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Queer canine becomings: Lesbian feminist cyborg politics and interspecies intimacies in ecologies of love and violence

Chloe Diamond-Lenow

Women's and Gender Studies, SUNY Oneonta, Oneonta, NY, USA

ABSTRACT

This article offers a queer lesbian feminist analysis attuned to lesbian-queer-trans-canine relationalities. Specifically, the article places queer and lesbian ecofeminism in conversation with Donna Haraway's work on the cyborg and companion species to theorize the interconnected queer becomings of people, nature, animals, and machines amidst ecologies of love and violence in the 2020s. It takes two key case studies as the focus for analysis: first, the state instrumentalization of dogs and robot dogs for racialized and imperial violence, and second, quotidian queer and lesbian-dog relationalities and becomings. In the first, the article traces how dogs are weaponized as tools of state violence and proposes a queer lesbian feminist critique of white supremacy and militarization that can also extend to a critique of the violence committed through and toward the dogs. In the second, the article analyzes how, within lesbian, non-binary, and trans-dog intimacies, dogs help articulate queer gender, sexuality, and kinship formations, and as such, queer worlds for gender, sexual, and kin becomings. The entanglements of violence and love in these queer dog relationalities provide insights into the complexities of queer and lesbian feminist worldbuilding. Lesbian and queer feminist cyborg politics can help theorize the potentials and challenges of these interspecies entanglements.

KEYWORDS

Interspecies intimacies; Donna Haraway; lesbian feminism; cyborg politics

> "Our realities are made for us through the worlds and meanings available to us, but they are also made by the connections in the affective realm. Whom we love matter[s]…because that process of love contain[s] the seeds of world-making." Kathy Rudy, "LGBTQ…Z"

> "To be alive, to live and die with each other, is to be accountable for our forms of love and violence." Donna Haraway

Feminist theorist Donna Haraway ended the introduction to her 1990 text *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women* with a rallying cry for "cyborgs for earthly survival!" (Haraway, 1990, 4). Haraway's cyborg emerges from the

CONTACT Chloe Diamond-Lenow Chloe.Diamond-Lenow@Oneonta.edu Women's and Gender Studies, SUNY Oneonta, Oneonta, NY, USA.

apparatuses of war, embodying the violent legacies of neocolonial techno-progressivism in the twentieth century (Haraway, 2004, 3). At the same time, it offers a model for a "post-gender" world that can be ironically blasphemous and subverts its origins in the "appropriation of women's bodies in a masculinist orgy of war" and other oppressive traditions, including "the tradition of racist, male-dominant capitalism; the tradition of progress; the tradition of the appropriation of nature as resource for the productions of culture; the tradition of reproduction of the self from the reflections of the other" (1990, 292, 295). Haraway envisions a cyborg world that embraces "social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints" (1990, 295).

Nearly 35 years later, this article argues for the ongoing relevance of Haraway's multispecies framework to address the challenges of the 2020s. In an era of rapid climate change, intensified technologized warfare and surveillance, the lingering impacts of a global pandemic, and the rise of far-right conservatism targeting queer and trans communities to advance white supremacist and nationalist agendas, Haraway's work persists in relevance, particularly for theorizing the focus of this journal issue, "lesbian earth." Her concepts of cyborgs and companion species "becomings" offer a framework for what Sabine LeBel (2022) terms "lesbian processing" in relation to the messy entanglements among lesbians, non-human animals, machines, naturecultures, and ecologies in the current moment.

Haraway's "becoming with" recognizes that "all ethical relating within or between species is knit from the silk-strong thread of ongoing alertness to otherness-in-relation" (2003, 50). It is about relating across difference. Attending to becoming with companion species illuminates how humans, animals, and machines co-create shared worlds, both in everyday domestic life and within state structures. The cyborg and companion species belong, in Haraway's (2004) words, to a "kin group of feminist figures [who] might guide us to a more livable place… [an] 'elsewhere'" (1). I draw on these figures to theorize human-dog relations and envision new possibilities for living otherwise.

Lesbian queer ecofeminists such as Greta Gaard (1997) and Catriona Sandilands (2005) have long analyzed the intertwined domination of nature, women, queers, and the erotic within heteropatriarchal colonial systems. While much of this work focuses on the connections between lesbians and nature, less attention has been paid to more-than-human relationships involving animals and machines and their "naturecultural" legacies (Haraway, 2003, 2008). This article bridges lesbian and queer ecofeminism, feminist animal studies, and technoscience, primarily through Haraway's work, to theorize a queer feminist cyborg politics for "lesbian earth" in today's world.

