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Wild and Unnatural:

Ideologies of Nature and the Paradox of Sapphic Modernities in Elsa Gidlow's *On a Grey Thread* and Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*

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"How can a relational system be reached through sexual practices? Is it possible to create a homosexual mode of life? . . . To be 'gay,' I think, is not to identify with the psychological traits and the visible masks of the homosexual but to try to define and develop a way of life" (Foucault, "Friendship" 137–38).

"If we are alive and growing, we are continuously giving birth to ourselves" (Gidlow, *Elsa* 1).

Abstract

At the turn of the twentieth century, the homosexual identity category was born amid modernity's rapid urbanization. With the scientific categorization of the 'sexual invert,' queerness was naturalized as a degenerate fact of biology, opposing the prevailing mindset that homosexuality was unnatural and sinful. This historical shift gives rise to a nature paradox: How could the modern homosexual simultaneously be too unnatural *and* too natural? In this thesis, I trace the thread of queerness and nature in two modernist works of literature published at the same time as the 'lesbian' and 'Nature' emerged as polarized cultural categories. When read together, Elsa Gidlow's poetry collection *On a Grey Thread* (1923) and Djuna Barnes's novel *Nightwood* (1936) form a queer response to the allegations that homosexuality was both too wild and too unnatural to belong to the new era. I apply queer ecology to the modernist narrative and modernist free verse to illustrate how Gidlow and Barnes destabilize the nature paradox and reclaim the role of nature in the lives of sapphic modernities. Drawing on Leo Marx's notion of the pastoral design and Neil Smith's scrutiny of Nature as ideology, I argue that notions of queer time and space rewrite the concept of nature as we know it. Overall, this thesis demonstrates the emergence of a queer counter-canon in modernism that encourages us to envision queer ways of living and queer futures that lie outside the binary, more aligned with boundary-breaking, nonlinear cycles of nature and rebirth.

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Introduction

At a time when coming out as lesbian was equated with misery, stigmatized medical conditions, and accusations of unnaturalness, poet-activist Elsa Gidlow (1898–1986) found defiant ways to embrace her sapphic "way of life" through poetry, community, and gardening (Gidlow, *Elsa* 145). Her philosophy of queerness was intrinsically tied to her intimate relations with the more-than-human world, and she never regarded her sexuality as inferior to the norm. On her relationship with another woman in 1922 she reflects in her autobiography that "[w]e took it for granted then that we were free to be our *natural* selves" (*Elsa* 144; my emphasis). Gidlow's modernist peer Djuna Barnes (1892–1982), on the other hand, publicly approached her own sexuality in a more elusive manner: "I'm not a lesbian, I just loved Thelma," the writer is famous for saying (qtd. in Caselli 34). These two authors demonstrate different, yet interconnected ways of relating to sapphist lifestyles during a time when homosexuality emerged as an *identity* category for the first time in history. For a long time, the heteronormative hegemony has used questions of nature to persecute queerness as deviant and degenerate ways of living and loving, and this ideology became magnified at the turn of the twentieth century with the creation of 'Nature' and 'the homosexual' as polarized cultural categories. Even today, the rhetoric of what is considered "natural" and "unnatural" can still be heard in religious and political criticism of queer identities. This calls for an examination of how discourses of nature and queerness relate to and impact one another, and it prompts me to question how this relation shaped the modernist literature produced alongside the birth of the modern homosexual. This thesis brings together two texts from the American modernist period: Elsa Gidlow's poetry collection *On a Grey Thread* (1923) and Djuna Barnes's poetic novel *Nightwood* (1936). However different in genre and style, both works draw remarkable lines between queer identities and the portrayal of nature, as illustrated by their stylistic forms, metaphorical language, thematic approaches, and choices of setting. When read together, Barnes and Gidlow make me inquire into not only how ideologies of nature aim to stigmatize and control queer identities, but also how queer reclamation of natural landscapes and temporalities shapes the articulation of what it means to be both sapphic and modern.

The birth of the scientifically categorized 'sexual invert' took place alongside the rapid modernization and technological revolutions that marked the turn of the twentieth century. At the same time, this urbanization led to a dominating conception of "Nature" as a pure and pristine "world out there," separate from culture (Morton 274; Pollini 26). Modern society heterosexualized these nature spaces: wilderness environments were shaped in the image of

"rugged individualism" and the "phallic authoritarian sublime" (Morton 274); while the garden, on the other hand, was idealized as the perfect "middle landscape" between the artificial cities and the barren wilderness (Marx 138), where the modern nuclear family could cultivate its domestic bliss. Consequently, the heterosexual orientation was *naturalized* as the dominant and progressive sexuality of the new era (Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson 14). Featuring as heteromasculinity's antithesis, homosexuality was regarded as weak and unnatural, and, as a result, the queer was often "violently dislocate[d]" from natural and rural environments—violence we still see reflected today (see Halberstam, *In a Queer Time* 22; R. Stein 292–93). This dislocation of the queer from the natural order accelerated alongside the industrialization and the subsequent increasing visibility of homosexual activities in urban centers, such as in New York City and San Francisco (Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson 13; Wright 164). Accordingly, queerness was accused of being induced by urban pollution and was labeled an artificial and disease-spreading way of life. On the other side, advancements in the field of sexology at the turn of the century led to public dissemination of the scientific findings that homosexuality was *a fact of biology*—a congenital "birth defect," but nonetheless not a conscious crime or sin (Faderman 59). This naturalized the homosexual to a certain extent, but it did not reduce the stigma that followed those who lived out their same-sex preferences. Instead, the fear of the sapphic woman, specifically, as a threat to the modern, domestic household initiated prevailing stereotypes of the wild lesbian as an untamed Other who did not belong to the progressive and reproductive new order.

From these introductory images that tie the creation of the modern lesbian to questions of nature, a paradox now emerges: homosexuality was simultaneously perceived as unnatural and wild, as an artificial product of industrialization and as a vicious predator, as a crime against nature and as a freak of nature. I read these images as antithetical: on the one side, homosexuality was seen as *too* natural (i.e., wild and biologically degenerate), and on the other side, it was seen as *too* unnatural (i.e., artificial and urban). In this context, unnaturalness can be read as nature's antithesis, underlining the paradoxical foundation that these accusations build upon. In this thesis, I will refer to this as the 'nature paradox.' This nature paradox began to emerge alongside a significant cultural shift in modern history, as the birth of the homosexual identity occurred at the same time as the production of 'Nature' as a heterosexualized social category. Barnes and Gidlow wrote their works in the middle of this cultural shift, and the nature paradox prompts me to ask several questions: How do Barnes's novel and Gidlow's poetry collection respond to this paradoxical stereotype of queerness as simultaneously too wild and too unnatural to have a rightful place in modernity? How do

these authors relate sapphic bodies, identities, relationships, and cultures of nature to the experience of becoming modern? To what effect do these literary works *queer* nature spaces and cyclical temporalities? And what can modernist literature viewed through the lens of queer ecology teach us about sapphic modernities and their ways of living?

In this thesis, I will dive into Gidlow's poetry collection *On a Grey Thread* and Barnes's novel *Nightwood* to search for ways in which these works can illuminate and expand our understandings of how the sapphist relates to both nature and modernity—and what this further entails for our contemporary perspective on the modernist canon. I will argue that what I call the nature paradox serves "a clear social and political function" in modernity (Smith 28), which involves a hegemonic desire to expel the threat of the abjected queer from the new and progressive era and to maintain power over the American pastoral ideal as a "pure" and "rural myth" based on performances of heterosexual Nature (Marx 229; Morton 274). The paradox is made up of contradictory arguments concerning nature that aim to contain and diminish the newly created identity of the lesbian to protect the dominant sexual order and its socially progressive timelines—timelines that demand heterosexual courtship, marriage, reproduction, birth, and childrearing (Halberstam, *In a Queer Time* 2). The contradiction leaves the modern lesbian in limbo: she was considered urban and artificial, but exiled from the domestic sphere and the modern cityscape, which was labeled a "city for men" (Massey 233); at the same time, she was constructed as wild and vicious, like an animal, yet she could not belong in the wilderness, because wilderness spaces and the 'last frontier' were deployed as images of heteromasculine strength and virility (see Slotkin). The modern lesbian caused such sexual anxieties in the public and featured as a threat to the social position of white, heterosexual men, to the extent that the presence of sapphic sexualities needed to be erased, infantilized, or controlled by the hegemonic narrative. As my research will go on to reveal, this erasure has had a great impact on the dominant perception of the modernist canon and the selection of whose works get to be celebrated and remembered. As an extension of what Adrienne Rich refers to as "the Great Silence" (640), sapphic authors and queer literature from the modernist period have long been considered of less value than their heterosexual and male peers, or their lesbian influences are often disregarded in academic settings (Galvin 1). I want to argue that Gidlow's and Barnes's works of literature represent a *queering* of modernity and that they make up the frontlines of a queer counter-canon that challenges us to reevaluate who and what we count in modernism.

Because ideologies of nature have long guided the dismissal, censorship, and stigmatization of sapphic literature in the previous century, it becomes essential to pay close

attention to how queer female authors respond to, reclaim, and rewrite questions of nature and the natural in their works. This leads me to Gidlow's poetry collection. *On a Grey Thread* reads like one of Gidlow's gardens—a theme I will return to in the second chapter—as the free verse embodies metaphors of sapphic flowering and the collection's structure floats in time with the seasons. I will argue that Gidlow responds to my concept of the nature paradox by locating queer bodies and desires within the perimeters of the garden. Aided by a queer reading of Leo Marx, I examine how Gidlow disrupts the heterosexual claim to the idyllic "middle ground" (Marx 65), which not only reclaims the role of nature in queer lives but also challenges the hegemonic hold on "Nature" as a heterosexualized and pure space (Morton 274). In other words, the poetry collection establishes sapphic ways of living as natural and queer coming of age as a process of blooming, undermining the centuries-old ideology that views homosexuality as a crime against nature. Moreover, Gidlow's devoted attention to queer relations with the more-than-human world does not dislocate her sapphic subjects from modernity. On the other hand, when she breaks down the modernity–nature dichotomy through her queer approach to time and space, Gidlow calls for a queer ecology that merges the experience of sapphic modernities with the notion of lesbian cultures of nature. *On a Grey Thread* uses these nature relations to articulate a pathbreaking way of "becoming modern" that lies outside the binary (Winning 21), further challenging the reader to embrace a queer and nonessential concept of nature. On the whole, Gidlow's poetic form and focus on cyclical rebirth also underscores a prevailing hope in queer futures.

When it comes to *Nightwood*, I will argue that the poetic novel evades categorization and continuously locates queer bodies floating in between culture and nature, the domestic and the wild, the urban and the rural. Unlike Gidlow's strong reclamation of the queer as natural, Barnes plays with the paradox of lesbians as both wild and artificial creatures—on the borderline between human and animal—and as a result the novel slips in between and articulates a queer resistance to hegemonic binaries. I will illustrate how the novel and its characters exist on the precarious point between these borderlines: between forms and genres, between past and present, between jungles and cities, and between modernism and postmodernism (Miller 124). While *Nightwood* has a more urban focus than Gidlow's poetry and can be read as a queer remapping of Paris, its fluid language and fleeting settings never dislocate the modern queer from the more-than-human world, but rather prompt us to reflect on how queer resistance relies on a merging of culture and nature. In doing so, *Nightwood* ends up rejecting the minute categorization that characterizes the twentieth century, including the wild–unnatural paradox that aims to domesticate sapphic women. As the novel's queer

spatio-temporal relations deconstruct binaries of genre, gender, sexuality, and nature in the same breath, it calls for a reevaluation of what it means to articulate a *sapphic* modernity, along the same lines as Gidlow. This deconstruction of binaries aligns itself with a nonessential concept of nature that bridges the gap between modernity and the natural order and allows the sapphic way of life to express an alternative sense of "belonging and becoming" (Freeman xv). When read together, I claim that Barnes and Gidlow represent a queer counter-canon that exists both within and as a counterpoint to the established modernist canon. Both authors place lesbian existence at the heart of their works and attest that queerness cannot be separated from the more-than-human world, nor can the sapphic be dislocated from the core of what it means to articulate a modernity.

Next, it becomes important lay the foundation for why these two works are significant to read in light of each other in this framework. Beginning with Elsa Gidlow, I want to recognize that Gidlow's poetry collection *On a Grey Thread* is considerably less famous than Barnes's cult classic, and it has received little to no attention in the field of literary criticism. Nevertheless, the collection is equally trailblazing in the context of queer modernist literature, and it has been hailed as the first book of lesbian love poetry in North America published by an openly queer woman.[1] While Barnes never claimed the lesbian label, Gidlow is part of a handful of female writers from the 1920s and 30s who not only loved other women, but also claimed their sexuality as an identity (the most famous amongst them being perhaps Gertrude Stein). Gidlow's writing did not reach a wide audience during her lifetime, but her story found its way to a new queer audience in the 1970s with the release of the documentary *Word Is Out: Stories of Some of Our Lives* (1977), where Gidlow was interviewed about her life as a lesbian author and activist. *On a Grey Thread* was Gidlow's first poetry collection, published in 1923 when she was a twenty-five-year-old living in Greenwich Village in New York City ("Elsa Gidlow Residence"). The collection consists of fifty-one poems, split into six sections: The Grey Thread, Youth, Grain and Grapes, Inner Chamber, In Passing, and Epilogue. Similar to *Nightwood*, I want to acknowledge that no summary could do justice to the experience of reading the collection, nor would a single poem be able to represent the full width of language and storytelling found between these pages. For the sake of this thesis, I have chosen to balance a close reading of two poems—"The Face in the Rain" and "Episode"—with an analysis of the overarching structure of the entire collection. Despite these limitations to my research, I want to emphasize the importance of treating the poetry collection itself as a

[1] The backside of the Mint Editions 2021 rerelease of *On a Grey Thread* reads as follows: "With *On a Grey Thread*, Elsa Gidlow became the first North American to publish a book of lesbian love poems."

holistic cycle, and not as individual poems read in isolation. As the title implies, Gidlow weaves threads and beads into a larger tapestry, and poems, lines, and images must be read in conversation with each other. Reading Gidlow's poetry collection is like entering one of her gardens: plants, flowers, and trees grow in cohesion and intertwine with each other in a rhythm tuned to the seasons. Sapphic love is often the center of this poetic garden, as my analysis of "Episode" will investigate further. Gidlow's poems alter between day and night, spring and autumn, youth and age, and throughout the collection, the author forges nonlinear strands of queer temporalities that are inseparable from nature's cyclicality.

Barnes's *Nightwood* is recognized as a modernist cult classic, although, as Jeanette Winterson notes in her introduction to the novel, "more people have heard about it than have read it" (ix). Winterson goes on to call the novel "an important milestone on any map of gay literature" (ix). Many scholars have dived into *Nightwood*'s world, its modernist aesthetic, and its influence on the twentieth century, but it remains less examined as a "queer text" (de Lauretis 244). The novel's "milestone" representation of queer characters and language, "hybrid images," lesbian affairs, and other "far-from-normative sexual interactions," marks this novel as an important gateway into queer modernism (de Lauretis 244–45). *Nightwood* is a novel that must be experienced rather than merely read, like Gidlow's poetry collection, and any attempt to summarize a traditional plot seems counterintuitive to its existence. As the doctor, a character in the novel, proclaims: "I have a narrative, but you will be put to it to find it" (Barnes, *Nightwood* 87). Diane Warren comments that *Nightwood* keeps to the modernist tradition of being a "novel of reflection, rather than a plot-based work" (118). Nonetheless, an introduction of its characters and the setting might serve as a gentle reminder for the reader as to what makes reading this novel akin to the experience of "drinking wine with a pearl dissolving in the glass," as Jeanette Winterson puts it (ix). *Nightwood* follows a cast of several expatriate characters in Paris in the 1920s: there is Felix Volkbein, the outcast Jew with a made-up family history; Dr. Matthew O'Connor, the unlicensed gynecologist who "talks his way through life" (Winterson xiii); Jenny Petherbridge, the "squatter" who preys on other people's lovers; Robin Vote, half-human, half-animal, and the great love of Nora; and finally, Nora Flood, the salon owner who devotes all her passion to an impossible love for Robin. The story mostly takes place in Paris, but with certain scenes set in rural America, such as the evocative ending in the decaying chapel on Nora's property. Both the urban and the rural settings will prove central to my analysis of queer spatio-temporal relations. While the novel does not single out any *main* character, my discussion of it will focus on Nora and Robin and their sapphic relationship. I leave the door open to further research on the queerness of other

characters in the story—for example, Dr. Matthew O'Connor—and hope the conversation regarding *Nightwood*'s manifold takes on new directions in the future.

When diving into queer modernism, it might have been an obvious choice to read Barnes alongside Gertrude Stein, an author who often is considered an "LGBTQ icon" of the modernist period (Railton), as she shared an open sapphic relationship with Alice B. Toklas, with whom she engaged in an expatriate community in Paris (like Barnes did), and her writing is unquestionably queer. However, Stein is one of modernism's most recognizable faces, and much literary criticism has already been devoted to her work. My approach intends to provide the perspective of less mainstream writers that can be said to develop their own strands of modernism, and for this reason, I will focus my research where the scholarly conversation has opened the door but not fully stepped inside yet. Barnes and Gidlow make for a compelling comparison: both authors are, in different ways, outsiders in modernism and represent a historical branch of sapphic writing that has long been ignored—as in the case of Gidlow—or whose queerness is often dismissed in academic settings—as in the case of Barnes. Another key correlation that makes this comparison imperative is the chemistry between the two texts' portrayal of nature and queerness on the same page. Both *Nightwood* and *On a Grey Thread* are full of natural imagery that informs the reader's interpretations of characters and themes, and their textual forms are impacted by cyclical temporality associated with the natural world. The works might be different in genre and voice, but they deal with such similar topics—and were published within the same significant historical period—that there seems to be an undeniable conversation happening between them that ought to be explored through the framework of queer ecology. It might be unconventional to compare a novel with a poetry collection, but I make the case that this would not be a queer thesis unless it broke certain conventions and did something a little different. Barnes and Gidlow may not have reached a wide audience during their lives, nor today, but one of my aims is to demonstrate why both authors deserve to be elevated and read as queer authors who situate lesbian existence as "integral to the modernist setting" (Galvin 86).

The connection between queerness and nature—sexuality and environment—is a recent pairing that only began to emerge as a field of study a couple of decades ago in the shape of 'queer ecology.' Nevertheless, the terms share a long, interrelated, and complicated history, and in my research of Gidlow and Barnes, I want to showcase why queer ecology serves as a new and enlightening methodology through which to approach modernist literature. To understand why this pairing is necessary, I want to direct attention to the turn of the twentieth century—the historical period when discourses of sexuality and ecology

converged in full. While the ideology of homosexuality as a "crime against nature" can be traced back several centuries to the time of Paul the Apostle (R. Stein 286), it was not until the development of the modern era at the turn of the century that homosexuality started to take the shape of a biological identity marker and became "naturalized" by science for the first time (see Ellis). At the same time as the birth of the modern homosexual, anxieties surrounding industrial development led to a rise in "nature worship" in the urban centers, and the idea of 'Nature' as a cultural category and an idealized space separate from culture began to accelerate (Smith 21). Nature, and questions of the natural, provided the foundations of the ideology that attempted to control the image of modern homosexual women as both too wild (i.e., too natural) and too unnatural to belong in modernity. The literature from the interwar period is written during this historical shift in the perception of both queerness *and* nature, and an examination of the role of nature in queer modernist literature seems inescapable if we are to challenge the sexual power relations that long have dominated the modernist canon.

At the turn of the twenty-first century, scholars began to address the implications of a pairing of 'queer' with 'ecology' for the first time, which involves a crossing of two academic branches and their histories, as well as a merging of their associated political and social discourses. In 2002, Catriona Sandilands was one of the first to use the term 'queer ecology' in an academic setting, defining it as "a cultural, political, and social analysis that interrogates the relations between the social organization of sexuality and ecology," which is "allied with, but not subsumed by, such currents as ecofeminism and environmental justice" ("Lesbian Separatist" 131, 133). While queer ecology can be applied to many fields, in this thesis I want to apply it as a methodology to modernist history and literature that brings queerness and nature onto the same page. In chapter one, I give a more detailed overview of the field and define terms such as 'queer' and 'nature.' Several scholars have engaged queer ecology with literary analysis (see for example Rachel Stein's "The Place"), but it has rarely been utilized in American modernism, and never in the combination of Barnes and Gidlow. I propose that by applying the methodology of queer ecological analysis to modernist works, this thesis not only enters the ongoing conversation that addresses discourses of sexuality and environment together, but it also points to an academic blind spot that has long ignored the historical significance of sapphic authors and modernity in this discussion.

Through the unconventional pairing of Barnes and Gidlow, I hope that this thesis will shed new light on underread modernist authors and make the case for how both authors, in their *bad* modernism—a concept I explore in chapter one—establish their voices, forms, and radically queer content as moving counter to the direction of the canon. I further want to

acknowledge that counterculture is an important component of queer history, literature, and community; going against the conventional and socially accepted has, arguably, always been a part of the queer experience. It is interesting to note that the uprooting of conventions also becomes the intersection where queerness intertwines with modernism. If modernist literature is, as Kate Haffey puts it, "known for its tendency to think against the grain of dominant narrative conventions" (4), and thus becomes "a literature of incoherence . . . that continually breaks the rules" (5), then the *queering* of both narrative and lyric could be read as the very heart of modernism. It was not until recently that this intersection was acknowledged in academia (see for example Haffey's *Literary Modernism, Queer Temporality*), and it is safe to say that this scholarly conversation holds a lot of potential. One of my additions to this conversation is to illustrate how and why notions of 'queer' and 'literary modernism' must be read in light of the concept of 'nature.' The literary works of Barnes and Gidlow become illuminating examples of how these three fields intertwine, collide, and call for a fluidity of boundaries. Overall, I argue that this pairing not only impacts the way readers approach modernist literature and the established canon, but that it further encourages an optimistic view of queer futurity. With this thesis, I hope to open the door for research that bridges the gap between queer ecology and literary modernism, and it would be rewarding and necessary to bring other authors into the debate in the future. A bigger research project might include H. D. and Amy Lowell, whose modernist poetry also deals with themes of sexuality and nature. And while my thesis limits itself to the portrayal of queer women and sapphic identities, future research in the field must bring other sexualities, as well as nonconforming gender identities, onto the table because *queer* itself requires the inclusion of a wide spectrum of experiences.

Following this introduction, in chapter one, I lay the theoretical groundwork for a debate on queerness and nature in modernist literature. I begin with a breakdown of the historical context: how the public perception of same-sex desire between women changed at the turn of the twentieth century with the newly born category of the 'sexual invert.' Then I examine the historical significance of the terms that define the paradox: how and why queerness was treated as unnatural and, as an extension, artificial and urban; and how and why sapphism was constructed as wild, which was fueled by social anxieties at the time. After this, I dive into queer ecology, and I begin with an introduction to the most crucial voices in the field today. This leads me to enter a philosophical debate defined by one big question: What is nature? Informed by the theories of Leo Marx, Neil Smith, and Bruno Latour, I examine how the ideology of nature will play into my understanding of queer modernist

history and literature. Next, I turn my attention to queer theory and define key terms such as 'queer time' and 'queer space,' as informed by scholars like Halberstam and Elizabeth Freeman. In the third and final section of this chapter, I introduce the reader to the historical context and literary criticism necessary to situate Barnes and Gidlow. I make the case for why both authors represent a form of *bad* modernism and show how this has marginalized them to the 'sapphic circumference'—a concept I unpack in this section.

In chapter two, I enter the sapphic gardens of Elsa Gidlow. I choose to begin the text-focused part of my thesis with the analysis of Gidlow—as opposed to the more obvious choice of beginning with the more famous Barnes—because Gidlow's free verse opens for a nuanced approach to Barnes's convoluted and poetic novel. In doing so, I aim to defy conventions of canonical dominance in the field and open a discussion of how we can approach Barnes's work from a less mainstream angle. I begin this chapter with an inquiry into Gidlow's relation to the modern city, analyzing how her poem "The Face in the Rain" builds queer spatial relations to the urban that depend on a bridge to the garden. This opens for a reading of how Gidlow *queers* modern traditions and connects the experience of sapphic modernities with lesbian cultures of nature. In the second section, I dive into the poem "Episode" and analyze how Gidlow utilizes the setting of the garden as the middle ground. Aided by Leo Marx and Michel Foucault, I illustrate how Gidlow reclaims the garden space and destabilizes the paradox that labels queerness as unnatural and wild. Finally, I zoom out and pay attention to the overarching structure of the collection, examining to what extent the poetic form inhabits a sense of natural cyclicality and what this entails for queer futures.

In chapter three, I enter Paris and the queer expatriate community as narrated by *Nightwood*. By comparing Barnes with Gidlow, I reveal how these two authors differ in their approach to queer nature and sapphic modernities. In the first section, I focus on the character of Robin Vote as a sapphic transgressor of boundaries, as her characterization parodies sapphic women as wild and unnatural and jeopardizes the hegemonic power of the gaze. Next, I dive into Barnes's portrayal of urban gardens, revealing how *Nightwood*'s gardens reclaim the lesbian counterforce as *non*reproductive, which contrasts Gidlow's emphasis on sexual productivity. Following this, I analyze how *Nightwood* breaks down traditional borders between the urban and the rural and rely on Halberstam's concepts of queer space and metronormativity to discover what this entails for *Nightwood*'s sapphic modernities. Finally, I compare Barnes's use of queer temporality with Gidlow's and examine to what extent *Nightwood*'s refusal to adhere to narrative coherence can be read as a resistance toward

straight timelines. Overall, readers are left to reflect on how a sense of nonlinear queer futurity depends upon a naturalization of sapphic modernities and a queering of nature.

More than anything, these two modernist texts emphasize queerness and nature in union as "a way of life," to borrow Michel Foucault's phrase ("Friendship" 138)—an idea I will return to in chapter one. This "way of life" moves aslant to the linear expectations of the dominant culture and paves the way to an alternative narrative, in much the same way as Gidlow and Barnes create their own paths, with regard to both formal textual conventions and their lifestyles. Reclaiming the role of nature in queer lives, in the context of modernity, becomes itself an act of resistance. While definitions of homosexuality, nature, and modernism often rely on dichotomies and oppositions, *Nightwood* and *On a Grey Thread* represent a resistance toward such strict binaries. Instead, these texts envision queer ways of living and queer futures that lie outside and beyond these binaries, advocating in favor of a counter-canon in modernist literature that establishes the sapphic as natural but not wild, and as modern but not artificial. Barnes's and Gidlow's writing prompts us—as readers today—to reflect on how these authors, in many ways, could be said to write *for the future*, inviting us to be borne back and craft nonlinear threads of "gay beads" that connect us to those who came before (Gidlow, *On a Grey Thread* 13).

1. A Queer Way of Life: Sapphic Modernities and the Role of Nature

1.1 Introduction

Elsa Gidlow concludes *On a Grey Thread*'s opening poem, "The Grey Thread," with four lines that echo a quiet, queer resistance and anticipate the colorful pride flag with all its significance decades ahead of its time:

> My life is a grey thread
> Stretching through Time's day;
> But I have slipped gay beads on it
> To hide the grey. (13)

Wrapped in a 1920s double meaning of the word 'gay,' which signified both happy and homosexual, the speaker invites us into a queer existence that is marked by oppositions: secrecy and openness, love and grief, pride and sin. Yet the tone of the poem reveals the speaker's decision to embrace all the colors repeated throughout—blue, purple, green, yellow, red, and so on—and thus to reject the trajectory of "dull" time as a "grey thread" in favor of queer self-acceptance, with all the oppositions that that might hold. Gidlow's verse is a powerful entry into a time when homosexuality emerged as a social identity for the first time in history, and when accepting such a stigmatized identity was, in public opinion, synonymous with misery and suffering. In contrast to much of the literature, journalism, and medical views at the time, Gidlow's speaker is hopeful; not for a cure, but for a life full of bright, many-colored "gay beads." Her poem sets the stage for a discussion of how homosexuality was perceived in the modern interwar years in America. In this chapter, I will trace the thread of queerness in relation to nature and provide a theoretical context for how and why sapphic women in modernity were simultaneously accused of being unnatural criminals and predatory, degenerate beasts—in other words, both too unnatural *and* too natural—a paradoxical accusation meant to exclude them from the new order. This will lay the groundwork for my analysis of how Gidlow and Barnes respond to this nature paradox in their writing. I begin with an introduction to the historical backdrop of how homosexuality as an identity category was born, and stigmatized, in the cultural period known as modernity, breaking down the two sides of the paradox: queerness as unnatural and queerness as wild. Next, I enter the debate of queer ecology, defining and examining key terms such as 'nature,' 'queer space,' and 'queer time.' Lastly, I scrutinize how and why Barnes's and Gidlow's

works can be read as *bad* modernism and how these authors thus come to represent a queer counter-canon in modernity.

