



liberation begins in the dirt

a thesis in art

by

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{this thesis is divided into:

chapters

subchapters

poems}

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abstract

this thesis began (in the dirt) with my involvement in various ecological communities near drew university, particularly the drew forest, the drew community garden, and the grow it green urban farm in morristown. i worked in all of these communities to varying extents, and i created documentary projects about the farm and the garden. i also created an experimental video piece, *what can be done // spread*, where i merge footage from all three spaces to create a narrative meditation on how we can each participate in ecological restoration in our own lives, using interview footage of myself and others.

the paper grew at first out of necessity to complete the requirement, but soon became the main focus of my work. through writing this paper i have begun to discover in myself a long lost love for the written word, shedding the shackles of disciplinary writing and reclaiming language as a tool for personal and collective liberation. in this paper i blur the lines between genre, weaving poetry, philosophy, journalistic writing, and academic research to create a piece that aims to resonate with readers spiritually, emotionally, and practically, encouraging them to reflect on their lives and opening their minds to the possibilities of liberation which exist.

my **introduction** provides my immediate context and reasons for creating the project, as well as describing the *dirt* i am talking about, dirt which is both physical and metaphysical. in **dark ecology and the mesh** i bring in the philosophy of **Timothy Morton** as a framework for how we can look at the world to most effectively design our minds to be conducive to liberation, which i define in my next chapter, **liberation**. in addition to defining liberation, this chapter examines what a society practicing liberation may look like, the need for both decomposition and growth, and the importance of viewing liberation as a *practice*, not an end goal. in **ecological living** i describe my experiences in the aforementioned ecological communities, and in **art**, i describe the importance of my art practice both in understanding myself and sharing my messages with the world. **expanding the scope** brings in my research on *permaculture* and *ecovillages*, demonstrating how liberation is already being practiced by many humans on large scales.

this work is an offering, a gift, a medicine, for myself, for anyone who reads it, and perhaps most of all for the community at drew university.

liberation begins in the dirt,

crawling, wriggling, covered in it,
can't tell which way is up
or down or out or in,
can't tell where i end
and it begins,
can't tell,
do i end,
does it begin,

can't get grounded because it's
 shifting,
 crumbling,
 b r e a k i n g d o w n
 and so am i,
 constantly changing,
 amorphous
becoming
 we're dying
 being *decomposed*,
composted, into fertile soil
 new seedlings sprouting up all around
 death and birth,
 and death and birth again,
 and again,
 born and lived and died and decomposed
 and born and lived and died and decomposed
 and born and lived and died and decomposed
 and born and lived and died and decomposed
 and you can resist
 and you can cling
 and you can scramble around for a footing
 or you can close your eyes and let it take you

introduction

"we have no idea what we could be, but everything that has been is falling apart." (1)
 -adrienne maree brown

as i write this thesis **i am actively thinking, feeling, being and becoming in the world.**
 as a result, this paper moves between academic prose, personal narrative, and poetry, weaving
 these seemingly disparate writing styles into one. as i read and write ecological philosophy, **i am**
 simultaneously **allowing the breakdowns**, allowing the **mixed feelings**, allowing the **confusion**
 - i am following the advice of scholar Donna Haraway and *Staying with the Trouble* (2). **i am a**
college student, graduating in less than two months with a degree in art and a blooming interest
 in ecological philosophy and regenerative agriculture, i am a **nonbinary trans woman**, 2 years
 into social transition, 10 months into hormone replacement therapy, struggling with gender
 dysphoria, second puberty, and a fascist regime intent on the genocide of people like me. i am an
american citizen, i am a **resident of a new jersey subdivision**, and as such **i am**
nonconsensually complicit in the harm and exploitation by my country **of people** around the

world, **including myself and those around me. i am grieving, i am mourning, i am loving, i am living. i am writing a thesis on liberation, ecology, and agriculture** and i am finding that putting it all into words is harder than i imagined, i am **constantly reframing my perspective, gaining new insights and understandings, going through breakdowns, awakenings, and rememberings. i am thinking, feeling, being, and becoming in the world.**

i am writing, from mid-breakdown, collapse of the self, of identifiers internal and external. i am writing in the midst of the largest ecological crisis humanity has ever witnessed, from a time in which the security of the nation i inhabit is being antagonistically eroded by the billionaire class. i write with my heart racing in my chest and my mind racing faster, from a place of deep fear and deep confusion about the state of the world.