In so doing, the article develops a queer and lesbian feminist approach to living in coalition with the more-than-human with attention to what Stephens and Sprinkle (2024) name in this journal issue as "co-sensing," an ethical, embodied mode of relating to the earth attuned to the sensorial and activated through the erotic. playfulness, and joy (2024, 3). Writing as a queer white lesbian feminist and dog lover, I center dogs as companions for living, thinking, "co-sensing," and navigating the complexities of more-than-human interspecies relationships.

I explore two distinct clusters of human-dog relationships, emphasizing their significance in the 2020s. First, using queer ecocritique and critical animal studies, I examine how dogs—and robotic dogs—are mobilized as tools of state violence and militarization. These examples illustrate inhuman technologies of subjugation and violence that an ethical relationship with "lesbian earth" must resist. Second, I explore lesbian, trans, and non-binary intimacies with dogs, tracing how these relationships disrupt masculinist and heteronormative kinship structures while fostering alternative formations of gender and sexuality. My analysis draws on feral spaces within dyke culture (Struthers Montford & Taylor, 2016), including Radclyffe Hall's (1928) *The Well of Loneliness*, the work of queer feminist theorist, Kathy Rudy, and trans queer theorist, Paul B. Preciado, as well as the 2023 Sapphic reality dating show, *The Ultimatum: Queer Love*.

This analysis aligns with Matt Richardson's (Richardson, 2013) call to embrace the "good and messy" (and fluffy!) relationalities of lesbian culture, focusing on connections among lesbians, transmasculine individuals, non-binary people, and their dogs. Stephens and Sprinkle (2024) concept of "Butch Earth" frames "lesbian" as a politically expansive category in perpetual process—becoming "non-binary, transgender, all gendered, or beyond gender" (2). This perspective fosters rhizomatic connections that reflect the rich complexity of dyke culture and its processes of continually processing and becoming.

The *Journal of Lesbian Studies* acknowledges the intricate intersections of lesbian and trans studies, identities, and communities. Jessica Campbell (2022) highlights that "some lesbians are transgender, or genderfluid, or asexual, or sometimes attracted to people who do not themselves identify as women" (362). Attending to trans and non-binary experiences is essential to a politically inclusive lesbian studies. I frame "lesbian" as a political orientation rather than solely a sexual identity, embracing trans men and non-binary individuals. This approach aligns with Ella Ben Hagai and Nicole Seymour's call in this journal for "a political definition of lesbian identity that defines lesbianism as a continuum, as fluid, and as nonessentialist" (Ben Hagai & Seymour, 2022, 2).

This trans-inclusive ecoqueer and lesbian feminist framework advances lesbian theorizations of the more-than-human. Sandilands (2005) reflects

on the need for such inquiry in her early work, noting, "I have not even begun to consider the ways the experiences of transgender individuals call us to question the interrelations among sexualities, natures, gender identities, and bodies." By examining trans, lesbian, and queer more-than-human relationalities, this analysis navigates the entangled complexities of queer gender, sexuality, and co-constitutive more-than-human becomings beyond cisheteronormativity. In this context, trans functions both as a lens to explore trans subjectivities within lesbian histories, identities, and desires, and as an analytic for transspecies and interspecies encounters (Steinbock et al., 2021). The article thus contributes a queer trans feminist perspective on human-dog becomings to queer ecological critique, highlighting the significance of lesbian queer feminism in analyzing more-than-human relationalities, particularly with dogs.

A queer and lesbian feminist theory of the more-than-human

Lesbian feminism analyzes how heteropatriarchy operates as a political institution that shapes desires, bodies, and intimacies (Ahmed, 2017). What can a critique of masculinist human exceptionalism and anthropocentrism add to this analysis? How might "lesbian" transcend its traditionally humanist boundaries to include the more-than-human, thus broadening both the category and the field of lesbian studies?

