



feral feminisms

Feminist Forms of Submission

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## Burning Embrace

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**Figure 1:** Swimming dock leads to icy water on a sunny day with a background of island trees.

Several stills from the digital story are above and below. To view the video visit:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jc9n4RUcWWQ&rco=1>

### Artist Statement

This is a digital story about ice swimming as a queer feminist practice that enabled me to transform pain into joy through submission to the natural world.

I started winter swimming as a daily ritual to manage my grief after my brother died from alcohol use disorder. I swam in a literal hole in the ice, in the winter water of the Finnish Baltic Sea. In winter, the top layer of the water is frozen into a sheet of ice so thick you can often walk on it. The water underneath is just above freezing, and it is so cold that it burns your skin like you're on fire. Fire and ice are complimentary states, and I learned to ice swim by accepting, even welcoming, the pain.

Submitting to the pain of swimming in ice water required giving myself to the burning embrace of the water. It's a queer desire, or what Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands refers to as, an

unnatural passion (Mortimer-Sandilands 2005). Queer feminist submission to nature invites us to subvert the idea of the “natural,” by embracing our unnatural passions in wild settings.

In this story, I take the sea as a lover—or rather, the sea takes me. I don’t know if the sea loves me back, and it doesn’t really matter, because I am nothing in the grasp of the water, and it’s this exact loss of self that frees me from my grief.

It is a decidedly queer kinship that I am pursuing each time I swim. I want to be familial with the sea. Kinship is about possibility and potentiality. As Ulrika Dahl and Jenny Björklund observe, “kinship always conjures up temporalities; both the rewriting of the past and the imagining of futures” (Dahl and Björklund 2020, 14). Familial kinship opens up possibilities for better understanding of human and non-human relationships. Queering familial kinship lets me consider an alternate narrative, one that reframes traditional concepts of struggles for power in and with natural worlds as a negotiation. Queer families are dynamic, so the intersection of human and non-human spaces becomes a place of possibility. Queerness has often been designated as culturally “wild” (Halberstam 2020) which provides a useful framework for a queer understanding of wild spaces. Wilderness becomes a queer space, and the “wildness” of my queer engagement with the sea invites curiosity about what makes our union possible.

Ultimately, my connection with the sea illustrates human and non-human relationships as an exchange, and highlights the generative nature of ecology, as that which fosters possibility and potentiality.



**Figure 2:** A fiery red sunset in front of a snowy beach is framed by two islands full of trees.



**Figure 3:** The sun shines brightly in the sky over a sandy beach covered in snow with trees in the background.

#### Access Text for Video

(The sound of footsteps on snow, walking toward and across a dock, while the wind blows snow.)

The first thing I tell myself when I'm getting ready to go in the water is, this is going to hurt.

For some people, this might be a deterrent, but for me, it's the way that I prepare myself to submit to the experience of ice swimming.

(The sound of rubber swimming gloves being put on hands.)

Ice swimming entails accepting physical pain. It hurts, and that's why it's so wonderful.

The queerest part of the pain is that it burns like fire. But I'm swimming in ice water, not fire, although the two elements have similar effects on the body. In the ice water, the sea envelops me with a roaring, searing numbness.

(Underscore the audio is the sound of swimming in icy water with wind blowing.)

You have to love pain, to love ice swimming. Just like you have to love the wild extremes of nature, to love ice swimming. You have to be willing to submit to the power of the water and the cold, and be nothing, feel nothing but burning.



When you lose your body in the quest for survival, you only live in that exact moment, and the pure focus where nothing matters but being in the water.

It's a kind of queer kinship, this relationship I'm cultivating with the water. The sea is my chosen family. I would do almost anything for the sea.

(A large group of ducks are quacking as they cross a snowy path. They take off in flight as a group and their wings beat loudly.)

Ulrika Dahl and Jenny Björklund observe that, "kinship always conjures up temporalities; both the rewriting of the past and the imagining of futures" (14). When I am with the sea, in the sea, everything is possibility.

To borrow from Annie Sprinkle and Elizabeth Stevens, I'm a practicing ecosexual. I have taken the sea as my lover. Although perhaps more accurately, the sea has taken me.

(The sound of water gently pushed by a pump underscores the following narration.)

I'm not the first to recognize a queer nautical power dynamic. Lynda Hart offered an analogy of the sea as a top in her iconic project, *Between the Body and the Flesh*. In revisiting Hart's work, Catherine Keller, author of her own philosophical study of watery depths, *The Face of the Deep*, explains, "without the tension of top and bottom, surface and depth, the bottom could not risk the deep-sea exploration, and the top would remain adrift in the shallows" (152).

I love the sea, and I am also terrified of the sea, because I am nothing, and the sea is everything. In the water, the sea holds me in its death grip, and it's strangely comforting. It's a prescient reminder of the ephemerality of the Anthropocene. Because in the world, I am also nothing, just another organism blowing around in this ecosystem, maybe useful, maybe meaningless, in any given moment.

When Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands suggests that we queer ecology, she foregrounds power relations in her analysis. She writes, "...ecofeminism and environmental justice open our eyes to the fact that nature organizes and is organized by complex power relations. What queer ecology adds is the fact that these power relations include sexuality" (4).

There is power in submission. There is agency in surrendering to the sea. And there is belonging in recognizing my place among beings in the natural world.

(The sound of wind and water underscore the following narration.)

Afterward, when I pull myself up and out from the sea's powerful grasp, I am not cold anymore, instead I am high in a way that melts me down with warmth. It's ecstasy, just being alive there on the dock, feeling the wind on my frozen, slowly thawing skin, like soft razors. I gave in to the sea, I accepted the beautiful terror of the moment, and I survived.

(Gently splashing water plays during works cited page.)



### Works Cited

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- Halberstam, Jack. 2020. *Wild Things: Disorder and Desire*. Duke University Press.
- Mortimer-Sandilands, Catriona. 2005. "Unnatural Passions?: Notes Toward a Queer Ecology." *InVisible Culture* 9 (October). <https://doi.org/10.47761/494a02f6.466bof4a>.

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