Before I enter the historical conversation, it is important to introduce and clarify a couple of key concepts first. I will use the terms 'queer,' 'lesbian,' 'gay,' 'homosexual,' and 'sapphic' interchangeably to denote same-sex desires, experiences, identities, networks, and relations. All these words originated as negative descriptors of actions and identities that were—and in many cases still are—frowned upon by heteronormative society, but what they all have in common is that they have since been reclaimed not only as identifiers, but also as means to find and establish communities. 'Queer' is perhaps the word whose history as a slur lingers the strongest to this day, and I want to acknowledge that some people in the community still find this term hurtful. However, as a queer person myself who has decided to reclaim the word with both joy and resistance, I hope to emphasize the importance of inclusion, of community, and of disarming homophobic rhetoric. Queer is vague on purpose. It includes all who go against the norm regarding sexualities and gender identities, yet it refuses to box anyone in. When I use the word queer—and sapphic for female experiences—this terminology allows for greater historical inclusion. Strict questions of "who counts" or "what is it that we count" as gay or lesbian, which long have been the base of lesbian studies, end up missing the point of queer fluidity (Doan and Garrity 4). Instead of scrutinizing historical people, books, and characters from contemporary perspectives preoccupied with labels, the broader terms of queer and sapphic open the door to a richer conversation. It is noteworthy that Laura Doan and Joan Garrity contend that this fluidity of boundaries was far more present in the interwar period than what has previously been acknowledged (5). When relevant to the context, I will also use the words homosexual, gay, and lesbian, as these concepts are linked to the construction of modern identity categories and the historical shift that changed how people saw and reacted to same-sex relations.

Furthermore, queer scholar and poet Adrienne Rich—writing in the 1980s—identifies the ideas of 'compulsory heterosexuality,' 'lesbian existence,' and 'lesbian continuum,' all of which are trailblazing concepts that are central to my research. Compulsory heterosexuality, Rich claims, must be recognized as a "man-made" political institution that reproduces the idea that there is a "mystical/biological heterosexual inclination, a 'preference' or 'choice' which draws women toward men" (637). Lesbian existence is a concept that "suggests both the fact of the historical presence of lesbians and our continuing creation of the meaning of that existence" (648). In other words, lesbian existence refuses to erase or ignore its history and underlines the notion that lesbians and sapphic women have always existed, even if the terms

we use have changed. Connected to this is the idea of the lesbian continuum, which Rich defines to include a range of "woman-identified experience[s]," such as networks and female bonding, that extend beyond sexual experiences and preferences (648). Through these formulations, Rich opens for a broader understanding of female history and calls for scrutiny of the political institutions that have contributed to the "Great Silence": the prevailing erasure and dismissal of lesbian existence in history and academia, as well as in contemporary contexts (640).

Next, it is necessary to introduce and define what I mean by modernity, what its defining factors are, and where its limits are drawn—definitions that are equally fluid as that of 'queer.' Modernity has been used interchangeably to designate various periods since the nineteenth century and earlier, and many have contested where to draw its limits since one could question whether every era is "modern" in relation to the ones that came before (Winning 19). Marshall Berman's classic definition designates that the lived and shared experience of modernity is "to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world—and, at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are" (15). He goes on to call modernity a "unity of disunity: it pours us all into a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish. To be modern is to be part of a universe in which, as Marx said, 'all that is solid melts into air'" (15). This "maelstrom" could denote several periods, but to narrow down the framework of my research, I want to focus on the modernity of the interwar years, especially the 1920s and 30s, as a period defined by its urban and industrial development, an accelerating pace of life, the production of new technologies and ideologies, and its avant-garde literature and arts (see Berman 16). This rapid development embodies what Baudelaire famously calls "the transient, the fleeting, the contingent" (403).

Alongside modern development, there also emerged new challenges, threats, and anxieties. Alison Oram identifies one defining factor of modernity as the pushing of the limits of what could be spoken about sexuality in public and private spheres, and many young women broke with tradition and found new vocabularies to describe their sexualities and desires out loud (166). As the creation of the homosexual identity is both a product of and an addition to the "maelstrom" known as modernity, the two become inherently linked. Joanne Winning argues that this gives rise to the term 'sapphic modernities,' suggesting a process of "becoming modern" that lies outside the binary (19). As this concept is of essence to my research on queer modernist literature, it requires a minute definition. I have already

introduced the term sapphic, but Winning explores it in more acute detail and aims to show how the sapphic is "constituted by intimate relationships of love and friendship" and "functions as an identity and identificatory practice that structures notions of community and network" (18). The sapphic, she says, "is deployed as a positionality" that repudiates "existing dominant cultural traditions" and, most importantly, "articulates a *modernity*" (18; emphasis in original). With the above definitions of modernity kept in mind, sapphic modernities can be read, in the words of Winning, as "an identifiable cultural phenomenon" of sapphic women, who either self-identified as such, or whom we might identify as sapphist from a contemporary perspective, who lived within the cultural period of modernity, and who participated in and shaped the definition of "being modern" (Winning 17–18). Scholars like Doan and Garrity, Oram, and Winning have opened doors to reconstructing what we mean by modernity and championed the inclusion of sexual minorities, but this is a rather recent focus. As I enter the historical conversation regarding sapphism and nature, my research will provide examples of attempts to exile the recently created social category of the lesbian from the new world order. Whether the discussion centers on advancing cities or idealized nature spaces, the dominant culture made sure sapphism was not allowed to feel at home.

1.2 Wild and Unnatural: The Creation of the Twentieth-Century Homosexual

Both Barnes and Gidlow wrote during a time of drastic motion and change, when innovative new forms of literature emerged alongside modern cityscapes, revolutionary technologies, avant-garde ideas, and the birth of the homosexual identity as a social category. Thus, before I dive into *Nightwood* and *On a Grey Thread* as works of queer modern literature, the essential task is to map out the historical context in which these authors produced their works, and, in doing so, to illustrate the backdrop for the creation of the nature paradox that deemed homosexuality to be at once unnatural and natural, artificial and wild. The following section will be split into three parts: first, I dive into the historical shift that happened at the turn of the twentieth century, when scientific categorization changed the public perception of homosexuality from something one *did* into something one *was*; then, I contextualize queerness in relation to the terms that define the paradox, beginning with a breakdown of how lesbians were viewed as wild and predatory; and finally, I conclude with insights into the other side of the paradox, namely the rhetoric of queerness as unnatural and—as an extension—artificial and urban.

Before the *fin de siècle*, in the nineteenth century and earlier, same-sex relationships between women were seen as innocent "romantic friendships." In her book *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers* (1991), Lillian Faderman gives an extensive overview of the history of lesbian life in America, and she contends that the institution of romantic friendships between women was both socially encouraged and admired, as it was envisioned as practice for future marriage to a man (1). There were, however, limitations to such intimate friendships, because if an "eligible male" suitor turned up, the women had to prioritize heterosexual marriage out of both social and financial pressures (Faderman 1–2). Such relationships were—on the outside—seen as nothing but charming and innocent, and these women's relations were never described as sexual in the language of the nineteenth century (whether they were or not is a different question) (Newton 561). At this point in time, the concept and category of the lesbian as we know it today did not exist (Faderman 2).

The turn of the twentieth century marked a significant shift in how the public perceived homosexuality: it changed from a set of *actions* between people of the same sex into a marker of *identity*. This shift occurred partially due to the work of sexologists—including Havelock Ellis, Edward Carpenter, and Richard von Krafft-Ebing—who began to scientifically examine and categorize people who deviated from sexual norms (see Black; Faderman; Smith-Rosenberg). This was "the golden age of scientific determinism" and taxonomy (Smith-Rosenberg 268), and the sexologists classified women with same-sex preferences as 'sexual inverts.' Thus, the identity category of the homosexual was born. In contrast to the era of innocent "romantic friendships," these scientific findings now linked the figure of the lesbian with sexual practices and desires for the first time, and the sexual invert was classified as a biological anomaly (Smith-Rosenberg 270). The sexologists' public dissemination of their research—that sexual inversion was indeed a fact of biology—was the first step in the process of *naturalizing* the lesbian. One of the most influential sexologists of the time was Ellis, and his treatise *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, a series of seven volumes, was published between 1897 and 1928. In the second volume, Ellis defines sexual inversion as "sexual instinct turned by inborn constitutional abnormality toward persons of the same sex" and claims that such sexual inversion is congenital and not a crime on the part of the person (ch. I).[2] For Ellis, 'sexual inversion' is a more specific term than 'homosexual.' When applied to women, the term entails the idea that these 'inverts' are men born in the wrong bodies—what we today would refer to as transgender. For the sexual invert, Ellis goes on,

[2] Quotes from *Studies in the Psychology of Sex Vol. II* are retrieved from the Project Gutenberg e-book and have no page numbers. I cite by chapters instead.

sexual impulse is "*organically* and innately turned toward individuals of the same sex" and should be regarded as "natural" (ch. I; my emphasis). Despite these attempts to naturalize and neutralize same-sex desires, the category of the sexual invert was equated with neurosis and biological abnormalities, and lesbians were regarded with stigma and suspicion. Moreover, the new category of the homosexual began to take shape not long after the trials of Oscar Wilde in 1895,[3] and the stigma surrounding his trials must have influenced the public perception of these 'inverts' (Warren xiii). According to Allida M. Black, the sexologists spread the stereotype that lesbians were "neurotic" and pseudomasculine, and in turn they infantilized them in the eyes of the public by proclaiming that "lesbians could not control their hearts and minds" (106). Consequently, women with same-sex desires were influenced to internalize their impulses and behaviors as "diseased and dangerous" (Black 103).

This left women who loved women in the early twentieth century in a tricky spot; they could either separate themselves from the hostile image of the lesbian invert and stick to the fading concept of "romantic friends"—and indeed, many did just that because they did not recognize themselves in such medical descriptions (Faderman 54)—or they could accept the degrading associations with the role of the sexual invert. Black asserts that for many women, such acceptance became self-deprecating, as happiness and lesbianism were seen as mutually exclusive concepts (Black 103, 105). Despite this, some women claimed these labels for themselves and turned the idea into something beneficial. These women used the argument of biological abnormality to assert that if they were *born* as homosexuals, then nothing could change them, because their way of life was "determined by God or Nature" (Faderman 58). The sexologists had provided a "ready-made defense for homosexuality," as well as an "identity and vocabulary" that allowed homosexuals to describe themselves and—more importantly—recognize that they were not alone (Faderman 58–59). Esther Newton exemplifies in her research on Radclyffe Hall that many lesbians embraced the sexologists' image of the "mannish lesbian" specifically to break with the "asexual model of romantic friendship" (560). For the second generation of "New Women" in the early decades of the twentieth century, sexuality became "a symbol of female autonomy" (Newton 564).

Entering the 1920s, the decade at the heart of modernity was defined by its sexual liberalization. The 1928 World League for Sexual Reform conference in Copenhagen points to

[3] It is interesting to note here that one of the first usages of the term 'queer' to derogatorily refer to homosexuals may be attributed to the Marquis of Queensberry during the 1895 trial of Oscar Wilde. In a letter that was read in court, the Marquis describes Wilde, his lover Alfred Douglas, and homosexuals in general as "Snob Queers" (Clarke).

the coordinated attempts made to separate reproduction from sexual intercourse, to disseminate birth control, and to value science as a means to describe sexuality (Pease 50). The growing feminist movement began to dispute that women were "the sexual property of men," and the decade was also inevitably influenced by Freudian ideas of the sexual drive and arguments that "sexuality is at the core of human personality" (Pease 51). In other words, the 1920s saw a rejection of strict Victorian traditions and repressions. Newton observes the example of how the middle-class "flapper" became symbolic for (hetero)sexual intercourse as both "cheap" and "fast" (565). "Sexual freedom," Newton writes, "became the cutting edge of modernism" (564). This era of sexual freedom led to a rise in the view of lesbianism as "chic" and trendy, and many women began to embrace same-sex experimentation (Faderman 62–63).

The literature of the 1920s further reflects this ambivalent fascination with lesbians: Ernest Hemingway, for example, brings up lesbianism in *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) and *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), and in 1922 Gertrude Stein published "Miss Furr and Miss Skeene," one of the first stories to use the word 'gay' referring to women (see Faderman 65–67). In 1928, Djuna Barnes published *Ladies Almanack*, a small book that narrates lesbian lives to the point of satirical parody. But, arguably, the most influential piece of lesbian fiction from the 1920s came in the shape of Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (1928; hereafter referred to as *The Well*). This English novel—published in the US in the same year—became both a success and a scandal with its portrayal of the upper-class heroine Stephen Gordon, who dresses and acts like a boy, falls in love with another woman, and gets banished (see Newton). In November 1928, the novel was taken to court on an accusation of obscenity, and subsequently, all copies of *The Well* were ordered to be destroyed (Parkes 434). The novel was not to be published in England again until 1959 (Gilmore 603). Adam Parkes notes that it was not necessarily the topic of lesbianism itself that was seen as the problem—other novels, such as Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1928), escaped censorship during the same period—but rather, it was the plea for sympathy for sexual inverts that caused the scandal (434). Hall takes Stephen's "point of view against a hostile world" and defends her way of living (Newton 571). Hall herself was an upper-class "self-identified 'invert' who wore 'mannish' clothes" and publicly agreed with the views of sexologists like Ellis that lesbians were biological degenerates (L. Taylor 251).[4] Nevertheless, she claimed the congenital argument in her favor,

[4] Elsa Gidlow makes a remark in her autobiography about *The Well*: "I was stirred by the story, though found it not very well done. In my journal I wrote: 'It is a remarkable book, but I am sad because it might have been so much stronger. It was self-pitying . . .'" (216). Gidlow also recounts meeting with Radclyffe Hall and Una Troubridge in Paris in the late 1920s (*Elsa* 217–18).

and her "plea for tolerance" was founded on the idea that lesbians were "hapless *freaks of nature*, unwittingly trapped in the wrong body" (Parkes 441, my emphasis). To be seen as someone with a biological birth defect (a "freak of nature") was, after all, preferable to being seen as a criminal or a perverse sinner (Faderman 59). *The Well* and its reception could be said to represent paradoxical forces at play in modernity: there was an ambivalent fascination and anxiety surrounding the subject of lesbianism; bisexual experimentation boomed, yet sexual inversion was stigmatized; lesbians gained a certain sympathy from the broader public due to their image as confused and naïve, but they were still regarded as outcasts and pariahs.

This ambivalence is underlined by the prevailing rhetoric of the lesbian as a vicious predator, which leads us to the first side of the paradox: the construction of the lesbian as a wild "freak of nature." Despite the pleas for tolerance that emerged during the sexually liberalized 1920s, this stigmatized stereotype of the wild predator began increasing in intensity alongside the sexologists' campaign to inform the public about sexual inversion. In 1924, people in London were duly warned about the "decadent" people and the "slime" of their (homosexual) art and literature that was "poising" the city (Oram 165). Oram's research on the portrayal of the lesbian in the popular press during the interwar years reveals that anxieties about "the lesbian seductress" sometimes took the shape of "the wife-snatcher" who threatened the private home (171). Many women, though not "genetically inverted," were considered "weak" and predisposed to the advances of predatory lesbians. These women were warned that the "mannish lesbian" could take advantage of their weakness and seduce them to their will (Smith-Rosenberg 270–71). One 1922 advice book warned husbands about the dangers of "strange types of women" who were "great pests to society," and whose sexual powers "will wreck your home" (qtd. in Oram 172–73). Ellis himself was wary that the "influences of modern movements," such as the feminist movement, would indirectly "promote hereditary neurosis" and "develop the germs of it" (ch. IV). In other words, sexual inversion was seen as both congenital and a threat to society because the invert could spread the "germs" of her disease to take advantage of helpless girls. The lesbian was thus publicly perceived as a homewrecker who preyed on innocent heterosexual women and destroyed marriages: she was *too wild* to belong to the new order of modernity defined by reproduction, the domestic sphere, and companionate marriage.

Entering the next decade, the Great Depression (1929–39) and its uncertain economic situation saw an increase in anxieties concerning the role of women. Fears of lesbians, as well as of independent feminists, began to magnify. Such figures threatened the security of companionate marriage and traditional gender roles, both in domestic and professional

spheres (Prescott and Giorgio 493). Women who lived without taking husbands, or women who worked independently, were seen as threats to the sexual order *and* to the economic survival and prosperity of the family unit (Faderman 99). The stigmatized literary images and public opinions that had begun to take shape in the 1920s were now amplified by the gloomy prospects of the decade. These anxieties generated perceptions of the lesbian as a predator, a vampire, and a wild Other that needed to be contained and kept at bay from society. Common literary depictions included "lesbian suicide, self-loathing, hopeless passion, chicanery" (Faderman 102). One novel, Sheila Donisthorpe's *Loveliest of Friends* (1931), included descriptions of lesbians as "crooked, twisted *freaks of nature* who stagnate in dark and muddy waters, and are so cloaked in the *weeds of viciousness* and selfish lust that, drained of all pity, they regard their victims as mere stepping stones to their further pleasures" (qtd. in Faderman 101; my emphasis). In this description, natural imagery is used to depict the sexual invert as a vicious beast who preys on innocent victims. The metaphor of being cloaked in weeds causes associations to Victorian "widow's weeds"—a concealing black veil and dress for mourning—and echoes the attitude that homosexuality destroyed marriages. "Weeds" can also refer to lesbians as an invasive pest; as weeds contaminating pristine, heterosexual gardens.

Overall, the prevailing images of homosexuality in the interwar period were simultaneously that of a birth defect *and* that of a disease that could spread—both congenital and curable. These stereotypes no doubt reflect anxieties surrounding the role of the institution of marriage and the need for reproduction to drive the nation forward, but they could also have served as distractions from the gloomy decade, as they offered something "bizarre" and "exotic" for the public to focus on (Faderman 101). The construction of opposing images might have occurred out of an attempt to control and reduce the threat the lesbian posed: if lesbians were portrayed through negative, threatening images, they might be discouraged from being visible in society, and thus the "spread" would be contained, at least in the eyes of heterosexual men. But while the main lesbian stereotype of the era consisted of associations with the wild and the pseudomasculine, sapphic women were nonetheless not to be associated with nature in the form of masculine wilderness. Views of homosexuality as too unnatural and too artificial still resonated in common attitudes of the 1920s and 30s and kept such women at bay from constructions of "Nature" and wilderness—ideas I will return to later in this chapter. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg notes that the "Mannish Lesbian" "embodied the unnatural and the monstrous" (268), and Oram comments that "the home and private space of companionate marriage were important sites of modernity for women," but that these women were "vulnerable to the newly recognized dangers of the city" (173). These opposing ideas

link homosexuality with urbanization and reinforce the paradoxical "nature" of sapphism: it is at once too wild *and* too urban, too natural *and* too unnatural.

This brings us to the other side of the paradox: the centuries-old ideology of homosexuality as a crime *against* nature. The origins of this ideology can be traced back to Judeo-Christian beliefs based on Pauline doctrine, where Paul the Apostle made a distinction between natural and unnatural sexualities, and then condemned those whose sexualities "perverted" nature (R. Stein 286). Christian thinkers in Paul's time used the agricultural analogy of planting a field, or "seeding," to establish that the only natural sexuality was the reproductive one, and all other sexual actions—whether between opposite- or same-sex couples—were forbidden and unnatural (R. Stein 286). Nineteenth-century sodomy laws in the US were based on the Pauline definition of crimes against nature, and according to Richard Weinmeyer, the sodomy laws served two main purposes: first, to protect "public morals and decency"; and second, to "protect women, 'weak men,' and children against sexual assault" (916). "Consenting adults" in private homes, on the other hand, were exempted and could not be prosecuted (Weinmeyer 916). In the twentieth century, these laws were abused to justify the persecution and punishment of gay men, both in the private and in the public sphere. While women did not suffer the same legal persecution as men, lesbians were still frowned upon as immoral and were in many contexts still seen as unnatural. It was not until the *Lawrence v. Texas* US Supreme Court decision in 2003 that the sodomy statutes were overturned on a national level and homosexuality was decriminalized (R. Stein 290). Decriminalization on paper, however, did not grant queer people the same rights as heterosexual people, and it did not prevent further discrimination (R. Stein 287). Religious, social, and political arguments that homosexuality goes "against nature" have been used to justify homophobic rhetoric throughout the twentieth (and well into the twenty-first) century.

Connected to the idea of queerness as unnatural is the idea of queerness as artificial and urban, and as something removed from natural environments—a view that became increasingly popular during the industrial urbanization of the interwar years. While homosexuality remained "invisible" in small towns and rural communities in the 1920s, cities saw a boom in the visibility of queer presence (Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson 13). American metropolises like New York and San Francisco became hot spots for queer activities, which led to a rise in anxieties concerning sexualities and contamination. Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson comment that this anxiety fueled a belief that homosexuality was an illness induced by environmental pollution and urban lifestyles:

> An array of explanations was offered for this supposed urban degeneration: the idea that the work men did in cities no longer brought them into *close and honorable contact with nature* . . . and the growing idea that homosexuality might, as a form of biological degeneracy, have environmental causes. (13; my emphasis)

A loss of contact with natural environments was thus named as one of the causes for the perceived increase in homosexual activity in big cities, further strengthening the argument that queerness was unnatural and that if it was induced by urbanization and its pollution, it certainly did not belong in pristine nature. This contributed to white, heterosexual men's anxiety that the rapid changes to society were a threat to their privilege and dominance. In addition to the increased visibility of queerness, the feminist movement saw women gaining financial improvements, immigration changed the politics and layout of the cities, and patriarchal family relations were reorganized under capitalism (Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson 13). Heterosexual masculinity needed an anchor to remain in charge. As a result, nature became categorized as a heterosexual space, "free" from all homosexual influences and their pollution (Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson 15). This led to a shift toward "corporealization of male power" with an emphasis on the body and its physical strength, and Theodore Roosevelt became the "poster-boy" for such virile, masculine power (Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson 14). Roosevelt—American president from 1901 to 1909—developed his persona against the backdrop of the western wilderness in the US. According to Richard Slotkin, he founded a "personal mythology" that linked him "to the historical and natural forces which he saw at work in frontier history" (620). American wilderness became a symbol of heterosexual masculinity, the location where the white man could prove his physical strength and heroicness as "the hunter-Indian fighter" (Slotkin 612). Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson assert that this corporealization was intrinsically tied to the "naturalization of heterosexuality" (14). The heterosexual man forged his identity in natural spaces, and thus he proved himself as a natural and pure alternative to the urban and contaminated homosexual. In reality, wilderness locations were far from being as heterosexual as this stereotype promised. In his research on the Pacific Northwest, Peter Boag notes that rural culture was a "magnet" for homosexual working-class men (41). Alfred Kinsey's 1948 survey of same-sex activity among men also reported that there was a high frequency of male homosexual activity in "remote locations, such as logging, mining, and ranching communities" (Boag 22).

This brings us to a question of gender: What about the modern lesbian? The sapphic women of the early twentieth century who were deemed "wild" and "vicious"—where did they belong? Physically, they were kept at bay from wilderness spaces, such as the logging

camps mentioned by Boag, due to strict gender roles; these camps were dominated by men. Nor did the *idea* of the lesbian belong in wild nature. She might have been constructed as a vicious creature, but unlike the actual animals of the Wild West, her presence could never reinforce heterosexual masculinity—it could only ever challenge or destabilize it. She had to be kept away from associations with wilderness lest she contaminate its image with her urban, yet wild; weak, yet vicious; feminine, yet pseudomasculine presence. What is more, the hegemonic culture neither allowed the lesbian to find her place in the new spaces that came to define modernity: the metropolis and the private, domestic home. The modern city was deemed "a city for men" (Massey 233), and the feminine, domestic sphere became symbolic of heterosexuality and companionate marriage (Smith-Rosenberg 266). From this brief overview of the history of homosexuality in the early twentieth century, one can summarize it as a problem of categorization: sapphism is at once a congenital birth defect that only affects a select number of people *and* a disease that can spread through urban contamination; it is a wild pest that must be kept at bay from modern developments and nuclear family homes *and* an artificial crime against nature that does not belong in wilderness. This leaves modern sapphic women in limbo, and we are left with one ringing question: Where do sapphic women in modernity belong—if anywhere?

1.3 Against Nature? A Queer Ecological Conversation

The historical discourse of queerness as paradoxically and inherently linked to questions of nature brings us to a critical pairing of two fields that entails "a fantastic explosion": queer ecology (Morton 273). This confluence of fields has slowly developed and received more attention in the decades following Catriona Sandilands's[5] description of it back in 2002 as a form of analysis that "interrogates the relations between the social organization of sexuality and ecology" ("Lesbian Separatist" 131). For my research, I aim to deploy queer ecology as a methodology to approach modernist literary analysis with a perspective that balances the intricate connections between queerness and nature. Thanks to the trailblazing work laid down by scholars like Sandilands, Bruce Erickson, Timothy Morton, and many more, queer ecology has since grown from seeds into a many-branched tree. Some of these branches include approaching queer histories and politics from environmentally focused perspectives, others focus on the queerness of animals and the natural world, while others again apply queer

[5] Sandilands and Mortimer-Sandilands refer to the same person. The author has published under both surnames since her 2005 publication "Unnatural Passions? Notes toward a Queer Ecology."

ecology as a branch of queer theory (Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson 5). It is the latter branch I wish to take up, to ask how nature—and questions of the natural—have informed histories of sexualities. First, I want to bring these questions to discussions of literary modernism and apply queer ecology as a literary methodology. How can a queer ecological reading of modernist literature inform new understandings of these texts? What can detailed attention to the production of nature as a social category, alongside the simultaneous creation of the modern homosexual, teach us about the perception of queer literature from the 1920s and 30s? Second, I want to zoom in and focus on how nature shapes literary techniques in modernist literature and how the effects of this can be read as a queering of modernity. What can natural cycles tell us about queer temporalities in relation to modern time? What can imagery of flowers, plants, seeds, and seasons tell us about queer spatial relations in modernity? How do both nature and queerness find their way into the classical location of modernity—the developing metropolis? These are questions I wish to apply to Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood* and Elsa Gidlow's *On a Grey Thread*, two works whose forms and voices will reveal the importance of applying queer ecology to modernism.

I want to begin this section with an overview of the most important voices in the field. First and foremost, Catriona Sandilands critiques the environmental justice movement for its lack of attention given to sexuality as a "dimension of power" that could be worth investigating for its "environmental significance" ("Lesbian Separatist" 132). Her research focuses on lesbians who have separated themselves from the "urban heteropatriarchy" and collectively moved to rural areas, with the knowledge of "the importance of nature in their culture, and the importance of their culture to ecology" (132). These women, she writes, developed a "distinct lesbian culture of nature" (132). She critiques these mostly white and middle-class movements of the 1970s and 80s for being "ahistorical, essentialist, and biologically deterministic," but she goes on to recognize that such essentialist rhetoric is "only part of the story" of lesbian separatist communities. She aims to tell a more complex story: a story about a "lesbian culture of nature" that advances queer ecology as a remarkable branch of environmental studies (133). Sandilands reiterates that queer ecology's predecessors include the intersection of "queer geography"—how sexualities are "organized spatially" in public and nature spaces—and ecofeminism, with Greta Gaard's "Toward a Queer Ecofeminism" (1997) as an influential voice (134). Both ecofeminism and environmental justice inform us that nature "organizes and is organized by complex power relations," and one illuminating example of such power relations can be found in the organization of wilderness parks, which were created to embody a gendered and racialized ideal of white,

masculine nature (Mortimer-Sandilands, "Unnatural"). This, as we have seen, is reflected in the Rooseveltian image of the masculine man in the Wild West. Queer ecology's task, Mortimer-Sandilands says, is to challenge such problematic links and power relations between heterosexuality and nature, and to disrupt dominant understandings of homosexuality as being driven by so-called "unnatural passions" ("Unnatural"). It is interesting to note here that Mortimer-Sandilands identifies the very paradox that lays the foundation for my research: "[h]omosexuality was simultaneously naturalized and considered 'unnatural'" ("Unnatural"). This illustrates that one of the aims of pairing queer with ecology is to critique the paradox of homosexuality as wild–unnatural and the associated power relations between dominant and marginalized sexualities.

Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire (2010) is an anthology edited by Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson that takes the discussion a step further. The anthology, the editors write, aims to stretch the boundaries of previous conversations and argue for "queer perspectives and politics against 'against nature' toward radical ecological ends" (39). Historical and contemporary questions of homosexuality as being "unnatural" or going "against nature" provide the foundation for many of the chapters, including Rachel Stein's research on the poetry of Adrienne Rich and Minnie Bruce-Pratt. Stein analyzes these sapphic poems in the context of how the hegemonic order "violently dislocates homosexuals from the natural order" (293). The poems in question reclaim the role of natural environments in the lives and their desires of sapphic subjects, she argues, and thus subvert "the deadly use of nature to police sexuality" (R. Stein 293). Her research also centers on the longstanding effects of Pauline doctrine that separates "natural" from "unnatural" sexualities, and shows how queer storytelling and poetry holds the power to resist and dismantle such dominant narratives and ideologies (R. Stein 293). From these perspectives, my research builds upon a discussion that has already started, but which is still in need of further critical attention. This thesis hopes to be a contribution to this body of work.