Lesbian feminism integrated with queer ecofeminism, animal studies, and critical posthumanisms provides tools to rethink non-heteropatriarchal relations across more-than-human realms. Queer ecofeminism involves "liberating the erotic" alongside nature, queers, and women, challenging the hierarchical dualisms that link mind/body, reason/emotion, man/woman, white/BIPOC, human/animal, nature/culture, and heterosexual/queer (Gaard, 1997, 122). It "calls into question heteronormativity itself" (Sandilands & Erickson, 2010, 5) by disrupting the primacy of reproductive sex and emphasizing alternative forms of intimacy and kinship. It also critiques the ways nature has been used to claim the "unnaturalness" of homosexuality (Sandilands, 2005, Gaard, 1997). In connection with animal studies, it "deconstruct[s] paradigms that define nonhuman animals as devoid of individual consciousness" and rejects their objectification as beings valued only for human use (D'Stair, 2020, 2). This perspective invites recognition of animals as active agents in interspecies relationships, opening non-anthropocentric possibilities for haptic, corporeal, and affective intimacies.

A queer ecofeminist critique of anthropocentrism also addresses the hierarchical dualisms embedded in white supremacist heteropatriarchy. These dualisms align "man," "heterosexual," and "white" with culture and reason, which mark "humanity," while relegating "woman," "queer," and

"Black" to nature, the erotic, emotion, and animality. As Greta Gaard (1997) notes, "it becomes clear that liberating women requires liberating nature, the erotic, and queers" (122). Challenging these humanist hierarchies and their underlying logics of subjugation allows lesbian feminist critique to chart more just relationalities for queer worldbuilding. Black feminist posthumanist and ecocritical analyses of dehumanization, animalization, violence, and precarity (Boisseron, 2018, Jackson, 2020; Holland, 2023) caution against uncritically celebrating human-nonhuman interconnections. In alignment with queer ecofeminism, these critiques reveal how colonial humanism restricts who is deemed "human" and show that animalization and dehumanization form the foundations of anti-Blackness, misogynoir, and white supremacy (Boisseron, 2018, Gossett, 2015; McKittrick, 2014; Weheliye, 2014, Wynter, 2003). Recognizing how anthropocentrism and human exceptionalism uphold these oppressive systems is thus essential to a lesbian feminist critique of interspecies politics.

Feminist cyborg politics for interspecies becomings

As I suggest at the start of this article, "the cyborg" is a valuable feminist figure for envisioning "lesbian earth." For Haraway, the cyborg "remember[s] war and its offspring, keep[s] ecofeminism and technoscience joined in the flesh, and generally honor[s] possibilities that escape unkind origins" (1990, 3). It offers a way to navigate beyond the "antagonistic dualisms" of Western humanism—nature/culture, human/animal, organic/machine (181)—and supports a politics in which "people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines" (154). In this sense, the cyborg is a generative figure for imagining interspecies queer feminist worldbuilding.

The cyborg also provides a useful framework for understanding human, animal, and machine entanglements in the 2020s. During the early part of this decade, many people's relationships with nonhuman beings—animals, machines, and nature—intensified. The COVID-19 pandemic deepened reliance on technology for communication and connection, even as surveillance and militarized policing expanded. Simultaneously, spending more time at home often meant increased interaction with pets and plants.

A cyborg feminist politics for lesbian and queer worldbuilding aligns with Haraway's (2008) concept of "companion species," which she defines as "webbed bio-social-technical apparatuses of humans, animals, artifacts, and institutions in which ways of being emerge and are sustained. Or not" (38). Companion species embody "significant otherness"—relations based on affinity rather than blood (2003, 7). This category might include domestic pets like dogs, as well as feral animals, smartphones, computers, and even war machines. Rather than a fixed animal category, "companion

species" describes an ongoing process of "becoming with" in entangled naturecultures.

Becoming with dogs

Intimate and violent entanglements

Dogs and humans have shared a unique, co-evolutionary relationship over hundreds of thousands of years. As descendants of wolves (*Canis lupus lupus*), dogs (*Canis lupus familiaris*) have evolved alongside humans through a process of mutual domestication, requiring both species to adapt to and understand each other's worlds. Today, dogs exhibit exceptional social and cognitive sophistication that aligns with human needs, unmatched among nonhuman animals (Udell et al., 2010).

The COVID-19 pandemic intensified some human-dog relationships as many spent increased amounts of time at home. Dogs were tasked with providing companionship in more intimate and demanding ways, often helping humans cope with isolation, depression, and anxiety. There was also perhaps more time for play and awareness in the process of becoming with each other as companions within our shared worlds.