i **write to orient myself**, to understand the world around me. and i **write to disorient myself**, to remove understanding and comfort. i **don't want to feel comfortable with systems in place.** i want to feel alienated when i go to the grocery store and witness the **excess, the waste, the toxicity of the food, the poverty of the people. i don't want to feel at home in that world - for i know a home exists for myself and for those i love (i love all)** that is **not in the grocery store, not in the city, not on the side of a trash-filled highway. there is a home which is soft and lush, which is filled with the singing of birds, the rustling of leaves in the wind, and joyous laughter,** a home where i can lay in the long grass and feel the dirt on my feet, the wind in my hair, the hands of loved ones in mine. a world where peace, joy, fulfilment and hard work co-exist, where hard work is not done out of fear for survival but out of love and reciprocity, of a desire to provide. i write from this home, from a place of deep trust, calm, focus, and love.

but isn't this a contradiction? yes! yes. yes, it is. i am simultaneously in the process of imagining/remembering/dreaming-into-being this home for myself and those i love, and also in a deep embodied awareness of the current situation which i and those around me are inhabiting. **this is the work of our time:** to stand with our knees deep in the garbage, to feel the filth and the wrongness not just surrounding us but inside us, permeating our holistic selves (social norms, limiting beliefs, microplastics, pesticides), to witness brutal slaughter and exploitation, to *feel it all* - and amidst this chaos, to love, to remember, to take what is here and shape a new world. this is the path not only to our collective survival but to our collective thriving, to our joy, to our home. this is the path of **liberation**, a path which is involved with dirt both physical and metaphysical.

metaphysical dirt being the emotional/spiritual mental dimension of the self and the collective, which in my estimation has been deeply **diseased**, in that many of our current paradigms (ways of thinking) lead to action which harms ourselves and our community (community being all living beings with which we interact directly or indirectly). examples of this disease are consumerism, addiction, limiting beliefs, sexism, racism, hatefulness, and the belief that we are separate from the rest of the natural world. working in this metaphysical dirt involves practices such as meditation, journaling, finding new language, connection with humans and nonhuman beings, letting go of unhealthy habits and addictions, detaching spiritually and emotionally from capitalist paradigms. this work is often difficult and in direct contradiction to

the world we currently find ourselves in. how can one remove themselves from the capitalist mindset when they need money to live? how can someone find time for meditation or journaling while working multiple jobs to feed their family? how does one let go of addiction if the alternative is constant suicidal ideation? working in the dirt of our own minds is no easy feat. however, if we are to ever reach a place of equity, peace, and fulfilment for the majority of earthbound beings, this work must be done.

physical dirt refers to the literal soil, the land, the earth, and the mountains of human pollution which are rapidly mixing with and becoming indistinguishable from soil. similar to the metaphysical dirt, the soil of earth is in many areas **diseased** - polluted and deeply scarred by human action, harming human and nonhuman beings. examples of this disease are monocrop farming, fracking, the fossil fuel industry, suburban style lawns, plastics, microplastics, and other harmful chemicals which have leached into the earth. working in the physical dirt is centered around regenerative agricultural practices, self sufficiency (food production, rainwater catchment, solar power), reducing interaction with harmful systems. again, this work can be difficult to participate in with the current systems in place. however, luckily there are many examples around the world of people engaging in these regenerative practices, healing the earth, human communities, and nonhuman communities.

this thesis grew out of a documentary based project where i sought to document on film some of the human directed ecological communities i have been a part of, specifically the forest preserve on my college campus, the community garden on my college campus, and a local urban farm about 15 minutes from my college campus. i documented and shared groups of people who are engaging in community based food production in urban and suburban spaces, in the hopes of showing that this sort of work is not only possible but deeply fulfilling and healing to the individuals who participate in it and to the earth. i have created two traditional documentary style videos on the farm and the garden, one more collage-style video merging the three spaces together, and one experimental video where i sheet mulch an area of my parents' backyard. these videos are part of my larger practice of art, which often takes the form of video. in this paper, in addition to examining how liberation begins in the dirt, i will dissect and analyze my art practice, primarily the experimental video/film aspect of this practice.

dark ecology and the mesh

in their 2012 book *The Ecological Thought* (3), Timothy Morton argues against understanding reality as a "lifeworld," and advocates instead for a framework based on what they call **the mesh**, which i have found extremely helpful for understanding and relating to the world around myself. this interconnected framework for viewing reality is conducive to creating the change i seek.