Timothy Morton is another pivotal voice in the field. He remarks that while queer theory and ecology might at first seem incompatible, the pairing is both important and necessary (273). Ecology, he argues, demands "intimacies with other beings" in a manner that queer theory also demands (273). Morton critiques the previous intersections of queer with nature—ecocriticism and ecofeminism—for relying on biological essentialism, which involves a binary way of thinking about gender and sexuality (274). Queer theory, along with the reclamation of the word 'queer,' specifically grew from a desire to embrace diversity and fluidity and step away from the strict man–woman, straight–gay binaries that defined much of

the discourse in the 1970s and 80s. 'Queer' requires us to let go of essentialism and think outside and beyond categories, much in the same way that nature requires us to (Morton 275). Similarly to Neil Smith (whom I will return to later in this section), Morton deconstructs "ideologies of Nature" and reveals how the idea of "Nature" is defined by an "inside-outside manifold" that sees the environment as a "metaphysical, closed system" (274). Likewise, Butler's concept of heterosexist gender performances relies on a separation of the "inside" from the "outside," which then sustains "rituals of exclusion" (Morton 274). In America, Morton notes, the idea of "Nature" has strong links with the performance of heteronormative masculinity, "rugged individualism," and "a phallic authoritarian sublime" (274). This performance rests on the shoulders of the human tradition of excluding all that is dirty and polluted, in order to portray "Nature" as "pristine, wild, immediate, and pure" (274). But Morton makes the case that all life forms and environments defy boundaries and binaries. He brings in Julia Kristeva and her *Powers of Horror* (1980) to argue that to have subjects and objects, there must also be abjects—namely, that which is polluted and dirty; vomit and excrement (274). Any repression or exclusion of the abject will only lead to reproductions of the heterosexist, exclusionary "brand of Nature" (274). Through his call for a concept of "Nature" that does not work by exclusion, he claims that queerness finds a friend in nonessentialist biology and vice versa (275). In his conclusion, Morton reiterates that "fully and properly, ecology is queer theory and queer theory is ecology: queer ecology" (281).

After this brief overview of the pairing of queer with ecology, its history, and why it is important, I want to continue with a breakdown of the two sides of the queer ecology coin: discourses of nature and discourses of queer theory. I aim to demonstrate the intimacy Morton describes and show how and why these concepts apply to modernity and modernist literature. I propose to start the conversation with a daunting question: What *is* nature? There is certainly no easy answer to such a question, and the problem of its definition has been debated for centuries. Raymond Williams remarks that 'nature' "is perhaps the most complex word in the language" (219). Notwithstanding, he distinguishes three areas of meaning: "(i) the essential quality and character *of* something; (ii) the inherent force which directs either the world or human beings or both; (iii) the material world itself, taken as including or not including human beings" (219, emphasis in original). Williams points to the fact that sense (ii) of nature developed from the first sense, and thus became an "abstract singular"—a "single universal 'essential quality or character'"—which was connected to the force of God (220). Neil Smith observes that this "universal" conception of nature serves an "ideological function" (20). In the name of what is considered "natural," humans have used the universality of "human

nature" not only to justify the conquest of "external nature," but also as a model to control "social behavior" (Smith 28–29). The universal conception of nature—and what is considered "natural"—is still used today to invest certain characteristics and behaviors as "normal" and "God-given" (Smith 29). For example, this social model uses arguments of nature to project heterosexuality as the natural and superior sexuality, or white people as the superior race, or capitalism as an inevitable "product of nature" (Smith 29). This conception becomes important to my analysis of how queer people have been deemed unnatural and attempted dislocated from the natural order as a result. The emergence of the third sense of nature—"nature as the material world"—led to a distinction between "Nature" and that which is man-made (Williams 223). "External nature," Smith says, can be defined as "the raw material" we build society from, a "pristine" landscape "outside society," the final "frontier" (11). From this essentialist perspective, nature is considered "a world out there that is ruled by immutable laws"; it functions as the opposite of culture and is "nonsocial by definition" (Pollini 26).

One of the main critiques of such an essentialist nature-culture separation was formulated by Bruno Latour. In his famous book *Politiques de la Nature* (1999),[6] Latour rejects nature-culture dualism. He declares that "*political ecology has nothing to do with nature*" and suggests that we must "rid ourselves of the notion of nature" altogether (5, 7; emphasis in original). While Latour acknowledges that a "world out there" does exist, he still advocates that a separation of objective nature from the "representation of nature" is irrelevant (Latour 41; Pollini 29). Latour questions how the social and natural sciences can speak of "nature itself" at all, because, as he argues, once we talk about dinosaurs we must add their paleontologists, if we speak of ecosystems we must include monitoring instruments, and ozone holes require their meteorologists, etc. (34–35). Thus, we are not speaking of *nature*, but instead of "what is produced, constructed, decided, defined" (Latour 35). In 2013, Jacques Pollini formulated a response to Latour's anti-essentialist critique and advocated for a middle ground, where a definition of nature must be compatible with both the essentialist conception *and* the nonseparation of nature and culture (27). This is necessary, he asserts, "if the relationships between humans and their environment are to be properly understood and managed" (25). Pollini critiques Latour's concept of produced "hybrid nature-culture objects" and his attempt to "render the concept of nature meaningless" (29). The argument for complete nonseparation can be disputed because all objects that have been through social processes still contain some form or degree of nature, Pollini asserts (29). An object's "degree

[6] The English translation of this work is *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*, translated by Catherine Porter (2004), and it is from this version I quote.

of naturalness" is relative to the objects around it, and Pollini provides an example of the contrasting responses to the countryside as experienced by an "urban dweller" compared to a "forest dweller" (29). Thus, the idea of "pure nature" is irrelevant and highly criticized by environmentalists, but dismissing nature altogether, and not distinguishing between abstract and practical meanings in language, is equally a fallacy we must avoid (Pollini 30). Pollini refers in his debate to Paul Keeling, who shows that an empirical objection to the idea of wilderness—simply because there is no place left on earth "completely free of human agency"—would be as meaningless as claiming there is no 'freedom' or 'justice' merely because it is "'impossible' in practice" (Keeling 506; Pollini 30). This debate between essentialist and nonessentialist conceptions of nature becomes significant in my research as Barnes's and Gidlow's work prompt us to inquire how a separation of nature from culture reiterates ideologies of Nature (as defined by Morton), and how instead we might merge a boundary-defying view of queerness with nonessential nature as a form of resistance.

Next, it essential to enter the historical debate of how the vision of nature—and especially the idea of the garden—has impacted and been impacted by the American nation, and in this field, there is none more influential than Leo Marx and his book *The Machine in the Garden* (1964). In this canonical work, Marx illustrates how nature has always featured as a utopian idea in the American imagination. "The pastoral ideal," as he calls it, has left its mark on American life and values since the "discovery" of the New World: that "fresh, green landscape" with its promise to realize the fantasy of a retreat into a new "oasis of harmony and joy" (Marx 3). Despite the industrial revolution and the consequent urbanization of America in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this collective ideal—American pastoralism—remains central today (Marx 4). The notion of an *ideal* landscape will feature as a key concept in my research on homosexuality because such an ideal has historically been synonymous with heterosexuality and hegemonic power. As the industrialization of the *fin de siècle* created a divide between the polluted cities and the barren wilderness, the collective urge to return to "a simple, rural environment" led to an idealization of nature as a middle ground (Marx 5). "Sentimental pastoralism" expresses a desire to flee from "an 'artificial' world" and toward a "symbolic landscape," which favors "natural" and simpler surroundings (Marx 9). It is worth mentioning here the distinction between "artificial" cities and "natural" environments—the contrast that makes up the nature paradox that was used to exclude queerness from the natural order and modernity. The garden, Marx asserts, becomes a favored and idealized "miniature middle landscape" (138). The idea of the garden is often associated with "abundance, leisure, freedom, and a greater harmony of existence," and it is "as

attractive for what it excludes as for what it contains" (Marx 43, 138). Functioning as the middle ground, the idyll of the garden must by necessity exclude both the artificial filth of the polluted cities and the bestial dangers of the "hideous wilderness" (Marx 41). If the modern construction of the lesbian labeled her as both artificial and wild, it becomes evident that the idyllic garden must exclude all forms of homosexuality from its perimeters. Instead, the idealized garden relies on a heterosexualization of nature and naturalization of heterosexuality, which upholds power dynamics and marginalizations of queerness. In Morton's words, the garden of the modern nuclear family—just like the rugged wilderness—depends on an essentialist *performance* of "Nature" as both "pure" and "pristine" (274). Marx observes how the counterforce of the industrial machine disrupts these idealistic bucolic images: for example, he exemplifies how Nathaniel Hawthorne's and Henry David Thoreau's exercises to record impressions of nature in the woods are interrupted by the shriek of a train whistle (12–13). The second kind of pastoralism, the imaginative and complex one, must acknowledge the presence of the machine in the pastoral design, as the ideal landscape and industrialization are juxtaposed against one another (Marx 15–16). The machine represents a threat against the lifestyle urged by "the rural myth" (Marx 229). Applying the notion of a counterforce to the pastoral ideal, I want to read the presence of the lesbian in the garden in Barnes and Gidlow as a threat to the sexual hegemony, which destabilizes the heterosexual claim to "Nature" and prompts us to question the implications of such a longstanding dislocation of the queer from nature.

Marx's concept of idealized nature gives rise to an examination of how questions of nature and what is considered "natural" have been used as a means of social control and domination in modernity. In *Uneven Development* (1984), Neil Smith provides a breakdown of how nature was born as a social category alongside industrial development, and coincidentally also alongside the birth of the modern homosexual. He begins by defining 'nature' as a contradictory concept, as it is simultaneously "dominated and victorious . . . woman and object . . . wilderness and garden" (11). Smith's essential dualism of "external nature" and "universal nature" lays the groundwork for what he refers to as the "bourgeois ideology of nature" (13). Smith illustrates this ideology through an examination of two modes of experiencing nature: the scientific and the poetic. The scientific mode aligns itself with an external, essentialist view of nature, where nature becomes "an object to be mastered and manipulated" (Smith 14). The poetic conception, on the other hand, developed in part due to industrialization's domination of external nature in the nineteenth century (Smith 19). As Marx suggests, the landscape became a powerful symbol for the American nation, both

despite and because of the increasing "contradiction between nature and 'civilization'" (Smith 18). This poetic reclamation of nature as a *cultural category* in modernity led to a rise in the "back to nature movement," where people would flee the urban centers to seek simpler and more rural environments—if only for the weekend (Smith 21; Marx 5). "Nature worship" entered the mindset of urban and suburban America toward the end of the nineteenth century: families retreated into a "humanized" and friendly nature, and "literary gentlemen" wrote this nature into suburban and urban homes: "[d]omesticated, sanitized, and sprawled out on coffee tables, nature belonged just like the family cat" (Smith 21). The romanticization of such nature was an "ideological necessity," Smith contends, not only because it justified the domestication and domination of external nature—for example, the conquering of wilderness spaces into more "friendly" landscapes—but also because it justified the social domination of marginalized groups, such as women (26). Overall, Smith asserts that the ideology of nature is rooted in the production of nature as a social category; it is "a social product" with a "clear social and political function," whether this function is to justify domination or to provide a model for how people should behave (28). Smith contends that the universal concept of nature categorizes certain behaviors or characteristics as "normal, God-given, unchangeable," meaning that a hierarchy with white, heterosexual men on the top can be justified as an inevitable and natural way of life (29). Those at the upper end of this hierarchy further claim ownership of the landscape—their "natural" right—and exclude those who pollute their idyllic vision. It is interesting to note Smith's remark that "nature is often envisioned as female" (26). This metaphor does not imply that women are stakeholders in the produced category of "social nature." On the contrary, the metaphor extends to the similar ways nature and women have faced objectification, domination, romanticization, and idolatry, and justifies heteromasculine conquest over both (Smith 26). I want to stress the importance of applying this thought to the intersection between gender and sexuality and examine the way nature as a cultural category in modernity was used specifically to dominate and exclude *sapphic* women from the cultural and natural order.

After this brief discussion on the history of the concept of nature and its relation to modernity and discourses of sexuality, I want to turn attention to two points of intersection between queer theory and ecology, namely time and space. The notions of queer temporalities and queer relations to space are essential to my research because of their clear relationship to the idea of nature. Many scholars have researched how sexuality impacts geography (see Halberstam; Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson; Winning), and more recently the debate has centered on how queer temporalities construct alternate ways of living (see Freeman; Haffey;

Halberstam). But why is there a need to focus on both concepts in union? As Jack Halberstam[7] argues in his book *In a Queer Time and Place* (2005), a "'queer' adjustment in the way in which we think about time . . . requires and produces new conceptions of space" (6). In other words, the two concepts cannot be separated, as space informs the way we think about time and vice versa, and both must be viewed in relation to one another. This is particularly important in any research on queer modernity because the turn of the century coincided with new productions of both time and space: the distinction between the urban and the rural grew rapidly, creating a spatial divide between homosexuality (often associated with the polluted cities) and heterosexuality (associated with pure and pristine Nature); and the new era also brought with it new concepts of time, causing friction between expectations of modern time and deviant queer temporalities. In addressing notions of queer time and space in Barnes's and Gidlow's texts, we open the door to "new life narratives" and "alternative relations" that make room and hope for queer futures (Halberstam, *In a Queer Time* 2).

I want to begin this discussion with a quotation by Michel Foucault—the quote that opened this thesis in my epigraph. In a 1981 interview, Foucault reflects on homosexuality as a "way of life," rather than merely a set of same-sex practices: "How can a relational system be reached through sexual practices? Is it possible to create a homosexual mode of life? . . . To be 'gay,' I think, is not to identify with the psychological traits and the visible masks of the homosexual but to try to define and develop a way of life" ("Friendship" 137–38). He suggests that it is this "homosexual mode of life" that appears "disturbing" to the heterosexual majority, and not the thought of "a sexual act that doesn't conform to law or nature" ("Friendship" 136–37). His reflections encourage us to see queerness as something *beyond* sexual acts and preferences, and this provides us with a springboard to discussions of how queer temporalities and spatial relations envision lives outside of mainstream narratives. Halberstam uses Foucault's notion of a "way of life" to define "queer time" and "queer space" as "eccentric modes of being" that develop partially in opposition to heterosexual family institutions and reproduction (*In a Queer Time* 1). I want to emphasize, as Halberstam does, that I have no intention of claiming that *all* queer people live in radical opposition to

[7] Halberstam published *In a Queer Time and Place* under the name Judith Halberstam in 2005. He has since come out to say he prefers the name Jack, or alternatively Jude. As for pronouns, he declares himself "a bit of a free floater," swaying in between "he" and "she." On his website, he writes that this captures "the refusal to resolve my gender ambiguity that has become a kind of identity for me." To honor and reflect this ambiguity, I aim to mostly refer to Halberstam by surname after this initial introduction. For the sake of clarity in writing, however, I have chosen to use the pronouns "he/him" as these reflect the way most scholars write about Halberstam in recent years. My aim is to be as respectful as possible in these decisions and to acknowledge gender as a personal, fluid, and intimate creation (Halberstam, "On Pronouns").

heterosexual people, any more than I claim that *all* sapphic women are inherently rural or inherently urban. To make any such essentialist claims of what defines queerness would be to go against the fluidity of the spectrum on which queerness exists. Nonetheless, the concepts of 'queer time' and 'queer space' become noteworthy markers of how and why queer networks, relations, and friendships open up alternative ways of living aslant to heteronormative society (Halberstam, *In a Queer Time* 1).

Halberstam defines "queer space" as "the place-making practices within postmodernism in which queer people engage," and where "new understandings of space" are enabled due to "the production of queer counterpublics" (*In a Queer Time* 6). I want to take this definition and extend it to the queer spatial relations that began to form in modernity and modernist works of literature around the turn of the century, when the homosexual and the lesbian were born as social categories for the first time in history. As I have discussed, the constructed dichotomy of urban—rural, along with hegemonic and idealized notions of Nature as a heteromasculine space, led to a dislocation of homosexuality from the natural order. The argument and ideology that homosexual practices were seen as crimes *against* nature fueled the anxiety that it must be an artificial product of urban development and pollution, which then fostered violence against homosexuals in rural settings (see Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson; R. Stein). This spatial divide could be one of the contributing factors that caused a strong link between the homosexual and urban ways of life. Urban queers have been researched intensely in the last couple of decades, as gay subcultures and networks flourished visibly in such locations as nightclubs, bars, and urban parks (Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson 13). Halberstam comments that the dominant link between homosexuality and urban spaces has led to a notion of "metronormativity," which constitutes a dominant narrative that equates the rural with the "closeted" and the invisible and the urban with the visibly "out and proud" (*In a Queer Time* 36). The metronormative story frames a queer spatial trajectory that moves *away* from the rural countryside of oppression and repression and *into* the town or the city, where the subject can "come out" and experience "the full expression of the sexual self" in "a place of tolerance" (Halberstam, *In a Queer Time* 36–37). From this perspective, queer life in rural sites or small towns has been degraded as the lesser and devalued experience and rural queers are seen as "stuck" in these environments (Halberstam, *In a Queer Time* 36). However, this stereotypical metronormative narrative belies the full spectrum of queer lives and spatial relations, and it erases the many stories of queer activities in more "natural" and remote settings. Alfred Kinsey's report on male sexual behavior (1948), for example, documented the dominating presence of male homosexual

behavior in wilderness locations, such as logging camps and ranches (Boag 22; Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson 15).

This discussion prompts questions on the social impacts of gender. Both the metronormative narrative of the "urban queer" and the documentation of gay rural lives mostly center on gay *men* and their spatial relations. Logging camps and the like were spaces reserved for men and masculinity, and gay men were framed as the source of the increasingly visible homosexual subcultures in metropolitan areas (Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson 13). But what about sapphic women in modernity—how did space impact their sexualities and ways of life, and vice versa? This is a field of research that requires much-needed attention today, although historians like Shari Benstock opened the door to this debate several decades ago, and scholars like Doan, Garrity, and Winning have added more recent voices to the conversation. Regarding life in the growing modern metropolises during the interwar period, a male-centered academia has long ignored the visibility and impact of lesbians and sapphic women, many of them claiming that "intensely urban" gay men were far more visible and impactful (Higgs 2). While gay men have been praised for inscribing their "queer visions" onto cities like San Francisco (Wright 164), lesbians have been deemed "placeless" people who have little to no influence on the cityscape (Castells 140). Doreen Massey's research on space and gender reveals that indeed, the modern city was spatially organized to benefit the man. Paris has been labeled "the capital of modernity" (Harvey), and the city's celebrated modernist attributes include the cafés, the boulevards, the "fleeting, passing glances" and the "anonymity of the crowd," often present in Baudelaire's infamous descriptions (Massey 233). Massey asserts that this city—which becomes the place associated with "the dawn of modernism"—was "a city for men" (233). While men could participate in the city's public life and cultural production, women were often confined to "the 'private' sphere" of the home or the suburbs (Massey 233). The boulevards, the bars, and the brothels, she exemplifies, were spatially organized to suit men's needs, and women who attended were only there "for male consumption" (Massey 233–34). Massey mentions one of the key figures that embody the experience of this modernity, namely the role of the *flâneur*, the "stroller in the crowd" who observes without being observed (234). The *flâneur*, she says, relies on the male, erotic gaze—a one-way gaze that objectifies women and makes it impossible for the woman herself to take on the role of the unobserved *flâneuse* (Massey 234).

Winning, on the other hand, takes a different approach to the gendered modern metropolis with her research on the "sapphist in the city," where she focuses on modern Paris as a capital of sapphic activities, networks, and cultural production (20). In Paris, Winning

asserts, women were freer to participate in the production of modernism and were not as constrained by "traditional heterosexual roles" (20). She underscores her arguments with examples of "the women of the Left Bank," the expatriate community which, amongst others, included Djuna Barnes, Natalie Barney and her sapphic salon, Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas's salon, and the bookshops of Sylvia Beach and Adrienne Monnier (Winning 20–21). Benstock's research on these impactful sapphic women of the Left Bank shows that their intelligence and energy "nurtured the development of literary Modernism's powerful culture" (*Women* ix). Scholars like Benstock and Winning make up pivotal voices to counter the "Great Silence" of lesbian historical erasure. They make the case that lesbians are neither "placeless" nor irrelevant to modernism and its cityscape, but that the modern city indeed became a space where the sapphist could "articulate her desire and her identity, her sense of 'becoming modern'" (Winning 21). In summary, it is essential to take into account the gendered spatial construction of the city—which *did* favor men—but at the same time to not erase the presence of sapphic women and their contributions to the modern city.

While queer theory has long concerned itself with "queer geography" and the ways in which spatial organization impacts discourses of sexuality and vice versa, the addition of time to this discussion is fairly recent. Halberstam, Elizabeth Freeman, and Kate Haffey are three distinct and major scholars in the research on queer temporalities, all of whom contend that there is such a thing as "queer time" that stands in opposition to "straight timelines" and "modern time." Halberstam's research on queer temporalities focuses more on postmodernism and the alternate relation to time that was forged by the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s. He defines "queer time" as "specific models of temporality that emerge within postmodernism," which envision "temporal frames" outside organizations of "bourgeois reproduction and family" (*In a Queer Time* 6). Under the threat of AIDS, queer relations to time rethought the conventional emphasis on longevity and futurity, and instead forged communities "in relation to risk, disease, infection, and death" (Halberstam, *In a Queer Time* 2; see also Edelman). However, Halberstam emphasizes that queer temporalities are concerned with more than just "compression and annihilation," and that they also include visions of a queer future—an alternative future that lies outside the "paradigmatic markers of life experience—namely, birth, marriage, reproduction, and death" (*In a Queer Time* 2).

Elizabeth Freeman brings modernity into the discussion in her research on queer temporalities and modern time. In her book *Time Binds* (2010), she encourages us to think against the grain of the "dominant arrangement of time and history," and instead direct our focus toward queer "nonsequential forms of time," which oftentimes are erased by the

heteronormative, historicist eye (xi). Freeman argues that corporations and nation-states alike strive to "adjust the pace of living" in modern society (xii). This temporal regulation results in a process Freeman refers to as "chrononormativity," meaning "the use of time to organize individual human bodies toward maximum productivity" (Freeman 3). The regulation of rigid and mechanical time in industrial factories is one example of this, where individuals exist strictly on the clock in a timeline constructed to achieve progress and maximum capital production (Freeman 5). Freeman also examines how "state-sponsored" timelines in modernity rely on sequential narratives of "socioeconomically 'productive' moments," such as marriage, reproduction, childbirth, and the accumulation of wealth (4–5). Alongside the birth of modernity and modern times, the homosexual identity category emerged, and with it came alternate ways of relating to these strict timelines. According to Freeman, queer time was born "*within* as well as in *counterpoint* to modern time" (xii; my emphasis). Queer temporalities thus became visible as nonsequential "forms of interruption" and "points of resistance" to the hetero-reproductive temporal order that demanded socioeconomic progress (Freeman xii). Queerness as a "way of life," using Foucault's formulation, proposes different possibilities for "living historically" in relation to the past, the present, and the future—opposed to and "out of synch with" these dominant sequences and "state-sponsored narratives of belonging and becoming" (Freeman xxii, xv). The rejection of time as sequential and progressive will feature as an important component of my analysis of Gidlow's poetry, as her use of queer time as cyclical challenges dominant timelines and prompts us to view queer futures in a different light. *On a Grey Thread* notably links queer time with natural cycles and establishes an interesting contrast between the mechanized temporality found in modern cities and the slower, floating sense of time found in the natural world. This further indicates the importance of viewing time and space in union, as these concepts inform one another.

Kate Haffey adds her contribution to the discussion with her work *Literary Modernism, Queer Temporality* (2019), where she draws direct lines between avant-garde modernist narratives and contemporary discussions of queer temporalities. She observes that straight timelines are often organized according to the logic of the *Bildungsroman*, which charts life schedules as a temporal progression from childhood, to adolescence, and into adulthood—in an orderly, heterosexual manner that often includes marriage and childrearing (4). In opposition to this, she references Halberstam's concept of queer time as existing outside of such narrative coherence, where "time flows independently of those conventional milestones" (Haffey 4). In other words, queer temporality and narrative *incoherence* are enmeshed, which then calls for an examination of the modernist narrative as form of queer

time. The modernist narrative, Haffey reminds us, is often defined by the authors' "unconventional use of time" and rejection of dominant narrative traditions, including chronology, the *Bildungsroman* progression of events, consistency in point of view, character development, and a sense of closure at the end (4). Haffey mentions Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927) as an example of a modernist work that at first shows readers the expected temporal convention—the expectation that Lily Biscoe must marry—but which then proceeds to turn away from and interrupt this narrative framework (5). This is done both through unconventional character development *and* through the text's form itself, which focuses less on progressive plot and more on "a past that interpenetrates the present," as Haffey puts it (6). This direct link between the modernist narrative and issues of sexuality becomes relevant in my analysis of Barnes, as *Nightwood*'s challenging form and rejection of closure can be read as a queer resistance toward dominant expectations and heterosexual timelines.

In summary, the ongoing conversation of queer ecology has identified and addressed many connections between discourses of sexuality and nature. The field is constantly growing, but its application as a methodology to analyze queer modernism is a relatively unexplored area. In my research of Gidlow and Barnes, I approach two different, yet related genres—the modernist novel and modernist free verse—to examine the intimate connections between modernism, queerness, and nature. As a framework of literary theory, queer ecology can reveal new ways of approaching modernist texts that encompass queer bodies and natural imagery on the same page. Analyzing the notion of queer space in relation to the urban–rural dichotomy in these works can inform us regarding how sapphic subjects find ways to relate to both the modern city and more natural environments, like the garden, despite attempts by the hegemonic culture to exile them. Moreover, these texts can reveal how modernist forms, both narrative and lyric, link the cyclical temporality of the natural world with the experience of queer time and create oppositions to modern conventions and expectations. In the end, a queer ecological analysis of these modernist texts can teach us how authors like Gidlow and Barnes rewrote a sense of queer futurity.

1.4 The Sapphic Circumference: Constructing a Queer Modernist Counter-Canon

Research on modernist literature, whether on the famous classics or the more unknown works, must attend to several looming questions: What *is* modernism? Where do we draw the line? These questions are no less difficult to answer than questions of nature, as definitions of modernism are constantly evolving and being challenged. Scholars agree that modernism is partially about challenging traditions of the past (see Marshik), but this challenge can take on

endless shapes and variations. Is modernism about radical new *forms*, or is it about radical social *content*? Or both? And which authors and works have been erased or overlooked in the shadow of the established modernist canon? In this section, I aim to examine the boundaries of modernism from a queer perspective, bringing in Gidlow and Barnes as examples of two different modernist authors who challenge the canon each in their own way. I begin with a breakdown of new approaches to the boundaries of modernism, exploring Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz's notion of bad modernisms and Heather K. Love's concept of the marginal circumference. I call for an examination of the *sapphic* circumference as a way of acknowledging and approaching the importance of female homosexuality to the production of modernist literature. Then I proceed to contextualize Gidlow as an underread sapphic author of modernist free verse, who has received little to no literary criticism, before moving on to compare her with Barnes, as I situate *Nightwood*'s unstable location in the modernist canon.

In recent years, several new ways of approaching and rediscovering modernism have emerged within the field, including new modernist studies, late modernism (Miller), and bad modernism (Mao and Walkowitz). Common to all these branches is a desire to challenge and expand "the definitions, locations, and producers" of modernism, and to encourage the application of "new approaches and methodologies" to modernist works (Mao and Walkowitz 1). *Bad* modernisms, Mao and Walkowitz assert, build on modernism's reputation of "bad behavior" and seek to take our notion of modernism in new directions that recover "forgotten badness" and bring it into new light (4, 7). "Badness" can include explorations of the possibilities in various forms of failure, bad behavior directed toward "mainstream institutions" and "aesthetic standards," or the failure of works that are deemed "inferior or inadequate *as* modernism" (Mao and Walkowitz 14–15; emphasis in original). Bringing "badness" into the limelight also entails an examination of works that are less experimental in form than what was expected of the make-it-new generation, as well as works by less famous, non-canonical figures (Mao and Walkowitz 2). This is essential to my research because being queer has long been equated with being bad. Queer people have long been treated as religious sinners, criminals opposing law and nature, and disruptors of the heterosexual hegemony.

Heather K. Love observes bad modernism as an image of a center and its margins, where the margins are characterized as the "freakish circumference" (20).[8] Modernism, Love asserts, must be understood as a period that is "marked by traffic *between* the center and the margins" (21; emphasis in original). She defines this center as "the center of culture," which

[8] Love borrows the term from Daniel Albright and his book on modernist art, *Untwisting the Serpent* (2000).

includes the "safe" and dominant aesthetics of the nineteenth century that modernism desired to depart from (20–21; see also Albright). Love differentiates between this "extreme impulse" to cross boundaries and twist away from the center of culture *on one's own terms*—which she refers to as "self-exile"—and departure as "forced exile" (21). "Self-exile" of dominant modernist authors would necessarily be deemed as *good* modernism. As Love argues: "iconoclasm is what modernism is all about (20). However, she defines the experience of "forced exile" as a marginalization or migration of "marginal" modernist authors who do not depart from the center on their own terms (21). Marginalization based on stigmatized sexual identities and expressions would be one example of such forced exile. This enables us to adapt the term "freakish circumference" to a sapphic context, whereby sapphic writers—as both female and queer—are forcibly exiled to the margins of modernism.

Gidlow's work as a poet can be said to suffer from forced exile to the margins, as she has been erased by readers and scholars alike. There are many layers of "badness" in Gidlow's modernism; not only did she live and write openly as a lesbian for her entire life, but she is also a non-canonical, underread author whose poetic form does not conform to the formal experimentation standards set by her canonical male peers, such as Pound and Eliot. Her rebelliousness lies both in her refusal to "make it new" and in her radical content that favors female same-sex desire and love. All of these factors contribute to her forced exile to the 'sapphic circumference' of modernism and underline why a reconstruction of her *oeuvre* brings her to the front of a queer *counter*-canon. On the other hand, authors like Barnes—and indeed, several of her canonical sapphic peers—have been included in the canon as long as their queer influences could be dismissed as neither evident nor relevant (Galvin 1). This leads to the presence of modernist sapphic authors floating in between the center and the sapphic circumference; their works are canonized, but their sexualities are marginalized. Other examples of such authors include Virginia Woolf, H. D., Natalie Barney, and Amy Lowell—indeed, the modernist canon is full of female authors whose female-driven sexualities have long been considered irrelevant (Galvin 1). Demonstrating the presence of the counter-canon is not only about bringing underread voices like Gidlow to the fore—against the mainstream current—but also about recognizing and acknowledging how sapphic sexualities, friendships, networks, and ways of life have influenced already canonized authors and their works, as is the case with Barnes and *Nightwood*. The notion of a counter-canon aims to take the authors that the canon previously has attempted to purify and clean of all traces of sexuality, and instead embrace their lived queer histories as valuable oppositions to "the Establishment" of modernist culture (Mao and Walkowitz 6).