Despite their celebrated status, dogs are frequently mistreated, neglected, and exploited. They are often abused, abandoned, or euthanized, and their legal value is largely tied to their role as property, particularly within white, bourgeois contexts. The pet economy contributes to harm through unethical breeding practices, unprepared ownership, and widespread neglect (Nast, 2006). These issues arise from systemic and structural inequities rather than solely individual actions. The Shelter Animal County Database reported a 37% increase in the number of dogs surrendered and euthanized between 2022 and 2023, linked to COVID-19 pandemic-related impacts, including housing instability caused by the end of eviction moratoriums, delays in spay and neuter procedure, and the heightened demand for dogs as pets during that time.

As companion species, dogs have been deeply entwined with the gendered and sexual formations of white supremacy and heteronormative domesticity. They play a foundational role in symbolizing the white bourgeois heteronormative nuclear family and the U.S. home. At the same time, dogs are often used to stigmatize and police "improper" homes and communities. For instance, breed-specific bans in the U.S. disproportionately target Black and Brown dog owners, functioning as a form of racialized criminalization (Weaver, 2021).

Historically, dogs have been tools of settler colonialism and enslavement mediating racialized naturecultures (Johnson, 2009, Boisseron, 2018). They are also instrumentalized for racialized securitization in policing, border

patrol, and carceral systems—they are in this sense, part of the violent cyborg offspring Haraway discusses. Police have long used dogs to intimidate and attack marginalized communities, as seen in numerous documented incidents: during civil rights protests in Birmingham, Alabama in 1963; against anti-police violence protests in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014 (Wall, 2016); against Indigenous activists opposing the Dakota Access Pipeline in North Dakota in 2016 (Democracy Now!, 2016); during Black Lives Matter protests in Baltimore and elsewhere (The Marshall Project, 2020); and most recently, in 2024, against student protests over the genocide in Gaza on college and university campuses (Most, 2024).

In the military, dogs are used as cyborg weapons, used to detect Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs), patrol bases, police detainees, and target enemies. They played key roles in U.S. interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, including the killings of Osama bin Laden in Pakistan in 2011 (Bumiller, 2011) and ISIS leader Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi in Syria in 2019 (Rogers, 2019). Dogs were also involved in abuse at Abu Ghraib prison in Baghdad in 2004 (Schmitt, 2006). These deployments reflect a logic of heteronormative nationalism and sexualized colonization, dehumanizing Arab, Muslim, and Middle Eastern men within necropolitical formations of war (Diamond-Lenow, 2020).

Dogs are often celebrated as cyborgian tools of securitization, combining natural abilities with advanced technological enhancements like night-vision goggles, body armor, live-action cameras, earbuds for commands, and titanium teeth (Goodavage, 2012). These technologies amplify their capabilities, rendering them both indispensable and disposable as weapons of state violence. Their apparent autonomy obscures the human commands that drive their actions, deflecting attention from systemic violence.

The technologization of dogs extends to robot dogs, or "quadrupedal unmanned ground vehicles" (QUGVs), introduced by the U.S. military in 2021 (Keller, 2023). These semi-autonomous machines mimic canine form and movement, combining features like 3D mapping, sensors for detecting people and objects, and the ability to traverse harsh terrain. Initially designed for border patrol, they are now used in various military and surveillance missions (Kenneally, 2022, Keller, 2023), some armed with machine guns and rocket launchers (Hambling, 2023). Their dog-like design capitalizes on the emotional associations with dogs while enabling violence and control. Recently, U.S. police forces have adopted these robot dogs, further contributing to the militarization of policing and domestic securitization. No longer "dog" in the sense of material being, but "dog" as signifier of advanced technology that draws on natureculture canine legacies for violent state power.

A queer and lesbian feminist cyborg analysis of these practices critiques the technologization and deployment of police and military dogs,

highlighting the urgent need to challenge imperial warfare, racial capitalism, militarized policing, and their roots in white supremacist cisheteropatriarchy. These systems of violence require an intersectional ecoqueer feminist perspective to confront how anti-Blackness, racism, and colonialism privilege human life over the earth and nonhuman animals. Dismantling these systems through queer abolition involves imagining and building alternative, nonviolent ways of being.

Lesbian feminist activism, particularly from Black and women of color feminists, has long embraced coalitional frameworks of anti-war, anti-violence, and abolitionist thought. These perspectives critique the intersections of heteronormativity, racism, militarism, and capitalism (Cohen, 1997, Combahee River Collective, 1977, Smith, 1998). Following this line of thought, a queer ecofeminist cyborg approach to worldbuilding calls for rejecting violent formations of human-animal assemblages in favor of intentional frameworks of love and ethical alterity.