All life forms are the mesh, and so are the dead ones, as are their habitats, which are also made up of living and non-living beings. [...] The mesh consists of infinite connections and infinitesimal differences. [...] Scale is infinite in both directions: infinite in size and

infinite in detail. And each being in the mesh interacts with others. The mesh isn't static. We can't rigidly specify anything as irrelevant. If there is no background and no foreground, then where are we? (3)

Morton's 'mesh' refers to **the interconnected web of all living and nonliving things—a perspective that dissolves boundaries between self and environment**. i have been experiencing and interacting with the mesh throughout my life, but had been previously unable to describe this phenomenon. particularly the way that Morton emphasizes the lack of distinction between foreground and background, the overwhelming amount of detail that exists in the mesh, feels to me like an accurate description of this experience i am having, and where i am having it. an example of a time i felt the mesh particularly strongly:

i am on the phone with matt, who is at his house and interacting with other beings and carrying out his own tasks. i am cooking dinner. my parents are in the kitchen, preparing their own food. the phone call is happening through my earbuds, meaning only i can hear what matt is saying. i take a cherry tomato from the plastic container on the counter and begin to cut it. matt is describing the difficult nature of his recent experiences within academia. the tomato cover the cutting board, and i move on to an onion i have removed from the inside of the cupboard directly in front of my face. matt says he feels like he's just waiting for disaster, everything is going to explode in his face before too long. my mom asks if there's any sourdough bread left, i hold up the package. she asks me to put two pieces in the toaster for her. she's eating them with leftover chili. i'm well into cutting the onion, my eyes are burning and tears are streaming. i'm looking in the refrigerator for the reusable container with the brown beech mushrooms. i bought them a few days ago at trader joe's. there's about half of them left. i ask matt if i had told him about my kale plant sprouting, to which my dad responds "yes." i turn the stove on to heat a pan and the oil i've poured. voices of matt's family members are in my ears . my mom gestures at the toaster, trying to access it, understanding what she wants to do, i flip the toast upside down for her. i place the vegetables i've cut up in the pan. matt is describing his parents divorce getting messy. he mentions something about alimony, i ask him what it is, because i don't know. i forgot to cut the mushrooms up, and i can't find my knife. the other vegetables are already well into being cooked so i'm a bit frantic, looking around. matt says alimony is money owed by one party to another in a divorce for things like childcare and maintaining a certain kind of lifestyle. i find the knife, my dad is using it to cut cheese for his chili. i cut the mushrooms up quickly, throw them in the pan. i smell burning. matt says his definition of alimony is not rigorous or technical, he only has a surface level understanding of the concept. it's the toast that's burning, my mom put it in a third time. i hand it to her, telling her it's burnt. she's still not satisfied, it's been cooked unevenly.

this series of happenings involves various forms of **communication** and **interaction** between beings. the onions burn my eye, matt's stories of his life make me feel empathy, cooking makes me feel happy, focused, and stressed. **sensory experiences** and **emotional ones** bleed into each other, creating **physical sensations**, **nervous system experiences**, and **emotional reactions**, which also influence one another. there are **beings**; myself, matt, my parents,

vegetables, mushrooms, there are **objects**; a knife, plastic, wooden cupboards, a frying pan. all of these exist across **time** and **space**, **interconnected** with one another directly and indirectly. additionally, the events or *happenings* happen at such a speed that **there's no time to recover from the last thing that happened because you're already experiencing the next thing that is happening**. all of these factors lead to a highly multi-faceted and disorienting experience, mirroring the overwhelming complexity of the mesh and the experiences of individuals perceiving that mesh.

Morton advocates for what they call "big thinking", or perceiving the totality of the mesh in all of its overwhelming and disorienting qualities:

We have gained Google Earth but lost the world. "World" means a location, a background against which our actions become significant. But in a situation where everything is potentially significant, we're lost. It's the same situation the schizophrenic finds herself in. She is unable to distinguish between foreground (information) and background (noise). She hears voices coming from the radiator, yet hears speech as meaningless burbling. [...] Strangely, big thinking doesn't mean that we put everything in a box. It means that the box melts into nothing in our hands. (3)