To further understand how and why the works of Gidlow and Barnes can be seen as constructing a queer counter-canon, I want to provide some informative historical context on their lives and backgrounds. Beginning with Gidlow, it is necessary to remind the reader that her life and writing have not been given the same attention or academic criticism as Barnes, and so situating her poetry becomes a different exercise than situating a canonized author. To underline how little work has been done to recover Gidlow as a modernist author, I want to highlight that Cary Nelson's modernist recovery project only mentions her name *one* time, and this is briefly and in passing (Nelson 102). Gidlow did not sell many books during her lifetime, and my research only uncovered one poetry review from the time when she published *On a Grey Thread*: in *Poetry* magazine in 1924, Harriet Monroe reviewed the collection, beginning with the statement that "[o]ne finds evidence in this book that, in spite of sophomoric thinking, Miss Gidlow may prove herself a poet" (109). Monroe made no comments regarding the collection's lesbian thematic. Nevertheless, some research exists on Gidlow's life, including the 1977 documentary *Word Is Out* and Greg Youmans's archival work in the book *Out of the Closet, Into the Archives* (2015). In addition, her autobiography, *Elsa, I Come with My Song*s (1986), published just before she died, provides valuable and personal insights into her career and life as a gay poet. I refer to this book throughout my analysis of her poetry in chapter two as a way of contextualizing the extent of Gidlow's social radicalism, which provides an even richer depth to her poetry.

Gidlow published her first poetry collection *On a Grey Thread* in 1923, in the middle of the crucial period when the first generation of modernist poets in America was emerging. Poetry as a literary form had long been living in the shadows of the novel, but during the second decade of the twentieth century, new poetic voices emerged to respond to a changing society: Ezra Pound, Robert Frost, William Carlos Williams, T. S. Eliot, E. E. Cummings and others established the modernist aesthetic (Beach 1–2). At the core of this new aesthetic and poetic form was a break from the strict rules and traditional conventions that had defined much poetry in the previous decades, which included a revolutionary shift to free verse (Beasley 1). Modern poetry had to capture the modern world, and so, in the infamous words of Pound, these poets had to "make it new." Pound is recognized as the founder of Imagism, a poetic movement that emphasizes focused, precise language centering on one image or moment (Beach 26), illustrated by Pound's infamous poem "In a Station of the Metro" (1913). Many of these modernist poets turned into "poet-critics" in the disastrous aftermath of the First World War, and their works began to reflect not only a changing society, but also its anxieties (Beasley 95). In 1922, a year before Gidlow published *On a Grey Thread*, Eliot

published one of the most influential poems of the period: *The Waste Land.* This poem has been interpreted in many ways, but is, in the words of Christopher Beach, often conceived of as a critique of "a civilization that has fallen into disrepair and needs to be put back together" (44). The metaphor of a "waste land" reflects not only images of apocalyptic war trenches, but also the destruction caused by capitalist industrialization; it is a landscape we also see echoed in F. Scott Fitzgerald's Valley of Ashes in *The Great Gatsby* (1925). This paradoxical modernist landscape—one of both destruction and creation—and the blooming literary field of modernist poetry make up the surroundings in which Gidlow composed her first verses. It is interesting to note that her good friend and fellow poet Kenneth Rexroth notes in a review that Gidlow's poetry "was singularly free of the influence of the then young classic modernists" (20). Instead, Gidlow's reflection on the literature that shaped her included queer authors and nineteenth-century symbolists, such as "Oscar Wilde and Alfred Douglas, Baudelaire, Verlaine, Mallarme . . . all the bourgeois-scorning, decadent rebels of the nineties and early twenties with their glamorous sinfulness" (*Elsa* 71–72). These "decadent" writers were her first introduction to a world of people like her. The trials of Oscar Wilde, she writes, "were not far in our past and very real," and Baudelaire's *Fleurs du Mal* (1857) introduced her to the exciting possibility of "love, passionate love, between women" (*Elsa* 73). Gidlow also got her hands on many volumes of Ellis's *Psychology of Sex* and Edward Carpenter's *The Intermediate Sex*, in addition to works by Krafft-Ebing and Freud (*Elsa* 72). But as she began to learn about the homosexual identity category, along with all its stigma, Gidlow did not accept society's rejection of her sexuality. Instead, Gidlow writes that she and her queer friends "rejected our rejectors, proud to be of the spiritual and passional kin of such as Sappho" ("Memoirs" 121). This underscores Gidlow's *bad* modernism: she rejected both the classic modernists' formal experimentation and modern society's conservative ideals, and instead paved a trailblazing path in the 1920s literary field.

The figure of Djuna Barnes can be seen as clad in mystery: she was a well-known, eccentric character from the Roaring Twenties, but while her persona has survived as a photographic emblem of the artistic expatriate community in 1920s Paris, Barnes's *oeuvre* has not found a secure place in the twentieth-century modernist canon (Caselli 1). The paradox of Barnes as an important yet overlooked modernist figure culminates in the slogan that positions her as "the most famous unknown of the century" (Caselli 2). Biographers have theorized that the reason for Barnes's reputation as a *minor* modernist writer—as opposed to her more famous friends, the *major* writers T. S. Eliot and James Joyce—stems from her hermit-like obsession with privacy and her "inscrutable, even indecipherable" literary style

(Herring xv–xvi). The work that nonetheless secured Barnes a spot among modernist classics (however cult-like this spot may be) was *Nightwood*. *Nightwood* was praised by T. S. Eliot, but the book never reached a wide audience while Barnes lived, only a select and literary one, and this remains the case today (Galvin 83). Barnes's place in the modernist canon could thus be said to be an unstable one; she floats between the center and the margin, simultaneously scrutinized and forgotten, figuring as a modernist figure *and* a marginalized sapphic author. Nevertheless, critics are torn on whether she constitutes a "modernism of marginality" or not (see Caselli), and her work has split critics in their attempts to define her modernism and her place in the canon. *Nightwood*, for example, has at once been called high modernism and avant-garde art, as well as "anachronistic" and not "of [its] time" (Caselli 4). Benstock claims that this anachronistic language marks "its modernist 'signature'" (*Expatriate* 101), while Caselli declares that Barnes's anachronistic style produces an "unmodern" and "improper" modernism (4). Tyrus Miller, on the other hand, has placed Barnes's *oeuvre* as "positionless," and in the late modernist tradition, halfway between modernism and postmodernism (124). Her style continues to baffle critics to this very day.

In the mid to late twentieth century, scholars devoted their time to analyzing Barnes's unique style, but the issue of queerness in her *oeuvre* was long disregarded. As Teresa de Lauretis observes, *Nightwood* has received attention in feminist studies and modernist studies, "but has been strangely disregarded in queer studies" (243). Biographer Andrew Field, writing in the 1980s, dismisses Barnes's queer existence by calling her a "basically heterosexual" woman (153). Regarding *Nightwood*, Field argues that, because there is no "lovemaking scene," the issue of sexuality is of little importance to the novel (149). Galvin criticizes Field for his lack of attention to both Barnes's and *Nightwood*'s queerness, and she summarizes the problem as a result of heterocentric worldviews that cannot make room for a writer like Barnes and her sapphic influences (86). As a consequence, the main critical scholarship on Barnes has long ignored the fact that, in the words of Galvin, "her work presents lesbian sexuality as integral to the modernist setting" (86). The historical erasure of Barnes and *Nightwood* as inherently queer may have been influenced by Barnes's own disavowal of labels: her claim "I'm not a lesbian, I just loved Thelma"[9] is an infamous phrase that leaves its footprints in any research on the author (qtd. in Caselli 34). Certainly, such a blatant denial of lesbianism has made it easier for heteronormative scholars and teachers alike to brush aside

[9] Thelma Ellen Wood has been referred to as the "great love of Djuna Barnes's life," and the couple spent eight years together living as expatriates in Paris (Herring 156). She has also been read as the "autobiographical impetus" that inspired the character of Robin in *Nightwood* (Herring 157).

evidence of queerness in Barnes's writing, or to blame queer scholars and readers for "forcing" sexual identity politics on Barnes in an attempt to "claim" her as a "lesbian writer" (see J. Taylor). There might have been several reasons why Barnes refused identification with the lesbian label, or indeed why she often refused identification of her work as gay at all.[10] In light of the historical earthquake of modern homosexuality that shook society at the time, the stigma and hardship associated with accepting such labels could be difficult to bear, and literature faced the threat of censorship. Literary same-sex desire and sapphism often had to be concealed, coded, or satirized to survive "a male-dominated publication industry" (Wells-Lynn 83). As we see in *Ladies Almanack* (1928), Barnes uses such satirical, convoluted language to portray the lesbian expatriates in Paris who frequented Natalie Barney's salon (Wells-Lynn 82). Moreover, *Nightwood* is full of non-labeled queer characters and queer language, which represent queerness as an underworld of the night—concealed, hidden, yet undeniably present. Recent scholarship has opened the door to new and enlightening queer readings of Barnes's work, including Amy Wells-Lynn's research on Barnes's Paris as sexually coded, Brian Glavey's examination of queer ekphrasis in *Nightwood*, Teresa de Lauretis's investigation of *Nightwood* and queer futurity, and Daniela Caselli who focuses on Barnes's modernism as "improper" and "queerly anachronistic" (4). What these scholars have in common is a focus on the complex and intricate relationship to sexuality in Barnes's works, which reveals "sexuality as enigma without solution and trauma without resolution," and queerness as evasion of categorization and binary identification (de Lauretis 245).

In summary, Barnes's modernism is *bad* because it slips between expectations regarding modernism, simultaneously conforming to "high art" and rejecting it. Compared with Gidlow's, Barnes's location on the sapphic circumference is more unstable, as it moves back and forth between the center of modernism and its margins. Despite this, Barnes's refusal to be boxed in emphasizes the necessity of reading her "improper" modernism as *counter* to the canon. Her view on queerness as fluid and non-labeled aligns itself more with the emergence of queer theory in the 1980s than it did with the 1920s' and 30s' dominant obsession with taxonomy, and underlines what Doan and Garrity argue: that this fluidity was more present in the interwar years than is often acknowledged (5). In this sense, Barnes was ahead of her time. It is interesting to note here that Barnes's bad modernism relates to this sense of temporality—her modernism is at once ahead of its time, "late," *and* anachronistic,

[10] In a letter to journalist Michael Perkins on 19 July 1971, Barnes writes: "My dear Mr Perkins: / Thank you for your generous article; I could wish it has not got itself to Gay. I quarrel with it in one or two places, but that's to be expected" (qtd. in Caselli 153; underlined in original).

altogether rejecting the notion of time as strictly linear. In comparison, Gidlow, too, can be read as both ahead of her time with regard to content and not of her time with regard to stylistic experimentation. Barnes's attention to the "'reclamation' of archaic vocabularies, styles, and forms," Galvin says, is partially what separates her from her modernist peers, as Barnes's style *rewrites* history and modernism to include "lesbian existence" (87). This rewriting, one might add, can be read as directed toward a sense of queer futurity.

With this theoretical background, I have aimed to redraw the historical map of modernism wherein these two texts—*Nightwood* and *On a Grey Thread*—were produced. Gidlow and Barnes both left significant marks on this map as trailblazing sapphic voices, yet their queerness was long disregarded or erased. Contextualizing their works and historical backgrounds is essential in order for us to discover to what extent these two authors *wrote for the future*, and how this impacts us—the readers of their works—today. This chapter has followed the thread of queerness and nature throughout the historical period known as modernity, with a specific focus on the interwar years of the 1920s and 30s. By tracing the intimate connection between discourses of sexuality and discourses of nature as they developed at the turn of the century, I have demonstrated how the birth of the homosexual as an identity category was intricately impacted by modern urban development and the corresponding creation of 'Nature' as both geographical space and ideal. History reveals that the *idea* of nature has long been utilized to punish queer people for being too unnatural, as religious ideologies "justify" the treatment of same-sex sexualities as crimes *against* nature. At the same time, the rise of the threat of the "homewrecking" lesbian in modernity led to the prevailing stereotype that sapphic women were wild predators and "freaks of nature" who needed to either be contained or cured of their biological ailments. Consequently, I have shown that society's attempt to force the lesbian to fit heteronormative expectations or to banish her from modernity altogether, led to the creation of alternative queer relations to nature spaces and the experience of time. This queer way of living aslant to normative society provides the backdrop for my analysis of Barnes and Gidlow, two authors whose writing constructs a sapphic modernism that counters the heterosexualized canon. As I will explore further in the next two chapters, these authors' use of form, language, metaphor, and style all reveal how their texts develop queer relations to *and disruptions of* the concept of nature—in the shape of geography, temporality, and ideal. When read in the light of this historical and theoretical background, *Nightwood* and *On a Grey Thread* open up new and richer understandings of queer modernism as inseparable from queer ecology.

2. The Sapphic Gardens of Elsa Gidlow

2.1 Introduction

Elsa Gidlow's life as a lesbian poet and activist began to take root in the midst of one of the fastest-growing metropolises of modernity. In New York City in the 1920s, worn out by the dreary offices, the lack of a community, and the "ugliness of modern life," Gidlow made up her mind to not be "subsumed" by this maelstrom (Gidlow, *Elsa* 58). The act of writing poetry became her means of resistance. In her autobiography, she ponders over the "acts of courage" and "radical action" required to remain in power over her own life and narrates that twenty-year-old Gidlow made a discovery that would shape most of her life as an activist: "I realized the word radical came from the latin word for '*root*'" (*Elsa* 107; my emphasis). In researching Gidlow's life, *nature* becomes the red thread throughout this activist's writing, philosophy, and lifestyle. This is evident already in her first poetry collection—*On a Grey Thread*—which was published in 1923. The twenty-five-year-old writer of this collection had never owned a garden, and she wrote surrounded by the roaring urban center of NYC, yet still the seasonal rhythm of nature structures the flow of her verse. In *On a Grey Thread*, Gidlow celebrates gardening and growth on almost every page, and the collection practically blooms with flower imagery as symbolic of sapphic love. In many ways, the poetry collection is itself a garden, cultivated by Gidlow but not domesticated, free to grow in the direction it chooses, free to bloom in unexpected places and take root on the most difficult of hillsides. In this chapter, I want to enter this garden on Gidlow's terms, as a gentle observer of the plants and seeds that linger as this poet-activist's legacy.

The first section of this chapter, "The Sapphic *Flâneur*," begins with an analysis of how young Gidlow found her place in the modern metropolis. My exploration of her poem "The Face in the Rain"—one of few poems in the collection set in a city space—will show how Gidlow takes the role of the modern *flâneur* and queers it through natural imagery. In doing so, Gidlow both rewrites the modern city as a space for sapphic women and reclaims the gaze, but she also proves sapphic desire to be an opposition to the fast-paced, heteronormative lifestyles demanded by modernity. Next, in the section titled "The Lesbian in the Garden," I turn my attention to Gidlow's gardens and dive into the poem "Episode." This poem portrays a sapphic love scene in a garden at night, and, aided by a queer reading of Leo Marx, I aim to show how Gidlow takes the heterosexual idyll of the middle space and turns it into a safe heterotopia—Foucault's place "outside of all places" ("Of Other Spaces" 24)—for

lesbian existence. The lush productivity of the garden challenges the crime-against-nature ideology and reclaims the naturalness of the queer. Finally, I zoom outward and investigate the overarching structure of the entire poetry collection. In my section titled "*On a Grey Thread* as Cycle: Queer Coming of Age," I examine how Gidlow utilizes natural cyclicality to shape the reading experience. Her cyclicality goes hand-in-hand with Elizabeth Freeman's and Halberstam's concept of queer temporality. As the rhythm and structure of *On a Grey Thread* move in time with the seasons—pulsating back and forth between youth and experience, spring and autumn, day and night—Gidlow establishes queer time as both an essential component of *and* a counterpoint to modern time. When she emphasizes queer coming of age as cyclical, Gidlow further leaves the reader with a sense of hope in queer futures.

Overall, this queer-ecological analysis of Gidlow will reveal how her sapphic poetry destabilizes the paradoxical notion of queerness as simultaneously too unnatural and too wild. In Gidlow's poetry, sapphic love finds a safe home in the garden, which functions as a middle space located halfway between wilderness and cities, neither wild nor artificial. What *On a Grey Thread* achieves is to articulate a sense of "becoming modern" as inseparable from nature—a concept we also see echoed in *Nightwood*. In other words, Gidlow's socially radical modernism has its roots in natural imagery and nature philosophy; when Gidlow's poetry disrupts the paradox and merges sapphic modernities with the natural world, she *queers* modernity to the extent that her voice paves the way for a counter-canon in the modernist tradition. She also calls for readers to see nature in a meaningful yet nonessential way that makes room for boundary-defying sexualities and gender expressions. Overall, her poetry separates itself from traditions of her past and stereotypes of her present and challenges us, as readers today, to reevaluate our definitions of who and what we count as modernism.

Before I enter the garden that is *On a Grey Thread*, however, I consider it imperative to provide some contextual insight into Gidlow's life and her intimate relationship with all things growing. This background, as informed by Gidlow's own autobiography and queer historian Greg Youmans's research on her life, will allow for a richer understanding of how and why Gidlow utilizes nature in her free verse. Elsa Gidlow was a lesbian poet, activist, and gardener whose life philosophy intertwined with the growing, sprouting plants and trees found in her abundant garden that she cultivated later in life. "What I visualized for the hillside under the guardianship of open-branched madrones was not a garden but a partnership between myself and nature," she reflects on her tight-knit relation to her plot of land (*Elsa* 294). The older Gidlow cultivated this partnership as a ritual that allowed her to synch her life

Figure 1. The remains of Druid Heights, photographed in 2015 by Fabrice Florin, a former resident of the community. Licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0 (Florin).

to the rhythms of nature and the seasons (Youmans 108). Growing up in a small village in Québec, young Gidlow was born into poor financial prospects and struggles. During this difficult time, she remembers how her vivid imagination found solace in the natural world around her: when she sat at her "secret place" by a nearby brook, the great elm there became "a sheltering friend I could talk to" (*Elsa* 2). From a young age, nature was essential to her creative mind. Despite this, Gidlow moved from city to city and never owned a garden until her forties, when she bought a rural plot of land in the Bay Area of San Francisco (Youmans 108). She called her new home "Madrona" and began to cultivate the "wild hillside" in a gentle manner that made room for native growth (*Elsa* 294). "Gardening," she writes, "is perhaps not the word for what was appropriate at Madrona" (*Elsa* 294). Instead of imposing her own will on the land, Gidlow worked *with* the land. Fifteen years later, in 1953, Gidlow began to build the bohemian community of "Druid Heights" together with Isabel Quallo, her then-lover of ten years (West 614).[11] In the words of Youmans, Druid Heights became a "countercultural mecca where writers, artists, and musicians gathered for parties and events and sometimes stuck around for long residencies" (106). The community was a haven for bohemians in the 1960s and 70s, and it also attracted big names like Alan Watts, Alan Ginsberg, Gary Snyder, Neil Young, and Dizzy Gillespie (Haiken). Travelling to Druid

[11] See figure 1. For more information about the Druid Heights community, see Gidlow, *Elsa*; Haiken; Youmans.

Heights was considered "a pilgrimage" (West 614), and some even referred to the community as a "Lesbian Avalon" (Youmans 107). At Druid Heights, gardening and living with the seasons became an essential part of Gidlow's and the other residents' lives, which sheds light on how the space encouraged the cultivation of what Sandilands refers to as a "lesbian culture of nature" (Sandilands 132). What this reveals about Gidlow as an author and an activist is an intimate awareness of her surroundings and how they impacted her work, a deep and lifelong relation to and respect for the more-than-human world, and a sense of how queer activism and community bonding goes hand-in-hand with a partnership-based cultivation of the land. *On a Grey Thread* prefigures this philosophy years before the establishment of Druid Heights, which echoes the nonlinearity of Gidlow's life and poetry.

2.2 The Sapphic *Flâneur*: Rewriting Modernity

Gidlow's intimate relationship with nature began long before she moved to Madrona in her forties. In this section, I want to approach the poem "The Face in the Rain" (69) as an entrance into Gidlow's experience of the modern city, and her quiet resistance to its heteromasculine demands. As a young woman in New York City in the 1920s, Gidlow wrote *On a Grey Thread* surrounded by the roaring urban growth that has come to define the essence of modernity. In spite of (or perhaps *because* of) her surroundings, the garden finds its way into almost all her poems. I choose to open the chapter with "The Face in the Rain" because it makes for an interesting geographical bridge between the city and the garden, and because it underlines how Gidlow's nature writing is never dislocated from the modern world, nor does it disregard its influence. "The Face in the Rain" emphasizes how Gidlow's underlying relationship with gardens bleeds into her experience living as a sapphic woman in an urban environment, and I will argue that her queer spatial relations break down the dichotomy of nature–modernity to reveal a more nuanced articulation of the modern sapphic identity. My research will demonstrate how Gidlow's poetry reclaims the traditionally masculine role of the modern *flâneur* and his gaze, and in doing so, rewrites the map of the city to include sapphic modernities—in a way similar to what my analysis of Barnes and Paris will illustrate in chapter three. Overall, Gidlow's thread of poetic beads reclaims classic modernist traditions—such as the role of the *flâneur* and Baudelaire's notion of the crowd—while also rejecting the more formal modernist experimentation and traditional content in favor of her thread of radically queer modernism. "The Face in the Rain" highlights the importance of seeing Gidlow's *oeuvre* as a significant voice of the counter-canon.

I want to begin with an exploration of how Gidlow's poem "The Face in the Rain" (69) takes the traditional role of the modern *flâneur* and rewrites it using natural imagery and a sapphic gaze. As a result of this rewriting, Gidlow further *queers* the gaze and constructs the city as a space that fosters sapphic desire and cultural production. "The Face in the Rain" sets its stage on a busy street, presumably inspired by New York City, and it centers on a brief moment in time: the first-person speaker's gaze lingers on an "elfin" faced woman in the crowd before she disappears, and the speaker repeats that she proceeds to think about the woman "all day long." But as is the case with most of her poetry, the natural world is never far from Gidlow's subjects. As the speaker describes the face of the woman in the rain, her most prominent feature—the scarf around her throat—is likened to a flower: "Pale throat wound with a poppy scarf / Gleaming out of the crowd." This "poppy red" scarf contrasts with the "[b]ackground of grey" of the cityscape and makes the woman pop out on the page as a lively and colorful figure. The speaker even narrates that the woman's notable colors, "[c]rimson and white," are "[s]plashed on grey." This poem paints a picture of a situation that will be familiar to readers both then and today—no matter one's sexuality—of spotting someone attractive in a large crowd. However, the poem's most striking feature is the role taken on by the female speaker. The modernist *flâneur* can be defined as a "stroller in the crowd" and an observer who "creates art out of the very stuff on the street" (Massey 234; Winning 20). In the context of Gidlow's historical situation, the *flâneur* was traditionally seen as a male figure, often reliant on an erotic gaze that objectified the opposite sex (Massey 234). Doreen Massey argues that the public city, which has been celebrated as a symbol of the flourishing modernism of the new era, was indeed "a city for men" (233). She claims that the role of the female *flâneur*—the *flâneuse*—was impossible due to the gendered city structure (234). Nevertheless, I want to claim that in "The Face in the Rain," both Gidlow as an author and her sapphic speaker *reclaim* this role of the observer in the crowd.

Gidlow not only rewrites the perspective of the traditional observer of the "shuffling" and "shambling" anonymous crowd, but she does so to illuminate how the sapphic gaze finds its object of female adoration in this crowd. Walter Benjamin notes that no other subject than the crowd was "more worthy of attention" to modernist writers (321). The crowd is "imprinted" on Baudelaire's writing as a "hidden figure," utilized as "an agitated veil" through which he saw the city (Benjamin 321, 323). In addition, the image of the masses in the streets embodies Baudelaire's famous definition of modernity as "the transient, the fleeting, the contingent" (Baudelaire 403). Massey similarly asserts that the "fleeting, passing glances" and the "anonymity of the crowd" are key defining factors of life in the modern city

(233). This motif is echoed by "The Face in the Rain," and we also see it repeated in *Nightwood*, where Robin utilizes the fleeting cityscape to express her sexuality. I want to highlight that Gidlow did read Baudelaire in her adolescent years, as she reflects on this literary influence in her autobiography (*Elsa* 71). However, as Gidlow deploys this traditional modernist motif in her poetry, her queer perspective disrupts the normative association with the *male flâneur*. Instead, the gaze in question is a female-to-female gaze that does not rely on erotic, heteromasculine objectification. Using the red poppy flower—arguably a feminine image—to frame her lesbian desire as separate from, yet at one with the crowd, Gidlow's speaker takes on the role of the *sapphic flâneur* and in doing so reclaims the cityscape as a place that fosters queer desire, networks, and relationships. As I will demonstrate in my discussion of *Nightwood* in chapter three, Barnes similarly rewrites the urban map of masculine modernity, in this case, Paris, to be inclusive of sapphic women and their cultural production. But unlike Gidlow's reclamation, Barnes's approach to the gaze will prove to be quite dissimilar, as she deploys Felix's and the readers' participating gaze of Robin to reveal modernity's attempts to control the image of the sapphic woman.

Furthermore, the poem raises the question of Gidlow's modernist influences. "The Face in the Rain" bears strong associations to Pound's "In a Station of the Metro," yet her refusal to follow the experimental style or conservative content of the male modernist classics frames Gidlow's poem as an experiment in writing and *re*writing not only the modern city and the gaze, but also modernism itself. Pound's famous Imagist poem hardly needs an introduction, but to illustrate the close thematic links between the two poems, it feels appropriate to quote it in its entirety: "The apparition of these faces in the crowd: / Petals on a wet, black bough" (Pound 12). The appearance of the face in the crowd is one of the most central images in modernist poetry (Benjamin 324), and this motif becomes apparent in both Pound's and Gidlow's poems. Connected to the role of the *flâneur*, the observer, is this image of the "faces in the crowd," to borrow Pound's expression—the observed. What Pound and Gidlow have in common is a detailed attention to how these faces appear in the crowd in a manner that calls for comparison to nature. Pound's Imagist poem frames its gaze to observe a range of fleeting, anonymous faces, and the comparison to the petals breaks down the boundaries between busy life in a modern city and a more natural environment. In a similar manner, Gidlow also builds a compelling tension between the shuffling crowd and the gleaming poppy flower. The difference between these poems, however, lies not only in the formal techniques, but also in the above-mentioned gaze. Pound's experimental Imagist style depends upon his authority as an unobserved, male "stroller in the crowd" (Massey 234). The

speaker removes the first-person "I" from the image, yet the heteromasculine claim to the modern cityscape and the natural world is evident. Gidlow, on the other hand, rejects Pound's formalist call to "make it new!" Her free verse floats on the page and requires more space—by contrast with the Imagist's demand to keep it short and concise (Beach 26). In other words, her decision to embrace the modern city as a site that inspires sapphic desire and cultural production also rewrites the formal demands of the canonical classics of modernist poetry, emphasizing why her modernism can be read as "bad" (Mao and Walkowitz). Gidlow utilizes natural imagery in a way that blends the borderlines between the city and the garden while refuting heteromasculine claims to either. This merging of the urban–rural dichotomy is further relevant to my analysis of Barnes, where Nora's salon in upstate New York, for example, blends traditions of the modern city with the experience of the countryside in a way that disrupts masculine performances of nature and modernity.

Moreover, Gidlow's use of natural imagery in "The Face in the Rain" can be read as both a queer and an environmental response to the fast-paced life in modern cities. The merging of these two strands of resistance advocates for the necessity of reading lesbian cultures of nature as integral to—not separate from—sapphic modernities. If the city is the "spatial context of modernity," with "its speed, its energy, and its sheer size" as defining factors, then sapphic modernities must reconcile their cultural production with the "experience of the modern metropolis" (Winning 20). In "The Face in the Rain," Gidlow grapples with this experience as ambivalent. When the speaker describes the "rain-wet" street and the "[s]huffling; shambling / Beating feet," the alliteration of shuffle and shamble mimics the rushing noise of the busy crowd, and the harsh sound of "beating feet" reminds us that the motion of the crowd is mechanical and never-ending. Gidlow's reflections later in life reveal that modern life in NYC was no bed of roses for a young sapphic poet like herself, and that the experience of the crowd was tainted with loneliness: "I have felt probably less alone in nature and with nature than at any other time. I tend to feel alone and separate in crowds," the older Gidlow contemplates in an interview (*Word Is Out*). It is intriguing to note that Gidlow's poetic response to this crowd, then, is to introduce the garden into the city and to blur the boundaries between the traditional dichotomy of nature–modernity. When the speaker describes the "poppy red" scarf of the woman as "gleaming out of the crowd," she prompts investigation of an intimate and present connection with the more-than-human environment that cannot be separated from the realities of life in the modern world. Instead of producing an essentialist view of "Nature" as a "pure" and "pristine" world that exists separately from urbanity (Morton 274)—which by necessity would have reproduced a heteromasculine claim

to said "Nature"—Gidlow urges an examination of nature as inherent to intimate expressions of sapphic desire in modernity and the production of lesbian cultures. "The Face in the Rain" not only uses the bright image of the poppy flower in the crowd as a symbol to elevate the experience of sapphic sexualities in modern life and serve as an antidote to loneliness, but it further anticipates the way in which Gidlow would find a queer community in gardening at Druid Heights several decades later (see Haiken). Put another way, the poem merges an environmental response to rapid urbanization with a queer response to claims of unnaturalness. In doing so, Gidlow argues in favor of lesbian cultures of nature as inherent to the experience of sapphic modernities, and she rebuts the notion that queerness is somehow too artificial or too wild to belong to either. *Nightwood* similarly blends the borders between the woods and Paris, but in contrast to Gidlow, Barnes also utilizes parody to disrupt the wild–unnatural paradox, as her sapphic subjects embody the tension of both "worlds."