Becoming queer with dogs

On more-than-lesbian more-than-human affinities

Lesbians "become with" dogs as part of their queer relationships and kin networks. Several queer feminist academics have explored their identities in relation to gender, sexuality, and their bonds with dogs. Feminist queer theorist Kathy Rudy (2012) reflects on her own experiences, describing how her intimacy with her dogs surpasses that of her relationships with past and current partners: "I get more affection from my dogs than I ever did from any girlfriend" (Rudy, 2012, 603). She further explains, "Being lesbian wasn't quite right… mostly because my mind was always on the dogs. From as far back as I can remember, dogs have been the most vibrant, colorful, and important players in the landscape of my life" (Rudy, 2012, 604).

Love for dogs is primary to Rudy's sense of self. Rudy undercuts her identity as a lesbian, seeing it as a term that can't contain her love for her dog and her romantic and sexual intimacies with other women. For Rudy, "lesbian" is a term contained by humanism's anthropocentric logic, oriented as it generally is to traditionally refer to *human* love. Under the epistemologies of sexual taxonomy that generally classify based on partner sexual object choice, Rudy lacks a queer vocabulary for naming the centrality of her love for dogs outside of terms like "zoophilia" or "bestiality," which are pathologized identities that indicate a more sexual relationship with animals.

There are rich possibilities for expanding the framework of "lesbian" to encompass interspecies ties. Such an expansion does not desexualize

"lesbian" into a generic term for non-heteropatriarchal intimacy but instead makes space for the pleasures and erotics of queer and lesbian desire while incorporating more-than-human interspecies intimacies.

Trans queer theorist Paul B. Preciado (2012) similarly reflects on his queer identity in relation to categories like "lesbian" and "transsexual," exploring these identities through his relationship with his French Bulldog, Pepa. Taking a non-anthropocentric perspective, he writes: "I should feel like a man trapped in a female body. But on the contrary, I discovered with Pepa, that I was feeling like a bulldog trapped in a lesbian body. I was neither lesbian nor transsexual, but I was a bulldog lover" (Preciado, 2012).

Preciado's gendered and sexual subjectivity is more deeply tied to his relationality with Pepa than to the anthropocentric frameworks of "lesbian" or "transsexual," which he critiques as rooted in eugenic logics of sexology. His bond with Pepa offers a radical ontology for "transing," a way of challenging and crossing humanism's constructed binaries. He proposes a counter-narrative of "the lesbian," one rooted not in pathologization by sexology but in a history of queer women, gender, and sexuality in relation to dogs. This history of "becoming with" emphasizes relationality, intimacy, and kinship while disrupting rigid categories and taxonomies. It makes space for the messy, fluid becomings of queer and canine intimacies, kinship formations, and cyborg fusions. As Rudy and Preciado's accounts suggest, dogs can serve as sites for articulating queer gender and sexuality, enabling alternative queer worlds of identity and intimacy.

Queer canine lesbian cultural production

Radclyffe Hall and The Well of Loneliness

Dogs have played a significant role as companion species for queer women, non-binary, and trans people within queer relationalities in lesbian cultural production. Radclyffe Hall's novel, *The Well of Loneliness*, is a canonical text in lesbian and trans studies, offering an ecoqueer perspective on more-than-human relationships. The novel follows Stephen Gordon, a white, upper-class English "invert" in early 20th-century England, as she struggles for acceptance in her queerness, with a focus on her connections to nature and animals. As the first novel to openly portray lesbian desire, *The Well of Loneliness* seeks to normalize and naturalize gender and sexual "inversion." It remains a seminal work in lesbian studies and invites a coalitional analysis between lesbian and trans studies (Bauer, 2023; Halberstam, 1998; Prosser, 1998).

Scholars of lesbian and queer ecocriticism have identified the novel as a "lesbian pastoral," highlighting its focus on non-human animals and the

natural environment as central to challenging heteronormativity and exploring queer relationalities. Hall uses the natural world to frame Stephen Gordon's "inversion" as inherently "natural," countering pathologizing depictions of inversion as unnatural (Sandilands, 2005; D'Stair 2020).