scrolling through my **instagram** feed lately, i find myself engaging with **videos**, **images** and **text** that act as direct or representative **windows** into different areas of the **mesh**: alexis has posted a new video she made in class. a professor from columbia warns the world their school is fascistic. ahmed the little farmer from gaza's cat suzy has just died. serene and her friend got a matching tattoo. there's a weeklong boycott of amazon. iphones cause cancer. donald trump has been elected. ahmed the little farmer is returning home due to the ceasefire. the salmon creek farm artist fellowship is opening. donald trump is signing executive orders targeting trans healthcare. paul stamets has posted some pictures of mushrooms. people in congo clamber around in a massive pit filled with water, mining for cobalt, the same process that yielded the phone i'm currently using. a movie made on a free animation software won an oscar. some hospitals have pre-emptively stopped providing gender affirming care due to trump's executive order. over one thousand national parks workers have been fired. yellowdoorurbanhomestead had a beautiful saturday. ahmed the little farmer is starving again. all of this, being witnessed from a literal box in my hands, the witnessing of which melts boundaries around boxes in my mind.

as Morton suggests, the mesh is disorienting, overwhelming, and confusing, when viewed in its totality. with such an abundance of information readily accessible at our fingertips, and with so much of that information being characterized by violence and harm that is actively being carried out in the world, it can be hard to know where we are standing, what is going on, and what can be done about any of it. i find Morton's ideas of big thinking essential to making change in the world - we must allow ourselves to be overwhelmed, to be confused, to feel the *wrongness* of the world we are inhabiting. however, i feel we cannot spend all of our time in this state if we are going to make change in the mesh. we must also allow ourselves to become

acquainted with our surroundings, to orient ourselves in the parts of the mesh which we are immediately present in. in this way, making change in the mesh begins with **observation**, both macro and micro.

liberation

"If you have come here to help me you are wasting your time, but if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together."(4) -Lilla Watson

the word '**liberation**' originates from the latin *liberātiō*, meaning "a setting free" or "release," derived from the verb *liberāre* ("to free") and the adjective *liber* ("free, unrestricted"). the word 'liberation' evolved over time, co-opted by many social and political movements including the protestant reformation, the haitian revolution, latin american revolutions, and many anti-colonial movements. the word also has roots in many spiritual traditions, eastern and western. in hinduism, *moksha* is liberation from samsara, the cycle of rebirth driven by karma. in buddhism, liberation is *nirvana*, freedom from desire induced suffering via the eightfold path.

what i am defining draws from some of the various energies that have been historically associated with the word liberation, particularly the notions of freedom and decolonization, however it does not stop there. for me, liberation is a way of life for the individual and the collective community (human and nonhuman) that maximizes fulfilment, freedom, love, expression, connection, intimacy, and conscious experience. **i define liberation is the practice of creating and maintaining equitable access for the earth's community to abundant resources necessary for achieving a high quality of life.** through this definition i am not looking to upend or overwrite definitions offered by others, rather i am **providing my own framework for how i feel we can collectively move forward as a species.**

liberation as society

my definition is also heavily influenced by what Morton describes "the ecological society" to be - *"much more pleasurable, far more sociable, and ever so much more reasonable than we can imagine."*(4) this description immediately resonated with me, particularly the reasonable and sociable aspects, however i wondered what this ecological society would look like in practice, and where we might find traces of it in contemporary society.

one example that came to my mind was **college**. college is a time and place i often hear idealized and **romanticized** in american culture, seen as a time of freedom, friends, and fun. outside of the fact that youth and being able-bodied is generally desirable for many, **the romanticization of college reveals the basic human desires for connection and community.** most colleges are dense yet walkable neighborhoods which provide space for and emphasize community interaction, a stark contrast from the suburbs and cities that make up most of the country. an ecological society may resemble this in some ways: **walkable neighborhoods**, time and space for **community**, an encouragement **learning** and **passion**. the model of a **college campus** is helpful in describing the ecological society because it is a widely familiar and

accessible concept for many. we can also take this one step further and examine key features of **ecovillages**, or intentional communities. in addition to being walkable and community oriented, these villages often **grow significant amounts of their own food, catch rainwater**, have **lively trade economies**, and use **technological innovations** like **composting toilets** and **temperature regulating cob buildings**. practices like these which are being developed by smaller communities can be a **model for cities and suburbs** (both residents and governments) to look to in order to **reduce their carbon footprint** and **increase quality of life** for their inhabitants.