This queer response to life in the urban center is also reflected in the poem's temporality. Gidlow's slowing down of time to center on the sapphic figure of desire rejects the modern notion of time as mechanical and linear, and instead it produces a queer, alternative timeline. As I have analyzed, the "[s]huffling; shambling" movement of the crowds and the "[b]eating feet" mimic the sounds of the crowds and visualize the masses on the street, but these images further exemplify the fast-paced, machine-like, and sequence-driven passing of time in modernity. Gidlow felt this "speeding up of time" on her body when she began working office jobs in NYC, and she reacted with shock and indignation to the modern "time clock" and the "deadening routines" of the modern office lifestyle (*Elsa* 107, 133–35). It becomes relevant to remember that Gidlow opens her poetry collection with the metaphor of time as a "grey thread" that is both "dull" and "dead." The color she identifies with modern time is noteworthy, because it is the same grey color used to describe the rainy and "misted" cityscape in "The Face in the Rain." Modern temporality in Gidlow's poetry is often linked with this greyness of the cityscape and the dullness of heteronormative expectations of linear progress (see Freeman; Halberstam). This is further exemplified by the poetry collection's structure, a topic I will return to later in this chapter. Contrasted with the fast-paced beat from the shuffling crowds, a different form of temporality emerges when Gidlow's poem zooms in on the figure of sapphic desire. In opposition to the mechanical movement of the masses, the poem's sense of time slows down to allow the speaker to express her desire for this woman, and the repetitive descriptions of the woman's face decelerate the moment to make it last much longer than the actual encounter: "I have thought of nothing else all day," the speaker confesses. This city dweller's love is not love at first sight, but "at last

sight," as Benjamin phrases it (324). Simultaneously embodying a notion of "the fleeting" that defines the experience of modernity *and* resistance toward mechanical narratives, Gidlow's poetic temporality establishes a queer timeline that is both a counterpoint to and an inherent component of modern time—an idea I will return to explore in depth in the third section.

The poem's form likewise illustrates this symbolically significant contrast between modern and queer temporalities and reminds us that Gidlow's poetic voice must be read as a thread running counter to the canon. As I have exemplified above, Gidlow's formal techniques reject the modernist classics' demand to "make it new." Instead, her free verse—which has its roots in the nineteenth-century symbolist tradition—floats on the page and reads like a watercolor painting. The structure of the stanzas drifts freely, the lines vary in length, and the second and fourth stanzas are indented to achieve a swaying effect. With this form, Gidlow creates a moment that slows down time and motion, which is echoed by the appearance of the woman in the crowd. Indeed, the movement of the female figure juxtaposes the mechanical, busy background of the street: instead of moving *with* the shuffling crowds, this woman's face seems "to float / Through the crowd / Like a wisp of song." Thus, the poetic form and the movement of the object of desire come together to elevate queer timelines as existing counter to the norm—both counter to the direction and motion of the beating feet of modernity and counter to the expectations of canonical modernist poetry. In both form and content, Gidlow's poetry stands out from the crowd—like a red poppy—and reminds us that her writing is, at its core, a radical (read: rooted) act of both embracing the sapphic *as* a modernity and of defying the "clashing, thundering, polluting" and "deadening" side of modern life—the side that demands heteronormativity (*Elsa* 107). This topic becomes relevant when discussing *Nightwood*'s form, too, as Barnes's narrative simultaneously adheres to high modernist conventions of difficulty and incoherence *and* rejects demands to "make it new" by reclaiming "archaic" forms and vocabularies (Galvin 87).

Nature becomes Gidlow's key to resistance and her key to modernity. "The Face in the Rain" reveals to the reader that Gidlow's poetry collection is never disconnected from its historical context of being produced surrounded by rapid urbanization, and it underlines that she reacts to this development with expressions of her tight-knit relation to the more-than-human world. Overall, I claim that Gidlow uses nature and its cyclicality to *queer* modernity. Whether in the image of the poppy flower that symbolizes sapphic desire or in the poetic form that floats like a breeze through the fields, nature finds its way to enter and influence Gidlow's experience of modern life. In this section, I have discovered that by blending the garden and the city, Gidlow manages to balance her portrayal of the sapphist as integral to the cityscape

without making her too artificial for nature, and as intrinsically linked with the natural world without making her too wild for modernity. In other words, this is the first of many Gidlow poems that work to destabilize the paradox that wants to limit queerness into two opposing categories: wild and unnatural. Furthermore, the tone of joy that characterizes the speaker of this poem (and, indeed, much of *On a Grey Thread*) is noteworthy. Kenneth Rexroth praises Gidlow's poetry for being "singularly devoid of the hostility that comes from the frustrations of a persecuted minority" (20). In a literary tradition that often ignores the existence of lesbians or makes them out to be exotic objects for male pleasure, predatory beasts, or criminals, Gidlow's focus on sapphic joy, growth, and—more importantly—on sapphic *belonging* makes her a unique voice in the literary field and in modernist history.

2.2 The Lesbian in the Garden

As the previous section demonstrated, Gidlow cultivated a tight-knit partnership with the more-than-human world throughout her entire life, and no environment had more influence on her nature philosophy and lesbian activism than the garden. The garden as a physical space, as a flourishing ideal, and as cyclical temporality found its way into Gidlow's prose and poetry long before Gidlow herself became an avid gardener, emphasizing the nonlinear acquisition of such a philosophy. Later in life, Youmans underscores, gardening "became the foundation of everything she did and was" (102). In this section, I want to look closer at how the garden leaves its mark on *On a Grey Thread*, and how this middle ground guides Gidlow's view of the sapphic as both natural and modern. To showcase this, I will do a close reading of the poem "Episode" (47) while I also intertwine my analysis with similar poems on Gidlow's thread. Aided by the perspectives of Leo Marx and Michel Foucault, I argue that Gidlow takes the idyllic image of the garden as the middle space and rewrites it as a 'heterotopia' for lesbian existence. The tension created as the counterforce of the lesbian interrupts what has been claimed as a heterosexual idyll challenges the reader to reevaluate how the universal concept of what is deemed natural has been used to exclude queerness from both "pristine" nature and developing modernity. Gidlow's poetry disrupts the foundations of the nature paradox that aims to contain the lesbian identity into opposing categories: the wild predator and the artificial urbanity. She strips these stereotypes of power when she portrays sapphic modernities as capable of productivity and growth—neither predatory nor artificial. In her garden, she cultivates her queer path of modernism, which both challenges traditions of the

past and goes against the current of mainstream modern thought, and she prompts us to reflect on how both nature and the sapphic relate to modernity in non-essential ways.

I want to begin with an exploration of how *On a Grey Thread* portrays the garden as an environment that fosters sapphic love and homoerotic desire. First, it becomes interesting to see how Gidlow moves away from the city into the garden to allow this sapphic desire to bloom. In "Episode" (47), the speaker of the poem recounts an incident in the night from a first-person perspective, as she (assuming the speaker is a woman) brings a "fair girl" from the "garrulous streets" into her "quietly sinister garden," where she prepares her for a "sacrifice" that must be made to the "mysteried night." From the beginning, Gidlow develops a stark contrast between the spatial settings of the quiet garden and the busy streets, the latter of which are presented as spoiled with "blight." Just as in "The Face in the Rain," Gidlow builds an enticing tension between these landscapes. However, in "Episode," the speaker narrates that she has "robbed," "thieved," and "stolen" this girl away from the deteriorating cityscape and into her garden, implying that the lush garden holds a potential for sexual freedom for the sapphic woman in a way that the city cannot offer to the same extent. On a side note, her word choices of *robbing* a fair girl from "*their* blight" (my emphasis) could be read as a parody of the urban "wife-snatcher," a stereotype that caused much anxiety in heterosexual households at the time of Gidlow's writing (see Oram 171). She thieves an innocent girl from the heterosexual order and portrays the loss of her virginity as a "sacrifice" that must be made, and the speaker's tone implies a reclamation of this stereotype. This reclamation allows for the lesbian identity in the poem to be sexually coded—not merely naïve and innocent like the romantic friendships of the previous century—and consequently, it embraces sexuality as "a symbol of female autonomy" (Newton 564). It further aligns itself more with Barnes's style, which relies on parody and reclamation of negative stereotypes.

In the second stanza, sexual anticipation builds as the poem shifts away from the city and into the garden. This relocation foreshadows how the garden will feature as the ground for a homoerotic union between the two women:

> I have brought her, laughing,
> To my quietly sinister garden.
> For what will be done there
> I ask no man's pardon. (47)

While the sapphic gaze in "The Face in the Rain" is featured as a more innocent expression of desire in the crowd, "Episode" turns desire into the promise of sexual pleasure in the garden. Leo Marx reminds us that the garden has historically been characterized as an idyllic, utopian

image of abundance and freedom, as opposed to the barrenness of the wilderness and the pollution of the cities (43). But what happens when the lesbian is introduced into this idyllic vision? This is what Gidlow confronts in "Episode," as well as in many other poems in *On a Grey Thread*. In "Of a Certain Friendship," Gidlow's speaker recounts the incident in the garden that "Episode" paints to the reader: "And there is one place in my garden / Where it's best that I set no foot" (61). Treating the site of the sexual encounter like a sacred spot, Gidlow intertwines the geographical place with the physical body and calls for a view of sapphic sexualities as natural, joyful, and pastoral—a view that disrupts the traditional use of this term. Historically, the image of the ideal garden was constructed by a heteronormative and patriarchal culture, where the idea of a universal, human nature—and ideas of what and who are considered "natural"—was implemented onto physical spaces of external nature to "naturalize" the heterosexual (Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson 14). While wilderness spaces were traditionally used as backdrops to prove the strength and virility of the male body and sexuality, turn-of-the-century industrial growth led to the emergence of a less extreme "back to nature" movement in the cities (Smith 21). This movement of "nature worship" emphasized reclaiming the experience of a more "humanized nature" than the barren wilderness allowed, which led to the "transformation of rural America into a playground" for city dwellers (Smith 21). Notably, the domestication of nature into parks and gardens featured as attempts "to smooth the corners of nature into a more harmonious unity" (Smith 24). Overall, if the garden can be read as the "middle ground" for the harmonious nuclear family in modernity (Marx 65)—a space that balances the need to domesticate nature and the need to find an antidote to urban anxieties—then it becomes clear that the lesbian could not be allowed anywhere near its perimeters.

Returning to Gidlow's poem with this historical context in mind, it becomes significant to note how Gidlow's speaker disrupts this heterosexual idyll and claims the garden as a sapphic 'heterotopia' instead. I want to highlight how the speaker introduces the setting in "Episode," with a confident declaration that this is "my" garden. Immediately, the poem challenges this heterosexual claim to the land and its symbolic power. The speaker enters this garden laughing—a laughter that could be read as an expression of both defiance and sexual pleasure and joy. Moreover, the speaker describes her garden as "sinister," which could signify that the garden is not, perhaps, sinister to the women themselves, but to the outside world looking in. This environment would no doubt be considered sinister—a threat, even—to the traditions of the dominant culture, because it dismantles the hegemonic hold on the "pastoral design" (Marx 25). In one way, one could see the lesbian in the garden in a

similar vein to the sudden appearance of Marx's unsettling machine, which disturbs the pristine, heterosexualized landscape and works as a counterforce to the pastoral idyll (Marx 25). But within the garden gates, Gidlow's sapphic garden acts as a safe counter-site where homosexual women can act on their desires and embrace their sexualities, shielded from the judgmental gaze of the outside world. In this way, it can be read as a heterotopia—Foucault's place "outside of all places" ("Of Other Spaces" 24).[12] A heterotopia is a concept that mixes the notion of a 'utopia' with the prefix 'hetero,' signaling in this case the 'other' or that which is different. Heterotopias are "real sites" within culture that are "represented, contested, and inverted," and often function as "enacted utopia[s]" (Foucault, "Of Other Spaces" 24). Examples of heterotopias would include cemeteries, hospitals, libraries, and ships, but according to Foucault, the garden is perhaps "the oldest example" of such heterotopias "that take the form of contradictory sites" ("Of Other Spaces" 25). Gidlow's garden holds within its bubble the inversion of societal norms, where for once homosexuality is taken for granted. It exists as a real place—as the "smallest parcel of the world"—yet outside and aslant from the heterocentric society found outside its gates (Foucault, "Of Other Spaces" 26). This is seen when Gidlow's speaker declares that the garden is a space free from heterosexual expectations and male judgment: "For what will be done there / I ask no *man's* pardon" (my emphasis). This statement makes it clear that the speaker refuses to apologize for acting on her desires. The heterotopia allows her to close the garden gates to the heteronormative culture outside and instead construct it as a space that encourages the sapphic "way of life" (Foucault, "Friendship" 138). The concept of the garden as a sapphic heterotopia develops in *Nightwood* as well, but as I shall illustrate, Barnes complicates this image beyond Gidlow's reclamation of the land to the point where the garden is shown to be subjected to threats from the outside world, and where lesbian sexualities embrace their *non*reproductive "nature" as a counterforce.

As we shift into the next stanza of "Episode," it becomes evident that the sexual union cannot be separated from the environment, and thus the poem challenges the essentialist view of nature as pristine and pure. The previous stanza leaves the reader hanging in the anticipatory atmosphere of "what will be done" between the two women in the garden. The third stanza brings the reader to the poem's climactic moment, where the speaker describes the homoerotic union between the two women in gentle, yet direct language. I want to draw attention to Gidlow's word choices to describe the lover's body: the speaker brushes the

[12] Foucault's "Of Other Spaces" was first published by the French journal *Architecture /Mouvement/ Continuité* in 1984 and was based on a lecture by Foucault in March 1967.

"rouge from *her* cheeks," cleans the make-up from "the rims / Of *her* eyes," lets down "*her* hair," and removes the clothes from her "glimmering, shy limbs" (my emphasis). The poem's queerness is never hidden in subtext and the lover is portrayed as a feminine presence, as we see in the direct use of the pronoun "her" and the explicit references to the lover's female body. With the rich imagery of "wild roses" scattered upon the lover's limbs—which "sting like love's pain" between their bodies—and the sensory descriptions of tasting the "endless kisses" of the flesh, it becomes evident that the natural imagery of the garden is never separate from the women's union. Instead, nature plays a vital role in the sexual climax of the scene. With these descriptions, Gidlow manages to *queer* both nature and the "nature of desire" (R. Stein 295). Morton informs us that an idealistic image of Nature—and indeed also the garden—as pure and clean relies on a performance of heterosexuality (274). This performance, by necessity, excludes the abject; a concept he borrows from Julia Kristeva that signifies that which is dirty and polluted (Morton 274). The garden as modernity's idealized "miniature middle landscape" is, as Marx claims, "as attractive for what it excludes as for what it contains" (138). This means that the performance of its Nature is constructed as a categorical selection of desired elements, which also relies on the exclusion of undesired elements. For example, the garden can exclude the "savage," the harsh landscape, and the wild animals of the wilderness, and it can also exclude the filth and anxieties produced by urban lifestyles. And because the creation of the lesbian identity became equated with pests, wildness, diseases, and pollution all at once, one could read the lesbian as modernity's abject—that which is sexuality excluded based on its otherness. In other words, an essentialist view of Nature and gardens as "pristine" and "God-given" relies on the exclusion of all that is sapphic (Smith 11).

Gidlow's poem, on the other hand, makes the case for a queer ecology that merges sapphic existence with a non-essential view of nature that challenges the foundational "inside-outside structures" of heterosexist policies and ideologies of Nature (Morton 274). Gidlow does not shy away from a direct portrayal of lesbian sexuality, nor does she attempt to perform a pure nature that excludes the repressed. Instead, her poetic form embraces the bodily fluids and pleasures of the flesh in a union with the "wild roses" and their thorns integrated between the lovers' bodies. Thus, Gidlow *queers* forms of nature and demonstrates that there is an intimate connection between the boundary-defying sapphic subjects and the non-human life forms found in the garden. This further calls for a critique of the essentialist nature-culture separation, which Bruno Latour similarly contests. Strict nature-culture separatism necessarily reproduces the performance of "[m]asculine Nature" that Morton

describes (279), and Latour advocates that if we are to avoid such fallacies, we must "rid ourselves of the notion of nature" altogether (7). As seen in Gidlow's garden, the human and non-human "actants" rely on a "relational agency" that merges the boundaries between them, as they are produced and defined by each other (Latour 35; Pollini 26). Donna Haraway adds to the conversation by calling the distinction between nature and culture "damaging," especially from a feminist perspective, since the ideology of nature and scientific knowledge often exerts social control over female bodies (8–9). The split has led women to view their "natural" bodies as the enemy, and hence, feminist theories have developed in isolation from the natural sciences (Haraway 9). In the case of "Episode," Gidlow embraces the women's bodies and desires as "natural" and as inseparable from the natural environment, reclaiming a feminist agency in union with lesbian cultures of nature. By embracing a non-essential view of nature, Gidlow asserts the garden as a space that works through partnership rather than through domestication. In *Nightwood*, Barnes's boundary-defying settings similarly embrace a nonseparation of nature and culture, but *Nightwood* utilizes the *act* of transgression between borders as its form of resistance, which is different from Gidlow's focus on cultivating a relationship with nature based on partnership.

Furthermore, the rhythmic night-day cycle of the poem can be read as representative of the nonlinear queer coming-of-age process. I want to specify that 'queer coming of age' could entail the discovery that one's sexuality differs from the norm, the 'coming out' process, and the moment of (homo)sexual maturity—all of which are moments that many queer people experience out of synch with societal expectations of linear progress. The speaker's reference to the "sacrifice" that must be made to the "mysteried night" illuminates how the sexual encounter is more like a ritual, associated with the garden landscape and its cycles. During the nighttime, the lover is described as "shy"—hinting at her virginity—before the cycle shifts into the hour of dawn, the denouement of the poem when the "wakening garden" around the two women comes to represent their wakening sapphic identities. This sexual coming of age is further emphasized by the cyclical, yet unpredictable structure and rhythm of the poem. Gidlow follows an almost perfect ABCB rhyme scheme throughout the five stanzas, where the second and fourth lines end in rhyming couplets. This rhyme scheme allows for a repetitive and circular rhythm, bringing to life the ritualistic nature of the poem's center-stage event. However, this rhyme scheme clashes with the unpredictability of the poetic meter, which follows no set rules. While the poem aligns with the modernist free verse tradition, it simultaneously breaks with conventions; like "The Face in the Rain," "Episode" refuses to conform to Pound's Imagist idea of "making it new." Gidlow's mix of predictable patterns and

the challenging of traditions prompts us, as readers, to see the queer coming of age as a natural process that moves in cycles, but that must also, like the garden, be allowed to grow on its own terms. This notion of queer coming of age as nonlinear is an idea I explore further in the next section of this chapter. It is also a theme I touch upon in my analysis of *Nightwood*'s peculiar ending, where the refusal to fit conventional temporal narratives aligns with a sense of nonlinear queer time and "queer failure," borrowing Halberstam's concept. Unlike Barnes, Gidlow does not portray her sapphic subjects as "failures" to the same degree; instead, she focuses on how the garden makes room for the queer coming of age as a form of cyclical productivity, defying society's image of the sapphist as unproductive.

When Gidlow draws parallels between the wakening garden and the lesbian lovers, she subverts the agricultural analogy of seeding—as established by Pauline doctrine—and disrupts the image of the "unnatural use of human bodies" (R. Stein 286). I want to claim that the setting reaffirms the garden as a landscape of queer productivity that defiantly challenges the crime-against-nature ideology. Rachel Stein observes in a similar case that, although this productivity is different from traditional heterosexual reproduction, a homoerotic union that takes place in a natural environment reiterates its own version of productivity: one founded on lush growth and "lively pleasures" of the body (294). "Episode" portrays this elegantly with its focus on joyful and tender touch and the garden "wakening" around the women "[a]t dawn." In another poem, "Love Sleep" (59), Gidlow repeats the motif of sexual flowering in rhythm with natural cyclicality when the speaker describes her sleeping lover as "a young flower at night / Weary and glad with dew." The speaker further elevates the bountiful growth that their love will bring about: "[l]ips a red spring bud / My love will bring to bloom." Gidlow's focus is unequivocally on sapphic love's potential for flourishing productivity, inseparable from the natural order. However, this focus also encourages us to question to what extent and damaging effect the universal conception of what is considered "natural" has been used to exclude the queer from nature. R. Stein contends that ideas of homosexuality as unnatural long have been used to "violently dislocate homosexuals from the natural order and from natural environments" (293). She reminds us that nature spaces often provide the ground for "homophobic violence," because the crime-against-nature ideology constructs homosexuals as threats to "the natural order" (R. Stein 292). Gidlow's poetry, on the other hand, not only unsettles the foundations of this ideology by declaring queer sexuality to be just as natural as the flowers blooming in the garden, but her voice also refuses to be apologetic for her celebratory portrayal of such love. The reclamation of rural environments in queer lives is also mirrored by *Nightwood*, where Nora's salon in upstate New York is not

associated with stereotypes of the closeted, rural queer, but rather features as the backdrop for a flourishing bohemian salon community.

Gidlow not only rebuts arguments of unnaturalness in her poem; her imagery of wildness also responds to the opposite side of the paradox—the paradox that aims to categorize lesbians as simultaneously too unnatural and too *wild*. While this paradox attempts to pinpoint lesbians as predatory animals or pests, "Episode"'s image of "wild roses" takes a gentler approach. Overall, Gidlow's queer spatial relations work to destabilize the entire paradoxical construction of the lesbian in a way that emphasizes belonging and inclusion rather than exclusion. I want to begin by drawing attention to Gidlow's description of the roses in "Episode" as "wild." Despite growing in a garden, on "man-made, cultivated pieces of ground" (Marx 85), the flowers are not domesticated. Like Gidlow's own gardens in Madrona and Druid Heights, there is room for the wild and native flowers, and cultivating the "middle ground" becomes more of a "partnership" with nature, rather than a masculine domestication or an exclusion of unwanted species (Gidlow, *Elsa* 294). Once again, this is Gidlow's way of disrupting the heterosexual idyll; she rewrites and reworks the garden—turning its soil, so to speak—into a space that fosters lesbian cultures of nature. From this perspective, the imagery of wildflowers can be read as a metaphor for sapphic women: Gidlow seems to be saying that sapphic women's growth is dependent on their independence, on their refusal to be domesticated and controlled by a hegemonic society, but at the same time, it requires a *partnership* between women and nature. From Gidlow's perspective, nature *is* resistance. When Gidlow's speaker narrates, "I break *wild* roses, scatter them over her. / The thorns between us sting like love's pain" (my emphasis), the poem does not fall into the conventional stereotypes of wildness at the time. Instead of portraying this love as doomed, or as a vicious, predatory act, the wildness of the flowers represents the potential for growth and resistance in harsh environments, as they "sting like love's pain." In her autobiography, Gidlow continues the metaphor of lesbians as "wild flowers" in response to a question of what it was like to grow up queer in the 1920s: "it was a desert, a desert of men. A desert with some wild flowers, a few wild blooms" (*Elsa* 122). At the heart of this image of the *wild* flower in the desert lies both a sapphic resistance and a sense of loneliness. Despite this, Gidlow's nature philosophy underscores that deserts also "have their oases" (*Elsa* 122). In "Episode," these wild flowers have found their bountiful oasis: a middle ground between the wilderness and the city where queer love can flourish and grow on its own terms, and, more importantly, find other wild flowers. Wildness is embodied differently by Robin in *Nightwood*, whose

character represents a precarious borderline between the beast and the human, and the resistance to such stereotypes lies within Barnes's disruption of the gaze.

Overall, Gidlow's portrayal of the lesbian in the garden responds to both stereotypes of wildness and ideologies of Nature found in modernity. Her poetic voice breaks down the dichotomy of nature–modernity to advocate for a more holistic approach to what it means to articulate sapphic modernities. Instead of reproducing heteromasculine performances of "Nature" as a romanticized "world out there" (Morton 274; Pollini 26), which would have dislocated the queer from the natural order, Gidlow reclaims the garden as a nonessentialist space founded on an intimate partnership with nature. Utilizing the idea of a middle ground, her disruption of spatial dichotomies calls into question how lesbian cultures of nature can, in and of themselves, articulate a modernity, as queer relations to nature demonstrate an avant-garde understanding of the sapphic identity—as both inherent to the modern era and as a counterpoint to its demands. The fluidity of boundaries is a theme I return to in my analysis of *Nightwood*, where a comparison of the two texts reveals that Barnes similarly constructs her sapphic modernities on the borderlines between culture and nature, the urban and the rural. However, while Gidlow mainly focuses on reclaiming the garden and the motif of flowering as symbolic of sapphic love, Barnes plays more with the tension that emerges from juxtaposing the wild and the artificial as she destabilizes sexual power relations through parody. Overall, my research reveals that both texts call for a view of nature and modernity as more aligned with the boundary-breaking, nonlinear experience of queerness.

2.4 *On a Grey Thread* as Cycle: Queer Coming of Age

Elsa Gidlow names her poetry collection *On a Grey Thread*, which speaks to the necessity of treating the poems in the collection as individual beads in a larger design. More than this, I suggest that we must see the collection itself as a cycle, as a work that breathes in rhythm with the natural world and its seasons. This cyclicality is evident in the overarching structure of the entire collection: the order in which Gidlow presents these poems symbolizes a cyclical journey that pulsates between youth and old age, night and day, autumn and spring, life and death—and rebirth. In this section, I will argue that Gidlow grounds lesbian existence in the seasonal rhythms of nature and thus claims cyclical temporality to be inherent to the queer coming-of-age process. At the core of this queer passage of time through cycles—as opposed to sequences, clocks, and linearity—lies an inherent resistance toward the heteronormative narrative demanded by modern temporality. Gidlow's approach to cyclicality declares queer

time as an alternative narrative that challenges the inherent naturalization of straight timelines. But instead of merely reiterating the dichotomy of nature–modernity, which would have separated the sapphic from the modern, Gidlow's queer approach to time and nature insists that lesbian existence is also inherent to the new order of avant-garde art and ideas. Even as her poetry continuously interrupts dominant "narratives of belonging and becoming" (Freeman xv), Gidlow challenges us to look beyond this dichotomy and prompts us to ask: Can the sapphic be both at one with nature *and* articulate a form of modernity?

Before I dive into the form of the poetry collection, I want to return to the opening poem "The Grey Thread" (13), because it signals to the readers that the text they are about to read takes on a queer approach to the concept of time. When the speaker in Gidlow's opening poem describes her life as a "grey thread," where one can "trace its course" as it stretches "through Time's day," this predictable thread of time can be read as the heterosexual temporal narrative already planned out for her by society: she is to marry a working man, give birth to his children and raise them, and stay in the domestic sphere. The sapphic speaker expresses detestation at these prospects: "[h]ow dull! How dead!" Instead of accepting this unsatisfactory narrative, the speaker resists in a queer manner: "[b]ut I have slipped gay beads on it / To hide the grey." This opening statement gives rise to an analysis of the tension between queer and modern temporalities. When read in light of Gidlow's life, her refusal to fit such heteronormative narratives exemplifies the speaker's rejection of the "grey thread." Gidlow knew from an early age she would never "marry a man for support" (*Elsa* 145), and she confesses that she would never want children of her own (41). On top of this rejection of society's "paradigmatic markers" of progress (Halberstam, *In a Queer Time* 2), Gidlow also detested the very symbol for modern times: the time clock in the office (*Elsa* 133). Gidlow challenges this strictly linear narrative with her "gay beads" as she crafts colorful threads of queer time instead.

Elizabeth Freeman reminds us that modern time emerged alongside the birth of the homosexual identity and that queer temporality came both from "within" and as a "counterpoint to modern time" (xii). If modern time is defined by mechanical narratives of sequence and socioeconomic productivity, its counterpoint can be read as cycles of nature, which focus on flow and seasonal growth rather than on the strict schedules and clocks of factory time. Freeman's concept of chronobiopolitics informs us that modern time synchronizes people according to productive moments that benefit society socioeconomically, such as heterosexual marriage and childrearing (4). Halberstam—whose ideas Freeman builds upon—claims that queer time envisions alternative lifespans outside of these heteronormative

"paradigmatic markers of life experience—namely, birth, marriage, reproduction, and death" (*In a Queer Time* 2). From the perspective of this timeline, queer existence can be read as an unnatural and disturbing outlier, because queerness as "reproductively sterile" does not contribute to society's progress in the manner that is demanded by modernity (R. Stein 294). Consequently, if modern time demands heterosexual activities, queer existence is at its core a resistance to this timeline, and this prompts me to inquire into how queer time relates to nature's cyclicality.