Much of the scholarship on *The Well of Loneliness* emphasizes the role of horses in the novel, interpreting them as proxies for Gordon's desire (Armstrong, 2008; D'Stair, 2020) or as companions shaping her naturalized masculinity (Sandilands & Erickson, 2010). Sandilands and Erickson argue that Gordon's moral character is developed through her skill and success in traditionally masculine activities, such as riding and hunting, and her eventual rejection of hunting and other violent relationalities with non-human animals (2010, 24).

Here, however, I shift focus to the role of dogs in both the novel and Hall's life, exploring the underexamined but significant lesbian-canine relationships in her work and experiences, arguing they reflect potent cyborg and companion species queer becomings. The novel concludes with a scene of domesticity involving Gordon, her partner Mary Llewellyn, and David, a stray Irish Water Spaniel they rescue from the streets of Paris and bring into their home (Hall, 1928, 161). In this final scene, Hall carefully attends to the dog's perspective, emphasizing his embodied and situated experience:

> The dog looked gravely from one to the other for a moment, then he lay down at Mary's feet, dropping his chin on his bandaged paw, and closing his eyes with a grunt of contentment. And so it had suddenly come to pass that they who had lately been two, were now three. There were Stephen and Mary—there was also David (Hall, 1928, 333).

David's inclusion in their home signifies their queer kinship, extending beyond human relationships to encompass more-than-human bonds. The scene invites the dogs' gaze to witness the couple. This moment reflects the interspecies ecological ethic in Hall's writing, where non-human beings are "mutually shaping participants within the intimate spaces they share" (D'Stair, 2020, 1).

This intimacy represents a "becoming with" in Haraway's sense between queer and lesbian figurations for kinship, intimacy, and domesticity. While Gordon is tied to nature through her connection to horses and her alignment with English gentry and masculinity, it is her triangulated relationship with her dog and her partner that establishes a naturalized lesbian domesticity.

The queer intimacies between Hall and Gordon are informed by Hall's own relationships with dogs. Hall participated in early 20th-century English dog fancy culture as a breeder and member of newly formed English Kennel Clubs (Bauer, 2023, 994). Hall and her wife, Una Troubridge, owned and bred two dachshunds, whose official Kennel Club names,

Fitz-John Wotan and Fitz-John Thorgils of Tredholt, reflect a queer kinship between Hall, Troubridge, and the dogs (998). The shared "John" in the dogs' names references Hall's adopted name, used among her friends and lovers. Hall's connection to her dogs extended beyond naming. She often wore a chain-link bracelet matching the "benching chains" of her dachshunds (1000). The dogs were also registered to both Hall and Troubridge, publicly marking them as a couple within this community—years before Hall's obscenity trial for *The Well of Loneliness*. These multispecies entanglements are part of a queer canine becoming.

Haraway's work on the cyborg provides a fruitful avenue for analyzing Hall's participation in early 20th-century English dog fancy culture, which intertwined science, colonialism, technology, and human-animal relations in addition to the emerging insights from sexology and ideas about gender and sexual "inversion." The breeding and naming of dogs like Fitz-John Wotan and Fitz-John Thorgils of Tredholt demonstrate how Hall and Troubridge constructed kinship networks that blur the boundaries between nature and culture.

The breeding practices, kennel clubs, and physical markers like the matching chain-link bracelets also embody Haraway's notion of the cyborg as a figure that disrupts binaries, including human/animal and nature/culture. These practices challenge the anthropocentrism embedded in traditional family structures and suggest alternative forms of belonging that are both queer and multispecies. An analysis of the role of the dog in *The Well of Loneliness* sets the stage for thinking about lineages of representations of lesbian-canine intimacies. Not only in life, but in cultural production, dogs and lesbians have become with each other in significant ways in the century since Hall's novel. How do these queer relationships endure, and how are they represented in contemporary media? And what might an analysis of such representations in more contemporary cultural contexts offer lesbian studies for thinking about lesbian, queer, non-binary, and trans becomings in the 2020s?

Contemporary queer canine companions in lesbian and queer cultural production

The Ultimatum: Queer Love

Queer relationships between women, non-binary people, and dogs take center stage in the 2023 Netflix reality show *The Ultimatum: Queer Love*. The series follows five queer couples, composed of queer women and non-binary individuals assigned female at birth, as they navigate an "ultimatum" to decide whether to get married. Each couple participates in "trial marriages" with a new partner to help them reach their decision.

The show explores "queer love" beyond anthropocentric notions of sexual desire and romantic relationships, aligning with concepts articulated by scholars like Rudy, Preciado, and Hall. It also highlights the queer intimacies of "puppy love" shared between cast members and their dogs, broadening narratives of queer connection within a contemporary framework of lesbian reality TV.