liberation as decomposition and growth

importantly, the form of liberation which i am suggesting is **not an attempt to escape the mesh** and all of its disorienting overwhelm - it is rather **a way of shaping the mesh from a place of embodied knowledge of grief and joy, of pain and pleasure, of connection to earth, the collective, the self, and spirit/source/god**, to create new systems which are conducive to this ecological society. we cannot instantly shift to a society which equitably provides opportunities for high quality of life, **we must begin where we are**, and move towards implementing this society in ways that are immediately accessible to us. this transformative liberation work takes place in two forms - **decomposition** and **growth**. diseased systems and ways of being must be broken down and phased out, *decomposed*. this can start at a micro level in our own lives - giving less money to corporations, finding ways to reuse and repurpose waste, mending or making clothing, getting rid of the grass on any property we legally own. these small actions help to reduce our contributions to larger corporate entities which ultimately rely on us. as more and more people sever ties with them, they crumble, they *decompose*. in addition to decomposition, we must also engage in growth of our own. this growth is not the extractive and profit driven growth of the corporate model, but rather it is **regenerative** growth focused on healing the earth along with human and nonhuman communities. this regenerative growth can also start small, starting a garden in your backyard to provide food and create habitats for pollinators, interacting more with neighbors to grow community, creating public art. again, these actions combined can snowball - if everyone on a suburban block started a garden in their backyards and had a group text for resource sharing, they could significantly reduce all of their reliance on corporations, increase the quality of their lives, and combat climate change.

sheet mulching is helpful in anchoring us into reality and giving some practical context to these ideas of decomposition and growth. sheet mulching is the practice of layering different sets of organic matter to suppress the current plants in an ecosystem, and get the soil ready for the plants in the next stage of ecological succession (the gradual change in the species community in a given area over a period of time). this practice can be done anywhere and with any kind of organic matter, but it is often most useful in the form of placing cardboard on suburban lots that have been domesticated by a grass lawn. the grass lawn is a prime example of what needs to change in the mesh, practically and conceptually. lawns originated in europe as a way for the elites of society to display their wealth and status, and during the suburbanization of america, they became a staple for homeowners. keeping your lawn mowed has become part of

the suburban ideal, a way to signal economic stability and fit into social norms. these monotonous lawns encourage conformity, harm both local lifeforms and the earth as a whole, and encourage a relationship to the earth characterized by dominance and suppression. manicured lawns displace native plants, depriving local pollinators and other wildlife of food and habitat. additionally, the process of maintaining lawns produces high levels of carbon and other harmful gases (gas powered leaf blowers produce around 124 times the amount of emissions as cars or trucks (5)) and uses a significant amount of water (according to the epa, "*landscape irrigation is estimated to account for nearly one-third of all residential water use, totaling nearly 9 billion gallons per day.*"(6)).

sheet mulching bridges the gap between theoretical and practical liberation. when sheet mulching, we can think of ourselves as contributing to the **decomposition of capitalism and colonialism**, both literally and metaphorically. we are appropriating resources (pieces of cardboard) created as a result of industry and mass production to undermine the suburban ideal of the lawn and make space for something wild and untamed. we are participating in the literal decomposition of one of the most recognizable symbols of suburbia, creating fertile soil for something new and beautiful.

liberation as practice

the liberation which this paper gestures at it is **not a destination**, nor a fixed state. **it is a process** which must be maintained; a **practice**. we practice liberation, individually and collectively. this is not to imply that this 'practice' is preparation for any event, or that it is to achieve perfection or mastery. liberation is practiced as **a way of being and becoming**, something which is carried out each day, each moment. this essay is in some ways an attempt to understand and improve **my own way of being** in the world - **my personal practice of liberation. artmaking, academic writing and research, community, shadow work, meditation**, working with **plant medicine, farmwork**, and **my personal life**, all of these things blend together as i work to reduce the **boundaries** between them. i am consistently and intentionally orienting my life and my actions to be as conducive as possible to liberation for myself and the collective.

this dissolution of boundaries can be beautiful, challenging, overwhelming, disorienting, and fulfilling. in some ways it makes things more cohesive - my life becomes a consistent experience, not separated into categories like personal life/work/hobby. however it can also create confusion and overwhelm. my personal life and my hobbies become my work, simply existing in the world becomes my work. as i gain reverence and respect for this gift of life, i am challenged to make the most of it, to fully inhabit this vessel. as i work to build frameworks of understanding for myself which are conducive to liberating action, the sorts of activities i engage in change. i spend less time distracting myself, i eat healthier, meditate, do yoga, work out more regularly, i write more, and i make more art. caring for myself becomes part of the work when i understand that a well cared for human will make more effective and positive changes in their communities.