Let us shift the discussion to the overarching structure of *On a Grey Thread*. The collection inhabits a cyclicality that synchs lesbian existence with the rhythms of the seasons as a constant process of growth, death, and rebirth, establishing queer temporality as a counterpoint to modern time. The beginning of the cycle comes to represent the queer coming of age, in similar manner to what "Episode" revealed. After the opening poem, *On a Grey Thread* continues with a section titled "Youth," and thus the cycle begins: with the young and innocent, who are filled with an enticing curiosity toward life. The first poem of the section, also titled "Youth" (17), brings us down below the crust of the earth, and as readers, we follow the young speaker "[d]own, down, / Below the crust of things," and "[i]nto the caves of life, / Into the darknesses," "[w]here the calm roots of wisdom creep." This image of being surrounded by earth and darkness is repeated throughout the collection, but it is especially impactful here at the beginning of the cycle, as the speaker can be read as a young and impatient seed, waiting below the surface, ready to grow. But to achieve such growth, she (assuming the speaker is a woman) first has to learn from the "roots of wisdom" and find "the caverns of truth" deep within herself. I read this metaphor as a queer coming-of-age moment: the speaker discovers that she is different from the majority and that this can cause pain ("I know pain is waiting there / Eager to break me"), but in the end, she accepts this truth ("[b]ut I am strong") and declares her hope for living "life unashamed / With the cry of Desire on her tongue." Thus, the seed of queerness bursts into the light, ready to live out its full potential as a self-fulfilled being. From a contemporary perspective, this reads like a coming-out story, which incidentally is a narrative that causes many people to feel "out of synch" with normative timelines (Freeman xv). When temporalities are regulated according to heteronormative frameworks, figuring out that one's sexuality is different from the norm is, for many queer people, a time-consuming process that puts "normal" adolescent experiences on hold. This still rings true today, but in Gidlow's time it was even more so, as the identity category of the homosexual was a new and stigmatized creation.

The motif of the seed repeats throughout the work, like beads on a thread, but more than just a coming-of-age moment, the "seeding" metaphor emphasizes the sapphist's potential for growth and undermines religious ideologies of unnaturalness. The motif is particularly impactful in the poems "Roots" (32) and "Declaration" (40), which are located in the second section of the collection, following "Youth," placing them early in the cycle. This speaker similarly turns into a voice from beneath the earth's surface: in "Roots" she is "crawling like a worm" and in "Declaration" she is "a seed in the dust" and "[a] live root bedded in night." The speaker in "Roots" dreams of the sun mellowing "my ultimate fruit," while the other speaker yearns for the moment in time when she shall "be done with night" and finally "thrill into flower." These two poems are thematically linked with "Youth," and all three of them foreground that the beginning of the cycle is marked by a birth. But this is not a traditional, heterosexual childbirth. Halberstam underscores that the timeline of heterosexual reproduction is "ruled by a biological clock" and the "strict bourgeois rules of respectability and scheduling," which have been commonly accepted as both "natural and desirable" (*In a Queer Time* 5). Opposing such strict timelines, Gidlow begins her cycle with a coming-of-age birth of queerness that is intricately tied with seasonal temporalities and images of seeds. This is a powerful declaration: Gidlow reclaims the agricultural analogy that provides the foundation of the Pauline doctrine that has targeted homosexuality as unnatural for centuries. Not only does this reject linear progress and demands of traditional reproduction, but it also grounds the queer experience as temporally at one with nature. To put it differently, Gidlow's cyclicality celebrates alternative, queer relations to time and questions the ideological naturalization of straight timelines. These three poems make two things clear from the start: processes of queer temporality go hand-in-hand with cyclical nature and exist as a counterpoint to modern time, and the queer coming-of-age process must be allowed to flower according to its own tempo, rather than being limited by mechanical heteronormativity. This concept of queer time reverberates in *Nightwood* as well, whose incoherent narrative refuses the linearity demanded by *Bildungsroman* narratives.

We move from these first two sections associated with youth and innocence to encounter a more experienced speaker in the last two sections, titled "Inner Chamber" and "In Passing." As the titles suggest, the poems in these sections focus on emotional experience and the sections contain some of the more explicit love poems about other women. The speaker continues through the cycle of growth, and I want to highlight how Gidlow's approach to temporality not only exists as a counterpoint to modern time, but also manages to claim the sapphic as an integral, pathbreaking part of modernity. In doing so, she challenges the

conception of nature as modernity's antithesis and asserts that the sapphic identity belongs both in the natural order and in the modern world. The contrast between queer temporalities and modern time, as exemplified by the last sections of Gidlow's collection, is never complete. Instead, the tension between these different ways of life brings to the fore how queer temporalities also exist as an integral part of modernity (Freeman xii). For example, in the poem "The Artist" (52), Gidlow merges cultural production with sapphic love and the motif of time: "Madonna . . . loose me and rise. / We are brief as apple-blossom" (ellipsis in original), Gidlow writes, echoing the notion of sapphic love as a cyclical flowering, now merged with artistic expression in the shape of the Madonna. She continues, "[c]reation is all. / The hours are thieves, Time a beggar," and "I ache for the brush in my hand. / . . . / I will paint you, Madonna, / . . . / Art is our one immortality." This poem underlines how queer timelines expressed through nature are inherently linked with an articulation of modernity. The speaker conveys a desire to paint her sapphic lover like the Madonna—traditionally a religious portrayal of Mary in art—before time runs out. Not only does the poem defiantly rewrite this religious figure in a sapphic context, but it further becomes evident from these lines that the speaker values artistic production as a way of achieving cyclical immortality in line with the rebirth of the apple blossoms. Moreover, the notion that the "hours are thieves" also implies different ways of relating to urgency and death, which is a key factor defining queer time (see Halberstam, *In a Queer Time* 2). Gidlow fronts the idea that queer temporalities not only exist as a counterpoint to modern timelines, but that modernity in one way is the midwife to queer time, and that the two are inseparable.

More than this, modernity can also be said to be the midwife to the social category of nature, and I want to pay close attention to how Gidlow's cyclical merging of nature and culture produces a rewriting of the concept of nature as we know it. As I have demonstrated, Gidlow's cyclicality articulates a sapphic modernity, and I will argue that the collection emphasizes how the nonseparation of culture–nature still relies on a meaningful concept of nature—*queer* nature—more aligned with Jacques Pollini's and Timothy Morton's line of thought. This is exemplified by *On a Grey Thread*'s alignment with seasonality. The second-to-last poem, "Before Sleep" (77), marks the end of a cycle, and the title tells us that we have come full circle to the image of the seed soon to be returning beneath the ground for the "ultimate slumber." The "autumn sadness" and the "falling of leaves" signify the end of a season, perhaps also a life, but it comes with the promise of a new spring, a new cycle, a new rebirth, as the speaker reaffirms the "dreamfulness in my heart." The cyclical nature of Gidlow's writing reaffirms the idea that the end of her collection, as indeed the end of her

Figure 2. The fallen Gravenstein apple tree in Gidlow's front yard at Druid Heights (2012; left), and the marker stone of Gidlow's grave at the base of the fallen apple tree (2013; right). Photographs by Greg Youmans, first published in Out of the Closet, Into the Archives *(2015), reprinted with Youmans's permission.*

own life, is nothing more than the beginning of something new. This tight-knit relation to and acceptance of the changing of the seasons produces alternative ways of relating to time, death, and futurity (see Halberstam, *In a Queer Time*). This chapter has discovered that Gidlow's writing, like her life, relies on a partnership *with* nature. This partnership necessarily requires a meaningful concept of nature as boundary-defying, intimate, and constantly transforming (see Morton; Pollini). By contrast with Latour's call to "rid ourselves of the notion of nature" (7), I propose that Gidlow's poetry and its relation to the seasons encourages us to take on a more nuanced view of the concept of nature, one that balances the non-separation of nature and culture with a concept of *queer nature* that relies on partnership instead of domestication. This notion of nature is not "pure" or "pristine" (Morton 274); instead, it embodies a nonlinear embrace of sexuality, death, and rebirth.

The last poem before the epilogue, "A Thought" (78), ends the collection's cycle with this promise of rebirth: "[t]here are more songs in the far corners of my soul / Than I shall ever be able to sing. / . . . / And they will wait for another life, / . . . / To give them birth." *On a Grey Thread* has come full circle: it began with a seed in the ground, a metaphor for the queer coming of age as a cyclical birth, and now the seed returns to the ground and completes the cycle with the hope of *re*birth. Cyclicality in *On a Grey Thread* represents the queer coming-of-age as a continuous process of rebirth and self-creation, which is opposed to the linear progression demanded by heterosexual *bildungsroman* narratives. Gidlow's philosophy of growth reiterates this perspective, as illustrated by the quote from her autobiography that I chose to open this thesis with in my epigraph: "[i]f we are alive and growing, we are continuously giving birth to ourselves" (*Elsa* 1). This is also relevant in the case of *Nightwood*, where the narrative refuses closure and similarly rejects linearity. Barnes also

brings queer rebirth into the discussion, although her framing is more ambiguous than Gidlow's. Nevertheless, both Gidlow and Barnes oppose Lee Edelman's contested notion that the queer has no future because society invests the future in "the Child" (12). While Barnes's approach relies more on deconstructing binaries of life and death and Gidlow relies more on natural cyclicality, both authors underscore that queer nature makes the future possible—for individuals and communities alike. Gidlow's poem "A Thought" complicates the notion of queer rebirth as merely a form of liberation and self-creation; it further embodies queer history as a "living, open-ended present" rather than a "fixed and frozen past," to borrow Youmans's words (103). Gidlow's cyclicality invites us to see her plants and poetry as a legacy that keeps on spreading its roots and finding new hillsides to grow on. Gidlow envisions a queer futurity that is not limited to the flesh, but that encourages us as readers to forge "new, queer forms of generational connection and remembrance" (Youmans 103). Both Barnes and Gidlow utilize queer temporalities in ways that move "aslant" to the strict expectations of modern time, and they thus pave the way for new, queer "narratives of belonging and becoming" (Freeman xv).

In conclusion, Gidlow's *On a Grey Thread* invites us as readers into a garden that encompasses queer growth and productivity. Tracing the thread of queerness and nature in her poetry turns into an act of discovering Gidlow's *roots* as an activist. In reclaiming the role of nature in sapphic lives, Gidlow stands out from the crowd as one of few modernist writers who embrace the naturalness of the lesbian identity with joy and optimism. While writers like Barnes—and many other sapphic writers of the period—often portray lesbian existence under the guise of satire or rely on convoluted meanings to escape censorship, I have demonstrated how Gidlow's poetry takes on a celebratory tone that was unprecedented for its time. This reading adds to the argumentation for why there is a need to "recover" Gidlow as a modernist writer of the counter-canon. Part of my decision to include Gidlow's poetry next to Barnes's novel in this thesis was guided by a sense of curiosity about what this underread author could contribute to the queer modernist conversation. I have discovered that *On a Grey Thread* rejects essentialist notions of queerness and nature, and instead rewrites the garden as a space that embraces sexuality in union with the seasons. Rejecting both claims of unnaturalness and wildness, Gidlow's collection envisions a modern, queer "way of life" in rhythm with nature's cyclicality. I want to reiterate how Gidlow calls for a sense of queer community and belonging based on a *partnership* with nature rather than domestication. This partnership extends beyond the text and invites us, as readers, to cultivate our own gardens, whether metaphorical or physical, in line with Gidlow's legacy and philosophy of queer rebirth.

3. “Jungles in Drawing Rooms”: Djuna Barnes and Sapphic Transgression

3.1 Introduction

Djuna Barnes’s eccentric character lingers as a photographic emblem of the expatriate community of writers and artists that helped define the modern era in Paris—the “capital of modernity” (Harvey). While she remained a private figure for most of her life (Herring xv), there is little doubt that her lifestyle, her networks, and her relationships in Paris left significant marks on her best-known work of literature: *Nightwood* (1936). *Nightwood*’s unique form and puzzling language continue to spark debates in literary circles even today, and regardless of how we choose to approach this work, it becomes necessary to first acknowledge the difficulty of categorizing a text like *Nightwood*. In his preface to the novel, T. S. Eliot writes that *Nightwood* “will appeal primarily to readers of poetry,” because “only sensibilities trained on poetry can wholly appreciate it” (xviii). This description touches on this core problem of categorization scholars of *Nightwood* have faced since its publication: Is it a novel? If so, what kind of a novel is it—a poetic one? What kind of modernist shelf does it belong on? Who is the main character? What is the plot? And so on. Eliot concludes that *Nightwood is* a novel, but that its prose—with its “rhythm” and “musical pattern”—is so alive that its reading demands more than the “ordinary novel-reader” can offer (xviii). Mary E. Galvin, on the other hand, describes the work as a “poetic ‘novel’” (83), with quotation marks perhaps to indicate *Nightwood*’s refusal to be boxed into the conventional understanding of the term. Moreover, Tyrus Miller contends that *Nightwood* must be understood as an example of *late* modernism because its style unsettles the “literary historical oppositions” between modernism and postmodernism (124). In other words, there is no escaping the fact that *Nightwood* slips between our fingers and evades easy categorization: it can at once be read as prose and poetry, as modern and unmodern, as archaic and innovative (see Caselli; Galvin).

For the sake of clarity, I will refer to *Nightwood* as a novel in this thesis, but I do not intend to resolve any questions about what *Nightwood* is or is not in terms of genre, style, or plot. Instead, I aim to show that this work embodies a “radical disruption of systems of representations,” and demonstrate how it can be read as representing a counterforce along the same lines as queer theory (J. Taylor). The purpose of ‘queer’ is to criticize identity politics and biological essentialism and instead focus on nonessential, fluid ways of living and relating to one’s identity. What makes *Nightwood* a key work to analyze from the perspective of queer theory is that there emerges a clear link between such questioning of essentialist

categories of gender and sexuality and the novel's undermining of essentialist notions of genre. *Nightwood*'s formal attributes—such as its archaic language, its narrative incoherence, its undoing of genre—mirror the thematic in the shape of gender-nonconforming characters, sapphic and non-monogamous relationships, and a focus on boundary crossing between worlds. In addition, Timothy Morton argues that queer theory finds "a strange friend in nonessentialist biology" (275), which opens for a reading of *Nightwood* that investigates to what extent its portrayal of *nature* intertwines with its queer content and its trailblazing (late) modernist style.

In this chapter, I aim to outline how Djuna Barnes's cult classic is a work that situates itself *in between*: in between genres, in between temporalities and geographies, in between modernism and postmodernism (Miller). Similar to Gidlow's poetry, *Nightwood* disrupts the nature paradox—the concept I have identified that aims to pinpoint sapphic women in modernity as simultaneously too wild *and* too unnatural to belong to the new order—but Barnes's approach diverges from Gidlow's on several points. While Gidlow's focus is more on reclaiming the *naturalness* of the queer in relation to gardens and growth, Barnes's disruption of the hegemonic order is achieved more through a parody of the paradox. *Nightwood* and its characters float on several borderlines and blur the boundaries between city and countryside, human and animal, culture and nature, and the novel exhibits a playfulness with these boundaries and binaries to such an extent that it threatens the hold of the heteropatriarchy. In its parodical reclamation of sapphic women existing on the edge of these precarious borderlines, the novel ends up embracing the fluidity and intimacy demanded by both queerness and nature. Furthermore, as *Nightwood* deconstructs these binaries of genre, gender, sexuality, and nature in the same breath, the novel calls for an examination of the concept of nature as inherently queer and nonbinary, which echoes *On a Grey Thread*'s emphasis on merging sapphic modernities with the notion of lesbian cultures of nature. But while Gidlow's focus relies more on nature in itself as a meaningful concept—as articulated by Jacques Pollini—Barnes's writing, on the other hand, centers more on nonseparation in itself as a form of transgressive resistance toward mainstream "narratives of belonging and becoming" (Freeman xv).

In the first section, I examine Robin Vote's character—the sapphist whose "troubling structure" brings out the tension between the wild and the artificial, and thus becomes an embodiment of the nature paradox (*Nightwood* 31). Characterized as a human-beast of "two worlds" (*Nightwood* 31), Robin unsettles the gaze that aims to control her. The ekphrastic image of Robin—an idea I explain in this chapter—necessitates a comparison with Gidlow's

poem “The Face in the Rain,” and I examine how these sapphic subjects break down borderlines to reclaim the sapphist as a modern identity. Next, guided by Gidlow’s devoted attention to gardens, I compare how Barnes’s use of gardens in *Nightwood* differs from Gidlow’s in the poem “Episode.” Instead of reclaiming the lush productivity of sapphic sexualities, as Gidlow does, I show how Barnes turns the garden trope on its head and portrays *non*reproductive sexuality as a counterforce to the hegemonic idyll. In the third section, I dive into the novel’s most prominent settings, Paris and upstate New York, to reveal how Barnes blurs geographical boundaries. When it comes to the city, I illustrate how Barnes rewrites Paris as the capital of *sapphic* modernity without dislocating the queer from nature. Aided by Halberstam, my analysis underscores how this continuous blurring of spatial boundaries ultimately rejects the metronormative narrative and instead calls attention to how queer cultures of nature can inform modern sapphic identities and vice versa. Finally, I turn to *Nightwood*’s puzzling ending to showcase how the modernist form disturbs conventional, straight timelines. The novel entangles “queer failure” with a return to nature and establishes queer temporalities as an alternate way of relating to death and futurity. More than anything, I want to stress that the novel articulates queerness as “a way of life” more than merely a sexuality or identity, as Foucault asks us to envision (“Friendship” 138). Ultimately this way of *living queerness*—awry with respect to societal expectations—leaves its mark on Barnes’s *oeuvre* and establishes her location in the modernist queer counter-canon. Both Barnes and Gidlow thus challenge us to reevaluate our conceptions of the past, the present, and the future.

3.2 Robin Vote: Queer Transgressions of a “Beast Turning Human”

Nightwood offers us as readers a vivid selection of character portraits, all of whom can, to some extent, be considered societal outcasts and pariahs. In this section, I want to analyze the characterization of Robin Vote, who embodies queerness as a boundary-breaking way of life that brings out the tension between the wild and the unnatural—the very foundations of the nature paradox that aims to control sapphic women in modernity. As the gaze seeks to render Robin frozen in the paradoxical image of an artificial jungle, her parodical embodiment of both the unnatural and the wild threatens to break down modern timelines and binary spatial relations. In the end, I reveal how Robin’s queerness refuses categorization, slips in between normative binaries, and unsettles the controlling gaze.

Robin Vote is the love and obsession of Nora throughout *Nightwood*’s entangled narrative, and we are first introduced to this character as a “beast turning human” in the Hôtel

Récamier, as Felix and the doctor find her passed out on a bed, surrounded by various plants and flowers (*Nightwood* 33). This scene is painted for the reader like a still life, a moment frozen in time in which the unconscious Robin becomes the focal point of the gaze:

> On a bed, surrounded by a confusion of potted plants, exotic palms and cut flowers, faintly oversung by the notes of unseen birds . . . lay the young woman, heavy and dishevelled. . . . The perfume that her body exhaled was of the quality of that earth-flesh, fungi, which smells of captured dampness and yet is so dry, overcast with the odour of oil of amber, which is an inner malady of the sea . . . Her flesh was the texture of plant life, and beneath it one sensed a frame, broad, porous and sleep-worn, as if sleep were a decay fishing her beneath the visible surface. (*Nightwood* 30–31)[13]

In this description of Robin, associations with the natural world are intricately linked to the appearance and location of her physical body. This "painting" places the young woman as the centerpiece of a still life, amongst "exotic" plants and flowers that have all been "potted" and "cut" to fit the interior of a modern Parisian hotel. I want to point to the importance of the diction in this passage, which foregrounds the domestication of nature as similar to the domestication of women, specifically sapphic women. Robin features as the novel's poster boy for the modern sexual invert (with 'poster *boy*' intended here to blur the boundaries of gendered language), as she is described to possess the "body of a boy," and she wears "boy's trousers" (*Nightwood* 41, 152). In the scene above, her sapphic, gender-ambiguous body merges with "potted plants" and "cut flowers," and she becomes the focal point of a gaze that attempts to cut her roots and contain her in a still, yet exotic image to the satisfaction of the viewer. The attempt to domesticate nature in the name of capitalist production aligns itself with the normative objectification of women, as Neil Smith reminds us (26). Nature is often envisioned as female and romanticized for this very reason; romanticization functions as a form of objectification and thus domination (Smith 26). I want to extend Smith's argument to include marginalized sexualities, where the intersection with gender exhibits a threat to heteromasculine identities and their social control. In the case of Robin, Barnes uses the imagery of the potted and cut flowers to portray the romanticization of the unconscious sapphic body, whose image can only be considered "productive" as long as it remains still and

[13]It is necessary here to point to the problem with quotations from *Nightwood*, a problem that Daniela Caselli also identifies: to choose quotes from *Nightwood* is more a process of elimination than of selection, as "any cut-off point seems arbitrary since it carries with it the regret for all the lost associations" (Caselli 165). This is just to underline that while quotes must be cut short for the sake of analysis, these scenes and descriptions flow into each other and demand to be read in the context of such fluidity.

pleases the male eye in its exotic arrangement. However, Robin's body refuses to remain still, and this is why the image of her body also poses a threat to the hold of the patriarchy.

When we zoom in on this introductory description, the language reveals how Robin's body brings out the tension between the wild and the artificial, the natural and the unnatural, as her flesh becomes a carrier of two worlds and refuses to be contained. Descriptions of her flesh are grounded in imagery of soil and fungi, with a smell and a texture that mirror the plant life surrounding her. Her body moves seamlessly between the soil and the ocean, between elements of earth and water. The picture of this unconscious body floats between several worlds: the hotel and the jungle, the earth and the sea. The flowing language is enticing; it draws us in, and, as spectators of "a 'picture' forever arranged," we cannot look away (*Nightwood* 33). The tension in this passage lies in its paradoxical arrangement: it is at once an image of what Caselli pinpoints as "stasis and movement" (165), and it embodies the friction between the wilderness and the artificial. The still life is never still. On the contrary, it crawls with life, not only through Barnes's frenzied language, but also with images of growing fungi and "earth-flesh," associations with insects that thrive in the soil, the slithering jungle-like plants around her, and the rhythmic, nauseating motion of waves that causes "an inner malady of the sea" (*Nightwood* 31). The physical stage, contrastingly, is set in a fast-paced Parisian hotel—the epitome of urban modernity. In the midst of these continuously moving, clashing worlds, Robin lies as the focal point of Felix's curious gaze—but the reader is also involved here. Caselli argues that we cannot merely observe this image of the unconscious female body, but that we must "'kill' it in order to make it stand still," because while we may be promised a "still life," the slippery "sliding of words" turns the image into the "frenetic performance of a circus ring" (164–65). Adding onto this, I want to say that Felix's and the reader's need to "kill" the image with their gaze not only stems from the slippery language, but also from the tension that arises when the wild meets the domesticated, and when the natural meets the artificial. The paradoxical fusion of these contrasting worlds creates the "troubling structure" that defines Robin's character from the first time we meet her: "the born somnambule, who lives in two worlds—meet of child and desperado" (*Nightwood* 31). As I have exemplified, the scene might at first appear to the reader as purely an objectification of the sapphic body: Robin is unable to speak for herself, and her image consists merely of body parts stretched out on an exotic stage meant to please the curiosity of the gazing (male) spectator. But Barnes complicates this picture beyond objectification. On closer inspection, the characterization of Robin as a carrier of the tension between "two worlds" unsettles the gaze, because her paradoxical image refuses to stand still. Robin's

fluctuation between natural surroundings and the artificial *mise-en-scène* of the hotel causes a tension that is impossible to resolve, but it nonetheless holds the essence of how this character will appear in the work as a whole.

The ambiguous boundaries between the natural and the artificial, alongside the simultaneous stasis and movement of the scene, could further be read as a parody of the wild–unnatural paradox that haunts the creation of the modern homosexual. The metaphor of painting Robin on the page represents the need to control her. In similar ways, the paradoxical stereotypes of homosexuality are used to contain the threat of the sapphic woman and keep her at bay from spaces of modernity *and* nature. But as Robin's body simultaneously occupies the natural and the unnatural, the wild and the artificial, Barnes creates a parody of the paradox that reveals its flipside. Robin's embodiment of the wild–unnatural paradox is illustrated by the ekphrastic painting metaphor that develops throughout these paragraphs:

> Like a painting by the *douanier* Rousseau, she seemed to lie in a jungle trapped in a drawing room . . . thrown in among the carnivorous flowers as their ration; the set, the property of an unseen *dompteur*, half lord, half promoter, over which one expects to hear the strains of an orchestra of wood-wind render a serenade which will popularize the wilderness. (*Nightwood* 31, emphasis in original)

The portrait of Robin has now taken on a new direction, moving from a still life of flowers and plants into a painting by Henri Rousseau—the modern naive painter who often painted jungles and wild, exotic beasts, but who never actually left France and only painted from what he had seen in botanical gardens (Vallier). What does this new association bring to our reading of Robin's character? Like the jungles Rousseau painted, the jungle Robin seems to lie in is both dreamlike and theatrical, an artificial wilderness trapped between the walls of "a drawing room" and it also becomes a drawing, never fully wild yet never fully domesticated, transfixed between movement and stasis. The perspective of the narrator and Felix seems to paint Robin in a similar manner, working to pinpoint her on the page, within the theatrical "set," in order to "popularize" her wildness (*Nightwood* 31). In this sense, Robin embodies the allegations of the "wild" sapphic woman—the predator who preys on innocent, heterosexual women. Interestingly, this echoes Gidlow's speaker in "The Face in the Rain," who reclaims the stereotype of the predatory wife-snatcher. The "carnivorous flowers" in Barnes's description further inspire a callback to 1930s stereotypes of weeds and pests, as exemplified previously by Sheila Donisthorpe's descriptions of lesbians as "freaks of nature" with their "weeds of viciousness" in her book *Loveliest of Friends*. But the reason I contend that Robin represents a parody, and not merely a reiteration of stereotypes, lies in the absurdity of the

scene's set-up. The clashing of jungles and drawing rooms, along with the circus-like quality of the beast and the tamer, underscores the *satirical* portrayal of the sapphic body as seen from the outside gaze of those attempting to "popularize" her.

Figure 3. Henri Rousseau's The Dream *(1910). Licensed under CC0 public domain (Rousseau).*

What is more, the reference to Henri Rousseau ends up painting Robin's image similarly to the naive and naked body of the light-skinned woman who is transported to a jungle in Rousseau's most famous painting *The Dream* (1910).[14] From this perspective, Robin appears to be simultaneously threatened by the "carnivorous flowers" and the animals surrounding her, *and* to figure as a wild beast herself, as "the property of an unseen *dompteur*" (*Nightwood* 31; emphasis in original). This image likens her to a circus tiger needing to be tamed for the audience, with the reader's gaze even featuring as the *dompteur*—the tamer.[15] Once again, she exists as a character of two worlds: wild and domesticated, threatening and innocent, natural and unnatural. The ekphrastic image of Robin thus embodies the full weight of the paradox that defined and stigmatized homosexuality at the time of Barnes's writing, and its parody ends up ridiculing this picture. Is she merely an artificial set decoration on this

[14] See figure 3.
[15] According to the Cambridge Dictionary, 'dompteur' is French for 'tamer,' often in the context of circus animals ("Dompteur").

stage of play-pretend wilderness, meant to represent the dislocation of the unnatural queer from the natural order? Or is she a fearful predator out of place, a queer beast caught in a drawing room that threatens to tear down the walls of the domestic sphere, unless she is tamed by the *dompteur*?

The juxtaposition of the wild and the artificial builds the tension that keeps the image of Robin together—statically frozen in time—but at the same time, the narrative seems to entangle her in opposing stereotypes to the point where her movement between these opposing worlds threatens to break apart her image. More than anything, the act of painting reveals that the paradox is imposed on her by the outside world, by Felix and the other characters, and by the reader's participating gaze. From the outset, it appears as though Robin herself has no say in the narratives crafted about her. Thus, many scholars argue that Robin is the empty center of the novel around which the other characters circle as if she is a black hole pulling them in (see Caselli; de Lauretis; Glavey). Brian Glavey, for example, reaffirms that Robin is the "ekphrastic image" that the entire novel spins around: an incomprehensible void of aesthetic form that the other characters attempt to grasp and control but will never be able to fully possess (756–57). This "ekphrastic object" of Robin, he observes, relies on a "two-dimensional" and silent portrayal of her character, as exemplified by the *mise-en-scène* of the *douanier* Rousseau painting (Glavey 757). Glavey concludes that Robin rejects these narratives crafted for her, and that in the void left by her character, the book turns into an "exegetical tug-of-war" that seeks to "transform Robin's mirage into meaningful discourse," and he suggests that in doing so, the novel offers a critique of how sexual politics in modernism tends to "treat people as pictures" (Glavey 757). I agree with Glavey that the painting of Robin highlights the stereotypical treatment of sapphic women in modernity to the point of parody and critique, but more than this, I want to emphasize that Robin's refusal to be contained by the narrative, or indeed by the painting, marks her "troubling structure" as more complex than merely a "two dimensional" fetish (*Nightwood* 31; Glavey 757). The novel warns us that "[t]he woman who presents herself to the spectator as a 'picture' forever arranged, is, for the contemplative mind, the chiefest danger" (*Nightwood* 33), and Robin comes to represent this danger as she slips between our fingers and refuses to be "killed" by the gaze, to borrow Caselli's term.