Netflix leaned into this "puppy love" to promote *The Ultimatum: Queer Love*. One teaser featured the tagline: "One question that can make or break any relationship: does the dog sleep on the bed?" (Reality Shows, 2023). The clip opens not with the contestants, but with a close-up of a grey and white husky labeled "Shylo: Tiff's Dog." It then shifts to Tiff, a masculine Latinx non-binary person, and Sam, a feminine Asian lesbian. Tiff's voice begins, "Can I be honest with you?" as Shylo turns to look at the camera, drawing the audience into the unfolding conversation. Tiff continues, "On the dog situation that's going on right now… I slept on the couch with the dog last night, and I feel like I'm compromising by not even putting you in a situation where you have to deal with my dog on the bed" (Coelen, 2023). The camera cuts to Sam and then back to Shylo, who lies on their side, seemingly reacting to Tiff's words. Tiff concludes, "Shylo is non-negotiable." In a confessional interview, they add, "I don't care if you have the most gorgeous face, the most gorgeous body, the most gorgeous personality, and the most supportive system. If you don't like my dog, you can get the fuck out" (Coelen, 2023).

The scene underscores how dogs become central to queer relationships, acting as integral companions and mediators of intimacy. Tiff's declaration that Shylo is "non-negotiable" reflects the depth of their bond and illustrates how dogs shape the contours of queer domestic life and kinship networks. Tiff later elaborated in interviews on their relationship with Shylo, describing the dog as an emotional anchor during the turbulent filming process. They explained:

> "The stresses of my dog being stressed out from constantly moving, to me at that time period and everything being busted open at the seams—me being vulnerable and us going through this crazy experience, not knowing my ex is falling in love with somebody else… Yeah, I felt like my dog was the most stable one because I wasn't stable" (Der & Santos, 2023).

Tiff's reflection reframes Shylo as a partner in navigating stress and vulnerability. Like Haraway's theory of becoming, they underscore how dogs can become central to queer relational frameworks, functioning as partners in affective worlds of intimacy. In this context, Shylo is not just a bystander to Tiff's experiences but an active participant in their emotional world.

Another promotional clip for the show highlights Yoly, a Latinx lesbian femme, and her French bulldog, Margaux. Yoly describes one reason to watch the show: "We have some fierce dog mommas in this cast, and

you'll see, the dogs can play an important role in a relationship." The clip then shows Yoly, Margaux, and another person together in bed, where Yoly remarks, "I wouldn't have gotten through this experiment without my baby Margaux" (Reality Shows, 2023).

By referring to herself and others as "fierce dog mommas," Yoly highlights an identity that extends beyond queerness to include her and others' relationalities to their pets. Her assertion that "the dogs can play an important role in a relationship" suggests that pets are not merely background elements but integral to the queer relational dynamics between partners. The presence of Margaux in intimate settings—such as being in bed with Yoly and another person—illustrates how dogs are woven into the fabric of the naturecultures of the domestic home and intimacies. This inclusion challenges traditional notions of romantic relationships by expanding them to encompass non-human companions.

The role of dogs in the contestants' relationships and lives became one of the most frequently quoted and discussed aspects of the show. Commentators across lesbian and queer cultural media highlighted the importance of dogs in shaping these relationships. Referencing the fight between Tiff and Sam, one source noted:

> *The Ultimatum: Queer Love* shed light on a variety of challenges queer women face when dating. There are serious debates about what it means to present masc or femme and how that affects attraction, emotional discussions about which partner will bear the couple's future offspring, and, of course, the all-important dog chat. Yes, there's a cliché for a reason that lesbians have a special affection for their dogs, and Tiff and Sam's argument on *The Ultimatum: Queer Love* proved it more than once. (Kickham, 2023)

While framed humorously, the commentary underscores the centrality of dogs in queer relational dynamics. By equating "the dog chat" with discussions about gender presentation and reproduction, it challenges heteronormative assumptions about what constitutes a "serious" relationship issue. In queer contexts, dogs are not trivial; they are foundational to the formation of domesticity and kinship. Dogs, as companions and sources of emotional support, shape the contours of queer intimacy in ways that extend beyond romantic relationships, influencing how queer individuals negotiate their identities and build their homes.