Robin embodies this precarious image through notions of both time and space. Spatially, she floats back and forth between wilderness and modern urbanity, revealing the cultural construction of both settings. Temporally, she similarly refuses to remain still; she is simultaneously "timeless" and an "infected carrier of the past" (*Nightwood* 33–34).

Furthermore, Felix sees her as a "figurehead in a museum, which though static . . . seemed yet to be going against the wind" (*Nightwood* 34). In other words, the gaze fails to pinpoint Robin's body in time and space. This spatio-temporal tension that makes up Robin's structure establishes her body as "ambiguous and fluctuating," to borrow Judith Paltin's words, and Robin can be read not merely as an object but also as a subject (Paltin 787). The impossible task of possessing or controlling Robin becomes the emblem of her rejection of imposed narratives. As Robin refuses to be controlled through minute categorization, her body similarly rejects all labels created to contain and maintain her queerness dislocated from modern society and the natural order. Overall, Robin breaks free "from the wild/cultivated binary" that has been imposed on nature—and queerness—for centuries (Paltin 788).

The ekphrastic act of using the gaze to paint an object of desire onto the page echoes the poetic form and imagery of Gidlow's poem "The Face in the Rain." In both cases, the narrator/speaker uses the metaphor of painting to express a sentiment of desire for another woman. The painting style bleeds into the textual form and shapes how the words move on the page, simultaneously capturing desire for a woman as a moment frozen in time and as a moving, ever-changing temporality. In Gidlow's case, the structure of the stanzas floats like the runny watercolor splashed onto the "grey street," while in Barnes's case, the sliding, slithering language represents the motion of the painted jungle—both artificial and threatening. What is interesting to note in *both* cases is that the painted picture of a woman is always located in between two contrasting spatio-temporal contexts: the speaker in "The Face in the Rain" blends the garden and the city as she portrays the object of the sapphic gaze as a red poppy flower in the hustling crowd; in the case of *Nightwood*, Robin fluctuates ambiguously between the constructed set of a jungle and the modern hotel scene. Temporally, both scenes linger on the moment to capture it as timeless. Gidlow's sapphic speaker shapes same-sex desire through its queer temporality, which contrasts with the fast-paced modern time of the city. Existing both in the middle of and as a counterpoint to modern timelines, sapphic desire "floats" in its own direction and expands the moment beyond the limitations of the setting. Compared with Gidlow's optimism regarding sapphic desire, Barnes focuses on Robin's transgression of boundaries as a *threat* that must be contained, an image that must be "killed" to make it stand still. Gidlow merges settings to defy the paradox and make room for sapphic modernities that belong both to nature *and* to the city, while Barnes embraces the unnatural–wild paradox to the point of parody and reveals the extent to which the sapphic woman is subjected to constant categorization. But overall, both authors use natural imagery

and unconventional temporalities to undermine the hegemony that aims to impose its rigid structures on the sapphist.

3.3 Dawn and Death in the Queer Garden

Now I would like to return to the idea of the sapphic garden. The previous chapter showcased how the garden serves as a significant motif in Gidlow's poetry collection, where it fosters sapphic desire and lesbian cultures of nature. *Nightwood*, on the other hand, relies more on the urban setting of Paris as the capital of modernity, but there are nevertheless two Parisian gardens that leave their mark on the novel: the Jardin du Luxembourg in Paris—the large and lavish green lung in the middle of the city—and the garden plot outside Nora and Robin's apartment on the rue du Cherche-Midi. These gardens serve different purposes throughout the novel's unconventional narrative and thus complicate the motif beyond the safe heterotopia for sapphic women that we see in Gidlow. I will assert that to some extent, Barnes similarly portrays the Parisian gardens as miniature shelters where sapphic women can express their desires openly without the judging eyes of urban society surrounding them. Unlike Gidlow, Barnes also recognizes the garden as a place subjected to threats—such as trespassers that represent heteronormative ideals and love affairs that jeopardize relationships. In response to these threats, Barnes's gardens twist the counterforce of the lesbian in a different direction from Gidlow. The disruptive power of *Nightwood's* gardens lies not in their productivity, as in Gidlow's poetry, but rather in their defiant and sometimes parodic reclamation of sapphic sexualities as *non*reproductive. Rather than focusing on fertility and life, Barnes's sapphic gardens foster defiance and death in the face of heteronormative expectations and stereotypes of lesbian misery—but not without the cyclical promise of rebirth.

The first garden we encounter, the Jardin du Luxembourg, comes to represent the invasion of queer spaces by normative heterosexual ideals—embodied by Felix through his obsession with traditions and his desire to marry and raise a son to secure his future. Unlike Gidlow's garden in "Episode," which shuts out the gaze of a judgmental (male) society, Felix trespasses into the Jadin du Luxembourg to attempt his courtship of Robin. As readers, we know that Felix is eager to encounter Robin again after their first meeting because he calls for her several times at the hotel unsuccessfully before he runs into her on "the corner of the rue Bonaparte" (*Nightwood* 36). Notice first the name of the street: the rue Bonaparte. This is a masculine and "conservative phallocentric" name, to borrow the words of Amy Wells-Lynn, which represents the "male-identified Paris" surrounding them (96). In this scene, Barnes

acknowledges the dominant perception of the modern city as a "city for men" (Massey 233). As I will argue for in the next section, *Nightwood* also makes room for a rewriting of this masculine cityscape from a sapphic perspective. Returning to the idea of the garden, Robin suggests "that they should walk together in the gardens of the Luxembourg, toward which *her steps had been directed* when he addressed her" (*Nightwood* 36; my emphasis). I want to acknowledge that Robin does invite Felix to the gardens, but I choose to regard Felix's character as a trespasser, because he is more identified with the male cityscape than with the garden. What is more, Robin's agency stakes a claim to the garden as a queer space; *her* steps were directed toward the garden in the first place, and she was going there with or without Felix—he merely tags along.

When they enter the garden, Felix's attempted courtship builds on ideas of female fertility—a traditional garden trope—and his character invades the queer space by subjecting Robin to "the damaging practices of heterosexism" (R. Stein 296). As readers, we already know that Felix is obsessed with traditions and the past, and that this leads to his desire for a conventional marriage and a son: "[t]o pay homage to our past is the only gesture that also includes the future," Felix says, and the doctor replies, "[a]nd so a son?" (*Nightwood* 36). When Felix and Robin walk in the "bare chilly gardens," Felix talks and talks about himself without any response from Robin: "[h]e felt that he could talk to her, tell her anything, though she herself was so silent. He told her he had a post in the Crédit Lyonnais, earning two thousand five hundred francs a week . . ." (*Nightwood* 37). From this interaction, or rather lack of interaction, Felix's courtship aligns itself with the binary gendered stereotypes of the dominant, talkative man and the quiet, submissive woman. It is relevant here to note that the performance of the garden as a form of pristine, idealized Nature relies on a patriarchal performance of gender, founded on what Morton refers to as the "inside-outside structures" of strict binaries (274). If the garden is idealized as a feminine space of fertility, the ideal must, by necessity, base itself on a performance of the woman who embodies the same attributes often assigned to the natural landscape, namely "tender, feminine, and submissive" (Marx 29). The role of the man relies on a performance of masculinity and dominance—exemplified by Felix in this passage in his attempts to dominate the conversation and prove himself a worthy husband through his social and financial position. In other words, in this particular garden, Barnes uses the space in a different manner from Gidlow. While Gidlow mainly focuses on the garden as a safe space that fosters productivity in "Episode," Barnes simultaneously constructs the garden as a queer space that Robin seeks out to find shelter from a "male-

identified Paris" (Wells-Lynn 96), *and* she makes visible the external heteronormative ideals that represent threats to which queer women are subjected.

Barnes highlights the immediate desire Felix feels to control Robin, yet the Jardin du Luxembourg setting brings out the difficulty this presents. Robin's manner of being, likened to a statue in the garden, comes to symbolize the counterforce of the lesbian who disrupts heteronormative ideals through a *non*reproductive way of life. Felix struggles to capture and understand the image of Robin in the garden, much in the same way he struggles to "kill" her image in the hotel. Felix describes Robin from his point of view as "gracious and yet fading, like an old statue in a garden, that symbolizes the weather through which it has endured, and is not so much the work of man as the work of wind and rain and the herd of the seasons, and though formed in man's image is a figure of doom" (*Nightwood* 37). The typical trope of the garden is one of fertility (Wells-Lynn 99), a trope that Gidlow reclaims by rewriting the garden as representing a female-coded and sexually productive space. A statue, however, arguably represents the opposite. Still, lifeless, grey, and worn down by weather—Barnes's allusions to Robin as a fading garden statue imply the opposite of traditional fertility. What this entails is that Robin's body as "reproductively sterile" is juxtaposed against a blooming garden (R. Stein 294), which illuminates why her figure is one of "doom" and justifies why Felix finds "her presence painful" (*Nightwood* 37). Metaphorically speaking, Robin refuses to "bloom" for Felix and rejects his courtship.

Moreover, Felix's description of Robin as simultaneously "formed in man's image" *and* as "the work of wind and rain and the herd of the seasons" echoes the earlier description of Robin as a "jungle trapped in a drawing room" (*Nightwood* 31, 37). In both cases, it is precisely Robin's "troubling structure," which moves in between the worlds of culture and nature, that causes her to slip away from Felix's grip (*Nightwood* 31). The fact that Barnes uses the phrase "herd of the seasons" to describe Robin's statue-like quality further suggests her cyclical opposition to the sequential progression demanded by modern time—represented by Felix—including events like marriage, reproduction, and childbirth (Halberstam, *In a Queer Time* 2). Had Robin's symbolic connection to nature conformed to essentialist boundaries that separate nature and culture, her character might have reproduced the limitations imposed by heterosexist policies (Morton 274). But as Robin refuses to be contained by essentialist and reproductive temporalities, she thwarts the demands of the patriarchy and quietly resists Felix's invasion of her queer garden. As I have investigated, Robin's nonreproductive *nature* (in the double meaning of the word) aligns itself with the herd of the autumn and winter seasons. This is traditionally portrayed as a "deadly, barren

time within the natural cycle," Rachel Stein notes, which is equivalent to how sapphic women historically have been labeled as "reproductively sterile" (294). In other words, Robin's appearance as a worn statue in a garden not only symbolizes her silent withdrawal from Felix's prescribed narrative that he aims to impose on her, but it can also be read as a defiance toward and parody of the rhetoric of unnaturalness. Although the novel goes on to show that despite Robin's withdrawal, she does not fully escape the heteronormative narrative, as she ends up miserably married to Felix for a short time and bears his child after all. But not long after the birth, the threat of Robin as a "figure of doom" comes back to condemn Felix: Robin strikes him across the face and says, of the son, "I didn't want him!" and then proceeds to leave Felix for a sapphic relationship with Nora (*Nightwood* 44). One might read the image of the "sterile" statue and the herd of the seasons as foreshadowing Robin's rejection of the mother-wife role.

Next, I want to direct attention toward the other garden in *Nightwood*, namely Robin and Nora's domestic garden plot outside their apartment. This garden complicates the motif further as it differs from both the Jardin du Luxembourg and from Gidlow's gardens: in this particular instance, the garden simultaneously functions as a sheltered site that hosts sapphic love affairs *and* as a parodic representation of female same-sex practices as *non*reproductive. First, I want to emphasize that this smaller and domestic garden becomes the backdrop to Robin's love affair with Jenny, embracing the garden as a (homo)sexually coded site. From Nora's perspective, we see Robin from the shadows in the garden, around the hour of dawn, in the company of another woman: "her arms about Robin's neck, her body pressed to Robin's, her legs slackened in the hang of the embrace" (*Nightwood* 57–58). This echoes the love scene in Gidlow's "Episode," although the two scenes are considerably different. While Gidlow focuses on sexual pleasure in union with nature, Barnes illuminates the ruinous effects of such love affairs outside a relationship. Nonetheless, it constructs the garden as a designated site for "lesbian flirtations" (Wells-Lynn 99). This concept would be familiar to Barnes in her expatriate community in Paris, as Natalie Barney's garden at rue Jacob, for example, was known as a "lesbian-friendly" and sexualized space that encouraged "nature worship" and "naked dancing" (Wells-Lynn 99, 101).[16] Such gardens, Benstock argues, became female-coded, queer spaces that encouraged androgyny and sapphism and functioned as shelters "against the modernized and mechanized urban civilization of Paris" (*Women* 301). Thus, in one sense, Barnes takes this domestic garden plot and claims it as a heterotopia and a

[16] See figure 4.

hidden “nightworld” for female sexual affairs (Benstock, *Women* 235), in similar ways to what Gidlow achieves in *On a Grey Thread*. However, Barnes complicates the image when she juxtaposes this sapphic love affair with the “obscurity” of the inanimate female statue and Nora’s misery.

Figure 4. A photograph of a gathering of women in Natalie Barney’s garden in Neuilly, possibly depicting a performance of a play about Sappho, ca. 1906. Licensed under CC0 public domain (“Greek”).

It is relevant to note how Barnes expands the motif of the nonreproductive statue from the Jardin du Luxembourg, and how the statue in the garden here embodies both death and life in paradoxical union. The metaphor of Robin as “an old statue in a garden” now materializes as a “fountain figure, a tall granite woman” in her garden, who conspicuously holds one hand “over the *pelvic round*” (*Nightwood* 50; my emphasis). Such a description of the “pelvic round” seems to imply pregnancy and fertility. The contradictory image of the fertile-yet-sterile granite woman echoes the paradox that sapphic women are seen as both unnatural and natural at the same time, embodying fertility but refusing to follow societal demands of sequential progress and reproduction. Adding onto this image, the granite statue prefigures the “death” of Nora as she witnesses her partner in the arms of another woman. The sight of

Robin and Jenny brings Nora to her knees: "as she closed her eyes, Nora said 'Ah!' with the intolerable automatism of the last 'Ah!' in a body struck at the moment of its final breath" (*Nightwood* 58). Nora's "death" at the sight of the lovers can be analyzed as representative of how the garden, like the sapphic woman, contains paradoxical multitudes. As I have suggested, the gardens in *Nightwood* represent simultaneously fertility and sterility, heteronormative trespassing and sapphic liberation, nature and culture, and now also death and sex. Nora's moment of "final breath" blurs the boundaries between life and death, as "the last 'Ah!'" that strikes her body simultaneously figures as the scene's orgasmic climax—an idea often referred to as *la petite mort*, or the little death. Her sexuality is literally *non*reproductive, as it causes death instead of life and echoes the sterile fertility of the statue.

At the same time, this scene can be read as symbolically linked with notions of cyclicality and rebirth, as it takes place in the queer garden "in the faint light of dawn" (*Nightwood* 57). The end of a cycle, marked by Nora's "death," coincides with the beginning of a new one, namely the dawning day and the sexual climax, which leaves the reader with lingering associations with cyclical rebirth. As I claimed in chapter two, queer self-creation and coming of age is intrinsically connected with the idea of birth—an untraditional rebirth that undermines the Pauline ideology of heterosexual 'seeding' as productivity. In "Episode," the coming-of-age process completes its cycle at dawn, and, however differently, both authors utilize the temporality associated with night-and-day cycles to develop new and queer understandings of life and death. When it comes to *Nightwood*, instead of reading the "death" scene in the garden merely as a portrayal of the stereotypical suffering lesbian—which arguably there *is* an element of—I want to read it as representative of the queer's possibility to defy expectations and create alternative narratives and timelines. I want to suggest that *Nightwood*'s portrayal of the paradoxical multitudes the sapphic identity embodies invites an understanding of sapphic modernities that lie outside binary definitions. The gardens we encounter in the novel complicate the idea touched upon in the second chapter: that queer futures also lie outside binaries and expectations of linear progress.

3.4 "The Sweet Woods of Paris": *Nightwood*'s Fluid Spatial Relations

Nightwood's title provides the reader with a puzzling entrance into Barnes's secret underworld of Paris in the 1920s and 30s. The image of woods covered by the shade of night might at first seem counterintuitive to the vibrant city life portrayed by the novel. But it is Doctor O'Connor who first gives us a direct link between the title and the story's most prominent

setting: "[w]here to but the woods, the sweet woods of Paris!" he shouts into the night, as his carriage sets off into the city (*Nightwood* 66). This metaphor of Paris as the woods, echoed by the novel's title, embodies what scholars have pointed to as one of the key features of the work, namely the erasure of boundaries (Paltin 785)—a topic that shines through in the novel's language, its characters, and its gardens, as I have illustrated in the previous sections. In this section, I want to analyze how boundary erasure bleeds into the novel's queer spatial relations beyond the middle ground, as I look to its portrayal of the city and the countryside. Much of the novel's unconventional plot takes place in modern Paris, often under the veil of the night, but other scenes also take us to America, to Nora's rural salon in upstate New York. Aided by Halberstam's theory of queer space and metronormativity, I want to examine how *Nightwood*'s settings disrupt the urban–rural dichotomy, and by extension also the modernity–nature and the unnatural–natural binaries. What this entails is a rewriting of where and how sapphic modernities belong in the new era, which directly undermines the nature paradox that aims to expel the newly constructed identity category of the lesbian. As the boundaries between spaces blend and bleed into each other, Barnes reworks the geographical map of modernity to include sapphic sexualities *and* the natural order, rejecting an essentialist view of nature and queerness in a similar vein to Gidlow.

Djuna Barnes left New York City in 1920 to become an American expatriate in Paris—the "capital of modernity" (Harvey)—where she ended up staying for a dozen years in a vibrantly artistic and sapphic environment (Heise 100). To begin with, I want to direct attention to *Nightwood*'s portrayal of Paris. Partially influenced by her own experience of the city, Barnes reveals Paris as an "underworld" of sexual dissidents who all leave their marks on the cityscape (see Heise). She plays into the urban anxieties that flourished during the 1930s, when she portrays real-life Parisian locations as "hotspots" for queer activity and sexuality, but instead of falling into stereotypes of artificiality or unnaturalness, she reclaims the modern city as a space that fosters queer possibilities. There is little doubt that Barnes's experience of Paris's "secret underworld" became the autobiographical inspiration for *Nightwood* and its cast of queer characters (Heise 100–101). Shari Benstock, for example, has called *Nightwood* "a cult guide to the homosexual underground nightworld of Paris" (*Women* 235). The novel is filled with references to real Parisian geographical sites where Barnes herself would have walked and dined: examples include the Luxembourg gardens where Robin goes for walks (*Nightwood* 36), Robin and Nora's apartment on the rue du Cherche-Midi (50), the carriage ride through Champs-Élysées (66), and the Café de la Mairie close to the St Sulpice church, frequently visited by doctor O'Connor (26). On a map, several of these locations can be found

within walking distance of Natalie Barney's salon on 20 rue Jacob—a gathering place for many well-known lesbian and bisexual writers and artists in the expatriate community in Paris, including Barnes herself (Wells-Lynn 101).[17] As I previously mentioned, the modern city is often described as a "city for men" (Massey 233), where "gendered spatial structures" are constructed to exclude women, particularly *sapphic* women, from participating in its public space and cultural production (Wells-Lynn 106). Doreen Massey calls attention to how the patriarchal construction of the public city led to confinement of women to the "'private' sphere," while men were seen as the producers of and participators in the city's vibrant life (233). This echoes the role of the male *flâneur*, as investigated in the previous chapter, where the masculine "stroller in the crowd" produces a cityscape reliant on strict gender binaries and objectification of the woman's body (see Massey 234). Barnes opposes this gendered city structure on two levels: first, in real life, as Barnes herself was an avid participator in an artistic sapphic community that left its mark on the city and its cultural production, and second, through *Nightwood* and her other works, which *queer* Paris as a city of sapphic opportunity. For example, Wells-Lynn makes a note of that, in *Ladies Almanack*, Barnes redraws the map of Paris as "a type of geo-*parler femme*," meaning a reimagined city that is inscribed with female sexuality (105; emphasis in original). This sapphic remapping of Paris can undoubtedly be extended to *Nightwood*, as Barnes takes real-life sites of the modern city and assigns them new, sapphic meanings. This new "female Paris" offers "sexual freedom" to women and emphasizes the influence of female sexuality on the modern city (Wells-Lynn 106). To phrase it differently, Barnes rewrites Paris as the capital of *sapphic* modernity.

It is interesting to note that Robin's character can be read to embody this reimagination of Paris. To the detriment of Nora, Robin expresses her sexual freedom by immersing herself in the city's nightlife, and her queer sexuality merges with the cityscape. Nora sees "Robin go from table to table, from drink to drink, from person to person," and the narrator observes that "Robin walked in a formless meditation . . . directing her steps toward that night life that was a known measure between Nora and the cafés" (*Nightwood* 53). Robin is tugged between daylight and nighttime, unable to satisfy Nora's demands. She is pulled toward the night because the city allows her the freedom to express a queer, non-monogamous sexuality that directs her from "person to person," even if this is at the expense of her relationship; as she says to Nora on her way out the door, "[d]on't wait for me" (*Nightwood*

[17] Gidlow spent a year in Paris in the late 1920s, but reflects in her autobiography about the lack of a community: "[s]ince my stay in Paris was during the now legendary period of the Natalie Barney salon . . . I am frequently asked if I participated. I must say that I did not even know they existed until years later" (218).

53). Through Robin's nighttime affairs, she rejects the traditional framework of romantic relationships and instead inscribes her unconventional sexuality onto the map of the city. Many scholars, most of them male, have argued that the lesbian cannot be said to have any impact on the metropolis, and point to gay *men* as the source of the urban anxieties that arose in the early twentieth century (see Castells; Higgs; Wright). Manuel Castells, for example, asserts that lesbians are "placeless" people, and that "there is little influence by lesbians on the space of the city" (140). But Barnes's reimagining of Paris through Robin and her expressive, polygamous, sapphic sexuality undermines the foundations of this argument. In *Nightwood*'s underworld, women's sexualities are of essence to the city space and the city offers them opportunities in return. This is further indicated when Nora searches for Robin: she looks "at every couple as they passed, into every carriage and car, up into the lighted windows of the houses," not to discover Robin but rather to find "*traces* of Robin, influences in her life (and those which were yet to be betrayed)" (*Nightwood* 55; my emphasis). To Nora, Robin's physical body—a sign of her sexuality—blends in with the outline of the cityscape, with the traces of her life no longer separable from the lighted windows, the carriages, the couples on the street, or the lovers she has yet to meet. I see Robin's shadow as the embodiment of "the transient, the fleeting, the contingent" that defines modernity (Baudelaire 403). Robin utilizes the entire city's fleeting outline as grounds for her sexual affairs. Like Gidlow's female *flâneur* in "The Face in the Rain," Robin reclaims the masculine city to accommodate her lesbian desires, and she does so unapologetically and without falling into stereotypes of artificiality.

This analysis of Robin gives rise to a question of homosexuality and urbanity that has long interested scholars of queer theory: Does the growth of queer visibility in modern cities, and the queer migration to such urban environments, imply a dislocation of the queer from the natural order? And does *Nightwood* fall into such a metrosexual narrative? I claim that what Barnes achieves with *Nightwood* is to challenge such simplified narratives and instead deconstruct binaries that separate the rural from the urban, the "natural" from the "unnatural." Despite her detailed attention to sapphic modernities in Paris, her continuous blurring of spatial boundaries allows for a fluid concept of nature more aligned with the fluidity demanded by queerness. First, I want to examine the dominant narrative of the repressed and "closeted" queer subject who moves away from the small town and into an urban setting in order to "come out" and experience "the full expression of the sexual self" (Halberstam, *In a Queer Time* 36). This narrative is what Halberstam refers to as "metronormativity" (36). From one perspective, Nora's narrative arc in *Nightwood* can be read in light of a metronormative

movement from the countryside to the city. The first time readers are introduced to her, she is the owner of a salon in upstate New York, which lies on a property with a "decaying chapel" surrounded by "a mass of tangled grass and weeds" and a forest (*Nightwood* 45). This rural setting seems at first to be the antithesis of the modern metropolis, Paris, where most of the plot plays out. Rural settings—including the small town, the countryside, and wilderness spaces—have often been framed as places where queer people face violence and hostility (R. Stein 292–93). And indeed, as I have highlighted above, concerns with nature and the natural are often used to dislocate the queer body from natural environments (see Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson; R. Stein). With this perspective in mind, the queer migration *away* from rural settings and *into* cities can be read as a logical mass response to such hostility. When Nora meets the love of her life, Robin, she decides to move away from the countryside and travel with Robin "from Munich, Vienna and Budapest into Paris," where they eventually buy an apartment and live out their turbulent, sapphic relationship (*Nightwood* 49–50). At first glance, Nora's spatial trajectory fits the metronormative narrative that creates a rural–urban binary, with rural as the "devalued term" (Halberstam, *In a Queer Time* 37). The implications of such a strict binary would, by necessity, entail a reiteration of the paradox that dislocates homosexuality from a "pure" concept of "Nature" based on queer urbanity, unnaturalness, and artificiality (Morton 274). But, as Halberstam notes, and as *Nightwood* exemplifies, the story is often more complicated than this framework allows (*In a Queer Time* 37). Rural and wilderness spaces have historically fostered homosexual activity, but most of the documentation of this centers on the lives of rural gay men (see for example Alfred Kinsey's report from 1948). But with *Nightwood*, Barnes brings the female experience into this discussion. Nora's spatial trajectory unsettles the metronormative narrative that would have urbanized the queer identity to the point of separation from nature, and instead prompts us to reflect over the consequences of simplifying complex human identities into strict, binary systems of categorization.

Let us direct our attention to the rural setting of Nora's house in upstate New York. Nora's countryside life pre-Robin breaks with a heterosexualized, essentialist view of pastoral environments. Instead, her salon blends a queer-coded tradition from modernity with the natural surroundings of Nora's property and invites an examination of sapphic modernities *alongside* nature. As Gidlow similarly envisions, *Nightwood*'s queerness calls for a concept of nature that rejects biological essentialism and merges nature with culture. Nora's salon in upstate New York is described as "the 'paupers' salon, for poets, radicals, beggars, artists, and people in love; for Catholics, Protestants, Brahmins, dabblers in black magic and medicine;

all these could be seen sitting about her oak table before the huge fire" (*Nightwood* 45). This salon—"the strangest 'salon' in America" (45)—echoes the lesbian culture found in Paris at the time, where salons would operate as the center of sapphic, bohemian communities of writers and artists. Interestingly, the establishment of such a community in a *rural* location further echoes Gidlow's creation of the bohemian heterotopia of Druid Heights (see Gidlow, *Elsa*; Haiken; Youmans). Returning to the discussion of Paris, Benstock comments that Natalie Barney's salon on rue Jacob, for example, functioned as a "support group" for lesbians in Paris that welcomed "writers, artists, musicians, and dancers . . . never discriminating on the grounds of social class or religious, political, or sexual persuasions" (*Women* 11). Barnes became familiar with Barney's salon (Wells-Lynn 99), and no doubt this inspiration bleeds into Nora's "'paupers' salon" in *Nightwood*, which welcomes all outsiders in society, including "poets," "radicals," and "people in love" (*Nightwood* 45). When read in a queer light, this "strange" salon and its patrons come to represent one of the cultural pinnacles of the sapphic scene in modern Paris. The twist, however, lies in its location. Barnes unsettles our expectations when she locates the sapphic salon in a rural environment in upstate New York. The traditionally urban identity of the salon owner—their sapphic *modernity*—becomes mixed and tangled with the "grass and weeds" and woods of Nora's property (*Nightwood* 45). The framework of metronormativity is thus already disrupted by Nora's salon (and Gidlow's Druid Heights). Instead of equating a rural setting with "closeted" repression, Nora's salon fosters a flourishing queer community.

When Nora does relocate to the city, descriptions of Paris are not far removed from her property in upstate New York. As exemplified above, the urban becomes natural and nature becomes urban as the cityscape of Paris is likened to the outline of a forest: "[w]here to but the woods, the sweet woods of Paris!" Dr Matthew O'Connor exclaims (*Nightwood* 66). The carriage proceeds to drive out into the Champs-Élysées in Paris, a large and busy street at the heart of the metropolis, and the juxtaposition is complete. Just as the modern salon found its way to the woods, the woods have found their way to the city. Barnes's seamless interweaving of locations disrupts the notion of nature as modernity's antithesis and calls attention to how a fluid approach to space and nature goes hand-in-hand with the fluidity of her characters' non-labeled queer identities. And when the novel ends, it ends back on Nora's rural property, in the woods and the decaying chapel on her grounds: "[s]ometimes she [Robin] slept in the woods . . . Sometimes she slept on a bench in the decaying chapel" (*Nightwood* 151–52). Note how Barnes's characters refuse a sequential narrative framework that moves in a direct line from rural to urban, which would have dislocated their queerness

from the natural order. Instead, a cyclical trajectory has brought them from the countryside to the city and back to the countryside, emphasizing that nonlinearity and cyclicality cannot be separated from expressions of sapphic identities. Overall, by rejecting the metronormative narrative and the strict binaries that make up its foundation, Barnes opens the door to a queer ecology that makes room for the sapphist to exist on a fluid spatial spectrum, never limited or excluded by the "inside-outside manifold" (Morton 274).

3.5 The End—Or Not?

Many scholars would agree that *Nightwood*'s ending harnesses the novel's "high modernist notion of artistic difficulty" (Caselli 154) because it refuses to follow a traditional plot with a resolution and instead leaves the narrative tangled in the "grass and weeds" of Nora's property (*Nightwood* 45). This final scene is thus perhaps also the novel's most puzzling. In this section, I want to examine how Barnes's unconventional style and genre-defying, late-modernist narrative are "enmeshed with issues of sexuality," as Kate Haffey puts it (2). *Nightwood*'s untraditional ending is marked by its "failure" to follow normative sequences and expectations of progress demanded by modern, straight timelines, but I propose that this "failure" ends up creating its own queer, modernist temporality. Barnes's disruption of narrative coherence and closure differs from Gidlow's focus on queer cyclicality, but both authors frame queer futures as possible.

The ending, like the novel itself, has divided critics and readers alike in interpretation. What are we to make of Robin's barking and her breakdown that has her crawling on all fours in the chapel next to Nora's dog? How should we read the novel's inconclusive conclusion? While there is no *one* correct answer to these questions, I want to suggest that the novel's refusal to end on a satisfactory note, read in light of its unconventional form, embodies *Nightwood*'s queer disruption of normative time and societal expectations. The novel's final paragraph does not provide the reader with a sense of catharsis. Instead, it leaves us with the echoes of Robin and the dog barking and weeping in unison:

> Then she [Robin] began to bark also, crawling after him [the dog] – barking in a fit of laughter, obscene and touching. . . . and she grinning and crying with him; crying in shorter and shorter spaces, moving head to head, until she gave up, lying out, her hands beside her, her face turned and weeping; and the dog too gave up then, and lay down, his eyes bloodshot, his head flat along her knees. (*Nightwood* 153)

When Barnes ends her narrative in a decaying chapel, with Robin on all fours "crying in shorter and shorter spaces," and with the last sentence spanning across seven lines, it leaves the reader out of breath. Equally abruptly as the breakdown began, we are cut off, left only with the image of the "bloodshot" eyes of the dog staring at us as if the dog challenges us to truly *look* upon the scene and the novel as a whole—to question its convoluted meaning. Moreover, Barnes's "runaway" prose causes a sense of timelessness and urgency, and Tyrus Miller claims that this style adds to the "'positionless' quality" of her work that unsettles questions of both genre and modernism (Miller 124–25). Some might read this "devastating and frustrating conclusion," to borrow Brian Glavey's description of it (760), as conforming to homophobic stereotypes that boomed during the 1930s; the sapphic narrative ends in tragedy and misery, the characters are silenced, and Robin returns, symbolically, to a beast-like state, all of which adds to the layered depiction of homosexuality as "doomed." Indeed, recent critics have concerned themselves with allegations of homophobia in Barnes's work.[18] I acknowledge that Barnes as a writer would, by necessity, have been influenced by the social forces of her time, and there is no doubt her *oeuvre* reflects many difficulties faced by queer women in the 1920s and 30s. It is interesting to compare the two authors with this in mind, as Barnes's style is concerned with the social scrutiny queer people face to a much greater extent than Gidlow's optimistic poetry.

Nevertheless, more than merely reading this ending as a homophobic reiteration of the stereotype of the suffering and wild lesbian, I choose to approach Barnes's modernist narrative structure—her refusal of closure—as an act of resistance toward the very forces that wanted to control the stereotypical image of the lesbian in modernity. *Nightwood*'s narrative becomes a wriggling, twisting, nonlinear depiction of queer temporality that refuses to conform to normative standards, making the case for why queer temporalities and modernist narratives go hand-in-hand. Kate Haffey argues that modernist works of literature deploy time in a manner that both experiments with and critiques the "conventional narrative," which intimately resembles the more recent research on queer temporalities (2). This causes a complex relationship to take shape; as my analysis of Gidlow's poetic cyclicality illustrated, the queer modernist narrative similarly exists both *within* and as a *counterpoint* to modern time (Freeman xii). It simultaneously perpetuates and challenges notions of modernity. *Nightwood*'s ending disturbs the idea of time as linear, often exemplified by the classic *Bildungsroman* plot progression from A to Z, from childhood to adulthood, from beginning to

[18] Barnes and her work have also been suspected of fascism and anti-Semitism. See Caselli p. 153 for more information on these allegations.

conclusive ending. This linearity is also embodied by straight and modern timelines, which demand sequential progress in the shape of marriage, reproduction, and childrearing (see Freeman; Halberstam, *In a Queer Time*). Instead, *Nightwood* turns away from "narrative coherence" and refuses a "sense of closure" (Haffey 4). As Caselli comments, the novel "undoes the notion of plot" (171). In the end—if, indeed, we should call it "the end"—there is no restoration of (hetero)sexual order and there is no sense of conclusion or moral lesson. This marks *Nightwood*'s modernist form as disruptive to the sequences that chart development as linear and heterosexual. While Barnes disrupts the traditional narrative, Gidlow similarly undermines expectations of the modernist lyric form. Although these two authors rely on different literary forms and genres to achieve this disruption, both end up rejecting traditions of the past *and* canonical conventions to express queerness in new and socially radical ways.

Furthermore, Robin's return to nature—as in both in a physical return to the countryside and a metaphorical return to a beast-like state—leaves the final pages in a state of both verbosity and speechlessness, and the ending inhabits a sense of *failure* to fit the expected narrative progression and conclusion. However, within this 'queer failure'—borrowing Halberstam's term from *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011)—lies defiance and the possibility to reevaluate our definitions of progress and futurity. Let us return, then, to the puzzling ending, where Robin's breakdown lies at the heart of the narrative's queer failure to fit social and temporal expectations of progress. It is intriguing to note that this failure is marked by the novel's ultimate boundary crossing, which occurs again and again throughout *Nightwood*, namely the crossing between human and animal, domestication and wildness, culture and nature. When Robin falls to the floor and begins to bark, "moving head to head" with the dog until they both give up from exhaustion, the beast associations that have followed her the entire novel culminate in a physical return to the natural order. The crossing is never complete, which is the cause of its disturbing "nature." Instead, Robin's failure is marked by her way of fleetingly moving in between both sides of the paradox—wild and artificial—simultaneously figuring as "a beast turning human" and as a human turning beast, yet never fulfilling the transformation (*Nightwood* 33). Diane Warren contends that Robin's problematization of "the relation between the domestic and the wild" brings to light her rebelliousness, and that her figure challenges the "bounds of bourgeois femininity," as well as "narrative expectations" (130). Adding onto this, Robin's queer "way of life" (Foucault, "Friendship" 138), which moves *in between* these states of being, could be read not merely as a "failure," but also as a threat to the outside world, because it can never be fully contained or domesticated into one category or the other. Robin embodies the nature paradox to the

breaking point, with her precarious image finally rupturing and leaving the novel's ending entangled in its debris. As the novel ends with a backward return to a state of *queer nature*, I want to read the "failure" as inhabiting the "unmaking, undoing, unbecoming" of heterosexualized binaries, natures, and temporalities (Halberstam, *The Queer Art* 2). Robin's transformation slips away from "the usual traps and impasses of binary formulations" and dismantles narratives of heterosexual progression (Halberstam, *The Queer Art* 2), which prompts a reevaluation of our definitions of progress and futurity.

This leads the discussion, finally, to a question of the queer future. From Robin's "failure" and *Nightwood*'s formal disruption of linearity and coherence, what can we conclude about queer futures? I want to assert that Barnes's novel, like Gidlow's poetry, embodies a promise of queer rebirth aligned with nature's cyclicality, although Barnes is somewhat more ambivalent in her approach than Gidlow. In Gidlow's poetry, queer futurity is optimistically reinforced by the collection's emphasis on the queer coming of age as cyclical. Her writing encourages us as readers to continue sowing and harvesting the seeds of her work and activism, and thus the cyclicality also takes on the hope of new, queer futures that extend beyond the flesh and reach us—as readers—today. Barnes's unconventional ending, however, leaves us on a more ambiguous note. Nora's "death" earlier in the novel, paired with Robin's breakdown in the chapel, arguably calls into question whether sapphic women are secured futures, or whether queerness only ends in "*nothing, but wrath and weeping*!" as the doctor proclaims in his final monologue (*Nightwood* 149; emphasis in original). Lee Edelman argues in his contested book *No Future* (2004) that "there can be no future for queers," because as a society we invest the notion of "the Child" to be the symbolic "token of futurity" (12, 30). Thus, the "radical *threat*" of queerness lies in its "dissolution" of "reproductive futurism" (Edelman 14, 16; emphasis in original). While *Nightwood* certainly embodies the *threat* of the unnatural, nonreproductive queer, I want to claim that it does not do so at the expense of the future. Instead, Barnes's entangling of queer temporalities and natural imagery blurs normative boundaries of death. *Nightwood*'s symbolic ending and its treatment of death go hand-in-hand with natural environments, as exemplified by Nora's "death" in the garden at dawn and Robin's return to a beast-like state during the final scene. This is further exemplified by the repetitive motif of love *in* death as linked with earthly processes: "[i]n Nora's heart lay the fossil of Robin," Barnes writes, and Nora is described as wanting to take "the body of Robin down with her into it, as the ground things take the corpse . . . down into the earth" (*Nightwood* 51). Thus, the novel echoes a similar queer cyclicality to the one that leaves its mark on Gidlow's poetry collection: the "ground things" fossilize sapphic love as

timeless—as existing *outside* normative timelines—yet always accompanied by "thoughts of resurrection" (*Nightwood* 52). If death is one of the "paradigmatic markers of life experiences" that define heteronormative experiences of time, queer temporalities must inevitably envision a future outside and beyond its limits, and so disrupt the reliance on "the Child" as the only way to secure a future beyond death (Halberstam, *In a Queer Time* 2; Edelman 12). When Barnes juxtaposes images of death and decomposing with the notion of a future—a rebirth—she challenges the traditional "marriage" of futurity with reproduction and calls for alternative temporal relations to take shape. In *Nightwood*, queer futures are ambiguous, yet framed as possible through the transgression of boundaries; Barnes rewrites the borders between life and death and opens for a queerness that finds new ways of growing and crawling, becoming and belonging—outside the binary. This marks the convoluted ending of the novel, like the ending of Gidlow's collection, not as a traditional ending, but rather as the beginning of something new.

In conclusion, *Nightwood* leaves the reader and the critic alike puzzled. But I contend that at the heart of the novel's baffling effect lies the key to understanding its counterforce. I began this chapter with a discussion on the difficulty of categorizing a work of literature like *Nightwood*. What genre does it classify as? What kind of modernist shelf does it belong on? Just as Robin exists in "two worlds" and embodies the tension between oppositions—the wild and the unnatural, the animal and the human—the novel's form itself embodies a similar tension. Transgressing normative boundaries of genres and classification, *Nightwood*'s bewildering style echoes a queer resistance toward the social forces that execute control through minute and essentialist categorization. Just as the more-than-human world crawls with binary-defying lifeforms, *Nightwood* makes the case that sapphic women open for new ways of living and expressing a modernity outside and beyond heteronormative, linear definitions. While Barnes and Gidlow differ in their forms and their thematic approaches, both authors nonetheless utilize various concepts of nature *in* modernity to express ways in which the sapphist can forge a sense of belonging—despite the hardships.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I have traced the thread of queerness and nature as it interweaves in the historical and literary tapestry of modernism. I began by identifying a nature paradox that emerges when discourses of sexuality and ecology collide at the turn of the twentieth century: the creation of the modern-day homosexual as an *identity* category led to a public conception of the lesbian as simultaneously too unnatural and too natural. This paradox, constructed by the dominant culture, was based on antithetical images in the public eye that saw homosexuality as a degenerate fact of biology, as a wild predator, and a freak of nature (i.e., too natural), *and* as a crime against nature, and an artificial product of urban pollution (i.e., too unnatural). This paradoxical treatment of the modern lesbian in the public eye guided my investigation of how nature informs sexuality and vice versa in the modernist literature that was produced during the interwar era. How do sapphic modernist authors respond to the prevailing wild–unnatural allegations that were used to persecute those who embraced same-sex desires and queer ways of living? More specifically, how can we trace this response in the works of two less canonical authors of the period, namely Elsa Gidlow and Djuna Barnes? These were the questions that opened this conversation and provided the framework for my research on queer modernism.

With this context in mind, I argued for the importance of reading Doan and Garrity's concept of sapphic modernities in the light of queer ecology. Barnes's novel *Nightwood* and Gidlow's poetry collection *On a Grey Thread* became the focal points of my research, guiding my analysis of how discourses of nature impact the modern homosexual, specifically the sapphic woman. I made several key discoveries regarding how these two texts respond, in different yet connected ways, to the nature ideologies that aim to sustain the heterosexual hegemony. What I found was that nature imagery and cyclical temporalities leave significant marks on these two texts, shaping their forms, their language choices and stylistic voices, their characterization, and their choice of settings. Accordingly, these authors claim that the sapphic way of life is integral to the modern world *and* the natural order, destabilizing the paradox that wants to exclude and marginalize the lesbian sexuality. It was illuminating to uncover how both Gidlow and Barnes rewrite and reject modernist traditions and conventions in favor of alternative paths of queer modernism, which underscores why these texts could be said to represent a counter-canon. While heteronormative ideologies of "Nature" rely on the creation of essentialist binaries that aim to separate the queer from natural environments and the developing modern era, *Nightwood* and *On a Grey Thread* undo the notions of binary

difference. I discovered that Barnes and Gidlow encourage us to develop new relations to the concept of nature, more aligned with the fluidity demanded by queerness. Hence, both works undermine the hegemonic naturalization of heterosexuality and disrupt dominant narratives of heterosexualized nature. While Barnes utilizes the transgressive nonseparation of nature and culture as a form of queer resistance through boundary-crossing, Gidlow calls for a meaningful concept of nature more aligned with lesbian cultures, which promotes partnership rather than domestication. This partnership requires alternate lifestyles—existing aslant to the dominant culture—to move in time with the seasons and foster queer identity as self-creation through rebirth. Both authors utilize the idea of nature, physical nature spaces, and cyclical temporalities to *queer* what it means to articulate a modernity, and at the heart of Barnes's and Gidlow's modernism lies a defiant reclamation of the role of nature in queer lives.

I want to reiterate my reasons for the decision to read Gidlow and Barnes together—two authors who have never been compared before, despite many similarities that build historical and thematic bridges between their works. This thesis partially functions as a recovery project of Gidlow, whose life and writing remain both underread and less researched than the work of her canonical peers. And while Barnes has secured a place in the canon, my research has revealed that this location in the canon is an unstable one, and that more research on Barnes as a sapphic writer of "queer texts" is necessary to fill this gap in the critical conversation (de Lauretis 244). By situating Gidlow's underread poetry next to Barnes's cult classic, I have aimed to highlight the textual variety that sapphic modernist authors represent and to invite an open discussion on the differences in critical response to these authors. When read together, these two authors broaden our contemporary understanding of what it was like to live and write as a queer woman during the first couple of decades of the twentieth century. More than anything, this comparison opens for an acknowledgment of the bias that has dominated definitions of the modernist canon. It challenges us to reconsider the boundaries of the canon as more fluid than what has previously been asserted. The conversation that aims to expand and rework definitions of modernism is well underway (see Mao and Walkowitz), and my addition to this conversation hopes to intertwine a recovery of Gidlow with the ongoing queer reconstruction of Barnes to make a strong case for the role of nature and queer ecology in the modernist counter-canon.

The unconventional, yet significant pairing of Gidlow's poetry and Barnes's novel in this thesis led to the necessity of situating the historical context that served as a backdrop for the production of these literary works. I relied on Berman's famous definition of modernity as "a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal" (15), mixed with Baudelaire's notion of

"the transient, the fleeting, the contingent" (403), to guide my investigation of how the sapphist "articulates a *modernity*" (Winning 18; emphasis in original). In my research on the creation of the modern homosexual, I discovered that sexologists scientifically categorized the 'sexual invert' around the turn of the twentieth century and declared homosexuality to be a natural fact of biology, although a degenerate one. Homosexuality changed from same-sex practices into a marker of *identity*. This naturalization opposed the crime-against-nature ideology, which was founded on Paul the Apostle's analogy of seeding. While arguments concerning unnaturalness spurred beliefs in the modern era that queerness was induced by urban pollution, the newly constructed lesbian was simultaneously accused of being a wild "freak of nature" who represented a threat to the heterosexual household. These historical discoveries underline the dominant influence of what I called the nature paradox, the paradox consisting of antithetical images meant to exile the lesbian from both the natural order and the modern era. This led me to raise a question of belonging: Where do sapphic women in modernity belong—if anywhere?

I continued my theoretical grounding with a deep dive into the field of queer ecology—the pairing of discourses of nature with discourses of queerness. One of the main aims of queer ecology, according to Catriona Sandilands, is to disrupt dominant ideologies of nature that understand homosexuality to be driven by "unnatural passions" ("Unnatural"). I touched on the debate between essentialist and nonessentialist conceptions of nature, and I turned to Timothy Morton to illustrate how a performance of pure "Nature" also relies on performances of heterosexism (274). Leo Marx and Neil Smith guided my investigation of the historical use of nature as an ideology. While Smith reveals how nature was produced as a cultural category in modernity, Marx informs us about how the garden was idealized as an idyllic "middle ground" (65). These scholars led me to raise questions concerning how discourses of nature inform theories of queer space and time. Queer spatial relations to nature and cyclical temporalities, I found, forge ways of living and relating to the future outside of the binary "paradigmatic markers of life experience," such as marriage, reproduction, and death (Halberstam, *In a Queer Time* 2).

Finally, I turned my attention to bad modernism and the 'sapphic circumference,' which laid the groundwork for a critical contextualization of Barnes and Gidlow. I emphasized the importance of expanding the boundaries and definitions of what modernism is and who we count as modernist (Mao and Walkowitz). Gidlow's modernism proves "bad" for several reasons: she is an underread, noncanonical author from the period; her modernist free verse refuses the formal experimentation that often defines the work of her canonical peers;

and her content is radically optimistic about queer futures. Barnes, on the other hand, unsettles the modernist tradition as her baffling form can be read as archaic and innovative, and modern and postmodern. While there is little to no criticism concerning Gidlow's poetry, Barnes scholars have long ignored her sapphic influences. Nevertheless, I also foregrounded the more recent critics who argue for how and why Barnes's work establishes lesbian existence as "integral to the modernist setting" (Galvin 86).

Moving on to Gidlow's poetry collection *On a Grey Thread*, I decided to balance detailed close readings of certain poems with an overarching view of the entire collection's structure. Beginning with an analysis of the poem "The Face in the Rain," I investigated how Gidlow's speaker takes on the role of the *flâneur* and discovered that the role of nature proves essential to Gidlow's remapping of the modern city. The motif of the poppy flower merges the city with the garden and breaks down the traditional modernity–nature dichotomy. By reclaiming certain modernist motifs, such as the gaze and the crowd, while also rewriting the modernist form, Gidlow's poem makes a case for sapphic modernities aligned with lesbian cultures of nature. In the next section, I entered Gidlow's garden in the poem "Episode." Informed by Marx's notion of the garden as the pastoral "middle ground" (65), I examined how Gidlow's placement of a homoerotic union in a garden space queered this environment and simultaneously naturalized the queer. In response to accusations of unnaturalness, I found that Gidlow's queer spatial relations merge same-sex desire with natural imagery, making the case for a queer ecology that disrupts ideologies of Nature. Overall, the garden in "Episode" can be read as representing Foucault's idea of a "heterotopia," a utopian place outside of all other places, which echoes Gidlow's creation of the bohemian community at Druid Heights in her later years. Finally, I focused on the structure of the collection, zooming out to reveal how the ordering of the poems reflects a seasonal temporality. Gidlow's attention to cyclicality echoes the experience of queer time, which both emerged from within and as a "counterpoint to modern time" (Freeman xii). I found that the collection emphasizes the queerness as nonlinear—more aligned with the shifts of the seasons than with the progressive demands of modern society. This formal attribute underlined Gidlow's resistance toward hegemonic social forces, but the debate complexified as this cyclicality also came to represent the queer coming of age as an expression of modernity. More than anything, I found that the collection brings to the reader a sense of hope and optimism for queer futures—futures that lie outside the binary and outside linearity.

From modernist free verse, I turned to *Nightwood* in chapter three, the poetic novel that breaks with both traditions of the past and expectations of modernism. I contended that

Nightwood as a piece of modernist literature situates itself on the borderlines of genres, forms, temporalities, and geographies, and that the novel evades simple categorization. To further examine how *Nightwood* as a "queer text" deconstructs and challenges binaries of queerness and nature (de Lauretis 244), I began with an examination of Robin Vote. Her character proves to be half-animal, half-human, always floating in between several worlds: the wild and the artificial, the jungle and the city, culture and nature. As her structure brings out the tension between the sides that make up the nature paradox—wild and unnatural—Robin's character can be said to break free from the gaze of the spectator, representing a rejection of the labels that aim to dislocate queerness from the modern era and the natural order. Next, guided by Gidlow's attention to the garden, I decided to examine the gardens portrayed in *Nightwood*. I demonstrated how these gardens differ from Gidlow's optimistic reclamation of the middle ground, as Barnes's gardens suggest that any sheltered heterotopia is still subjected to outside threats and trespassers. And unlike Gidlow's focus on productivity, Barnes claims the garden statue as a metaphor for how *non*reproductive sexualities function as a counterforce to these threats. Moving on to the novel's spatial relations beyond the garden, I investigated the portrayal of the city and the countryside, utilizing Halberstam's notion of 'metronormativity' to examine Nora's narrative. What I discovered was that the novel bleeds the boundaries of the rural and the urban to the effect that Barnes rewrites the map of modernity to include nature in union with sapphic sexualities. Finally, I turned to the novel's puzzling ending, analyzing how the modernist narrative of incoherence reflects a queer rejection of straight temporalities. The ending embodies a sense of "queer failure" to fit normative expectations, but within this "failure" lie opportunities to envision alternate ways of living and relating to the future. Both authors' texts showcase different yet interconnected ways of embracing queer rebirth—suggesting a cyclical relation to life and death that moves beyond the binary.

This thesis has brought together two texts from the modernist period to analyze how queerness and nature were portrayed in sapphic literature produced around a century ago. From a contemporary perspective, many of the stereotypes that emerged alongside the birth of the homosexual identity category—such as the view that queerness was a "birth defect"—might seem far-fetched to modern-day readers. The public perception of homosexuality *today* has changed drastically since Gidlow's and Barnes's time, and the playing field for queer literature has improved significantly in the last couple of decades, and even more so in the last couple of years. Some might ask: What is the contemporary relevance of examining queer literature from this period? And moreover, what can the development of this relationship between queerness and discourses of nature inform us about our own time? To answer these

questions, it is necessary to note—as I touched on briefly in my historical research—how arguments concerning nature, and what is considered natural, are still used to this very day to persecute and discriminate against queer people.

We need not look further than recent anti-gay legislation in the US, such as the 2022 "Don't Say Gay" bill in Florida that prohibits discussions on LGBTQ+ issues in kindergarten through third grade and strictly limits such discussions for older students (Phillips). As a result, the bill prevents teachers and librarians alike from "promoting" topics of sexuality and gender identity, and books that deal with these topics can be banned from classrooms (Phillips). Contemporary homophobic and transphobic legislation in the US has deeply ingrained roots in the sodomy laws that labeled homosexuality as both *unnatural* and illegal (Weinmeyer), and as this thesis has underscored, such arguments concerning unnatural sexualities can be traced back two thousand years to Paul the Apostle's religious doctrine (R. Stein 286). The US sodomy laws were struck down in 2003 (Weinmeyer), but the rhetoric still echoes in political and religious arguments and ideologies today. In addition to the contested "Don't Say Gay" bill—promoted by Florida's Republican Governor Ron DeSantis—the polarized political stage in the US is full of similar examples. In 2023, another Republican lawmaker compared trans people to "mutants" during a hearing on anti-trans legislation in Florida: "[w]e have people that live among us today on planet Earth that are happy to display themselves as if they were *mutants from another planet*," Republican Webster Barnaby said, continuing, "this is the planet Earth, where God created men male and women female" (qtd. in Agee; my emphasis). Barnaby later apologized for these remarks (see Agee), but his harmful rhetoric merely underscores the larger social forces at play in the US political climate today. The word "mutant" causes strong historical associations with the sexologists' notion that sexual inversion was a biological birth defect. But when God enters the argument, it becomes clear that Barnaby's harmful comment reinscribes the nature paradox of my research: it demonstrates how queer people are both villainized as unnatural—as not from this planet and going against "God's creation"—and as "mutant," degenerate "freaks of nature."

I want to point to the tendency in conservative political and religious arguments today, both in the US and in the rest of the world, to make transgender people the "new" target of this rhetoric. While my research has centered on the treatment of sapphic women in the first decades of the twentieth century, it is striking to note how the same paradoxical stereotypes and arguments are now recycled to target *transgender* people and frame them as the new "threat" to society and its "family values." This is not only echoed by US politics, as illustrated above, but also in recent religious declarations. On 8 April 2024, the Vatican

published a new document titled the "Declaration 'Dignitas Infinita' on Human Dignity." In this document, the Vatican reinforces its stance on topics such as abortion, surrogacy, and gender-affirming surgery. While Pope Francis has previously appeared slightly more progressive toward LGBTQ+ people than his predecessors, this new document outlines the Catholic Church's deeply ingrained values that separate the "natural" from the "unnatural." On the topic of sex change and transgender issues, the Vatican writes: "[t]eaching about the need to respect the *natural order* of the human person, Pope Francis affirmed that 'creation is prior to us and must be received as a gift. At the same time, we are called to protect our humanity . . . accepting it and respecting it as it was created'" ("Declaration" par. 60; my emphasis). The Vatican continues by asserting that any form of gender-affirming surgery threatens "the unique dignity the person has received from the moment of conception" ("Declaration" par. 60). Once again, this merely illustrates how religious doctrines continue to equate God with nature in order to claim its authority over a queer minority, demonstrating Smith's statement that ideologies of nature serve "a clear social and political function" in society, which provides models to control "social behavior" (28).

In an article in *Earth Island Journal*, Sage Agee comments on the similarities between the current heated debate on queer issues—and especially trans issues—in the US and the attitudes of supremacy that continue to destroy and rampage the environment. They argue that the anti-gay and anti-trans legislation seen in Florida and throughout the rest of the US is based on a sense of rightful domination that "requires the existence of a 'lesser' or 'other,' human or otherwise." This supremacist worldview, Agee writes, "endorses a rapacious taking from the Earth as a (Christian) God-given right of a supposedly chosen (read: White) people," which in turn has led to the environmental crisis we find ourselves in the middle of right now. In the case of the US, this "God-given right" to exploit the environment is historically inseparable from the exploitation of Indigenous peoples, the violent slave-trade and plantation history, and the persecution of queer people (Agee). This hegemonic urge to dominate and "purify" the land lives on in the US today in the continuous "violence against Black, Brown, and gender-nonconforming bodies," often justified in the name of "protecting the family" and the children (Agee). This just goes to show why it is more important now than ever to read discourses of nature and queerness in light of one another. Future research on this topic could take on a more environmental approach, examining this connection between violence against the environment and violence against queer people (as well as other minorities). Moreover, there is an open door into a conversation regarding how and to what extent queer literature, both lyric and narrative, informs our understanding of nature in a time of climate change.

Overall, these contemporary examples of homophobia and transphobia bring out the importance of researching the past to understand the present. Thus, this thesis not only opens a window to the historical period that shaped Barnes's and Gidlow's writing, but it further draws attention to how we can understand the roots of harmful rhetoric that prevails today, providing the means to disarm it. The contemporary relevance of my argument also reminds us of the significance of *community*. In a time when transgender bodies have entered the spotlight as the main target for political hatred—the same violence that mainly targeted lesbians and gay men in the twentieth century—it is more crucial than ever to emphasize queerness as fluid and interconnected. At the core of my argument lies a focus on the queer as binary-defying; the non-labeled, transgressive identities and desires portrayed in *On a Grey Thread* and *Nightwood* represent a rejection of essentialist notions of sexuality, gender, and nature. This reinforces the idea that *all* alternative narratives of "belonging and becoming" (Freeman xv) that move aslant to the linear demands of the dominant culture must be read in connection with one another. Queer ecology reminds us, now more than ever, that no matter where these stories appear on the queer spectrum, together they build a sense of community.

Finally, I want to reiterate the importance of nonlinearity. Queerness cannot know its future without paving a way to its past, without recognizing the trailblazers who have come before and made today's world more possible for queer people with every passing year and decade. To look forward we have to look back—as Gidlow's plants invite us to let go of history as a "fixed and frozen past" in favor of a "living, open-ended present" (Youmans 103). This thesis has centered on the nonlinear cyclicality of the queer "way of life" as portrayed in modernist literature produced and set in the 1920s and 30s. However, the experience of queerness as inherently nonlinear continues to ring true to many people today, underlining why Barnes's and Gidlow's cyclical narratives and portrayals of rebirth intertwine with queer stories across time and space. As one illuminating example, I want to mention Elliot Page, a trans actor, author, and activist, whose strong voice reverberates in the current fight for queer and trans rights. In his 2023 memoir, he writes, "[t]hese memories shape a nonlinear narrative, because queerness is intrinsically nonlinear, journeys that bend and wind" (x). These journeys that bend and wind reflect the experiences of queer individuals—as in Page's story or, indeed, as in Barnes's and Gidlow's—but zooming out, they also reflect queer communities, histories, and literatures. In many ways, *Nightwood* and *On a Grey Thread* invite their readers to enter their gardens, turn over the soil, and embrace these nonlinear journeys in ways that build bridges between an open-ended past and a remarkably queer future.

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