In these queer relationships, like in Hall's text, the contestants' relationships with their dogs challenge norms of hetero-reproduction, gesturing toward queer cyborg becomings. This is evident in a scene featuring Tiff and their original partner, Mildred. Sitting on a bench with Mildred's Goldendoodle between their laps, Mildred reflects, "Tiff and I have discussed having children, and we decided that we'll take another dog, but not have another baby" (Coelen, 2023). This moment offers a narrative resolution for the couple's future. Though they do not propose by the end

of the season, their decision to prioritize dog ownership reflects an alternative queer futurity. Dogs symbolize their commitment and provide a way to imagine a life together beyond traditional reproductive frameworks, the "*autre-mondilisation*" Haraway outlines.

In heteronormative family structures, dogs often complement the nuclear family of a married couple, children, and a home. However, in queer relationships, dogs frequently occupy a central role, serving as both proxy children and partners. These relationships disrupt normative ideas of family by centering non-human companions as integral members of queer kinship networks. By fostering non-anthropocentric forms of intimacy, queer relationships with dogs challenge traditional ideas of identity, love, and domesticity, reshaping how we understand gender, sexuality, and family. These lesbian, queer, and trans canine relationships are part of potent lesbian natureculture legacies, especially capturing an important lesbian public archive for queer more-than-human analysis in the first half of the 2020s.

Toward queer interspecies worlds

Queer and lesbian interspecies worldbuilding toward a "lesbian earth" embraces relationalities between humans and dogs that engage with the complexities of the categories, histories, and intimacies we inherit. As Haraway argues, our fusions with animals and machines provoke deeply ethical questions that remain vital today, particularly from a cyborg lesbian feminist perspective in the shifting landscapes of the 2020s and in relation to the histories we inherit and the futures we week to build.

Queer-dog relationships are not inherently transgressive or ethical—they must be intentionally shaped to become so. As Heidi Nast (2006) notes, dogs offer remarkable "anthropomorphic malleability," allowing them to supersede children as ideal love objects due to their flexibility and lower demands: "They can be shaped into whatever you want them to be—a best friend, a lover, an occasional companion" (302). However, this "malleability" is not without danger, as it stems from anthropocentric humanism—the tendency to impose human desires onto dogs without considering their own needs or agency. Striving to "become with" dogs in ways that honor their autonomy and move beyond anthropocentrism is a powerful way to challenge human exceptionalism.

Becoming with dogs as part of lesbian feminist cyborg queer worldbuilding includes a commitment to engaging with dogs on their own terms—to move outside of humanist norms of relating and valuing. A queer inhuman should be attuned to what Harlan Weaver (2015) calls "inhuman intimacies," more "haptic way[s] of meeting and responding to the world" for humans and animals, including through smell, taste, and touch (351). Such contacts and becomings require humans and animals

to learn each other's affects beyond language and to sit in a zone of not knowing, unknowing, and re-knowing, outside of anthropocentric humanism. These cyborg becomings challenge the dualisms of humanism—thinking/feeling, human/animal, and mind/body. They help guide toward an "elsewhere" as we imagine and enact a "lesbian earth." They move us away from the dehumanized violence of state securitization and technologized warfare and toward the reciprocity demanded of our enmeshed material fleshy and furry becomings with our non-human kin. They also help us understand the legacies of the entanglements of race, gender, sex, and species in which we become, and can become otherwise.

As I write this my Olde English Bulldog, Rumples, barks at me for attention. I have not walked him enough today. Nor nearly enough play. He is reminding me that it is time to stop work and to start playing. Or, that he and I live together, and how I shape my world impacts his. My partner and I navigate our relationship around him. She/they, a Black genderqueer first-time dog owner, and I, a white dog-loving queer woman. I do not mean to overly romanticize queer and lesbian canine relations. They are messy and bound up in structural relations of speciesism and racial capitalism. However, it is important to think about how they offer moments for living and enacting otherwise, more justly, with an(other)—how they open spaces of joy, pleasure, play, and have done so in especially unique ways in the early 2020s.

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Notes on contributor

Chloe Diamond-Lenow (she/they) is an Assistant Professor of Women's and Gender Studies at SUNY Oneonta. Her work on the politics of race, sex, species, and nation is published in *The Journal of Intercultural Studies*, *The Routledge Companion to Gender and Affect*, and *HumAnimalia: A Journal of Human-Animal Interface Studies*.

ORCID

Chloe Diamond-Lenow http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0837-267X

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