as i learn more about the state of the earth and her inhabitants, my senses of urgency and responsibility grow. the work often takes the form of balancing the sense of urgency i feel as i witness phenomena like genocide and climate change with the internal knowing that true change comes from slow and intentional steps. when i rush, rarely, if ever, do i end up somewhere that is productive or fulfilling. since part of my work is dreaming a new world into being, i want to make sure that dream is coming from a place of peace, love, wonder, connection to spirit, and restedness, not from a place of fear, anger, and hate. part of my practice of liberation includes consistently making time for myself to participate in activities that bring me back to this state, to ensure that the actions i am taking are aligned with the world i want to be building.

as i walk the forest floor, my feet bare, i feel connection, i feel pain, i feel pleasure, *i feel*. i feel the cool dirt, still damp from yesterday's rain, i feel the woodchips and the rocks and the needles prod and poke at my soles, i feel the moss, fuzzier than the coziest carpet and ever so much more like *home*. i feel the strong and smooth tree roots, and when i walk on the dead log laying in the water i feel my feet sink into its damp and decomposing wood - it feels fleshy. the pain grows the longer i walk, until it becomes the defining feeling of the experience. this is the first time in a few years i've gone out barefoot, so they're still adjusting. i'm looking down at the ground instead of up at the trees like i typically do - watching every step. the pain is sharp, and i'm grateful for it - i love it. i love this kind of pain because i know it's directly leading to growth. i can feel my body becoming acquainted with the earth - getting to know her. this pain is being actively *alchemized* by the earth and by my body, transformed into rougher feet that will be able to handle this sort of walk. it's a gift of wisdom - a reminder that i am capable of doing hard things, that i can handle this rocky and uncertain path i've chosen to walk.

gifts

| | | | | |
|-----------------|------------------|------------------------------------|-------------------------|--|
| "buds | early flowers | almost mathematical | beauty bird | |
| song | humans | on grass picnicking | playing games | ice |
| melted | again feel sun | on skin, again | rejoice, again | grieve, grieve earth |
| | grieve palestine | grieve confusing | uncertain love | grieve nineteen |
| years | told i was a boy | grieve rights | under attack | nightmares about |
| losing estrogen | | grieve | leaving | place i love in three |
| weeks | people | saying "don't say that | | <i>i don't want to talk about it,"</i> |
| | | but <i>i</i> want to talk about it | cry about it | hold be held by |
| community | reminisce | reflect | honor our time | |
| | | | not the culture here | to hold |
| our grief | | so i grieve alone | hold myself | cry tears of sorrow and joy |
| coexisting | | | <i>i feel</i> , so much | |
| | profundity | every moment | soak it all in | <i>here now</i> |
| | | deeper all the time | | richness |
| of spirit in me | around me | confusing | heartbreaking | beautiful joyful |

moving halfway across the country for unknown
 time following intuition dreams to learn how to make life i want
 for myself my community excited terrified can see stars there
 lake to swim i'll be cooking gardening
 farming building houses with dirt straw halfway across the country no
 safety net dangerous animals don't know when i'll see friends
 don't know if i want grad school how i'll make any money
 all looming in the future leaving here going there and busy as ever

drawing, exhibit filming editing writing researching
 two weeks neither finished still ideas for new projects, today edited
 video on sheet mulching today had idea for short film started filming my
 clothes walls desk bed electrical wires
 fingers snapping slow and rhythmic wrote essay on kendrick lamar
 talked to matt wrote poem
 saw mary the sweetest white haired
 woman from ireland see her in forest sometimes always tells me i'm beautiful
 that she loves me that god is good, in forest filmed birds turtles frogs
 trees on camera caught long-necked crane catching fish in video fish wriggles
 in crane's beak a moment crane snaps it up see it move
 down crane's throat still alive what an experience swallowed whole digested "

the liberation i practice is *embodied*, not just theoretical. it is something that is felt, that is lived, not just sometimes but always, the *work* and the *living* becoming indistinguishable as i orient my life towards healing myself, the earth, and the collective. a walk in the forest becomes a sacred experience and an opportunity for learning. a stressful and emotion filled end of college becomes a gift of profundity and an opportunity for exploration of the richness that life has to offer. in addition to feeling and transmuting difficult emotions, a key aspect of how i liberate myself and participate in collective liberation is through community-based agricultural work; **ecological living**.

ecological living

this thesis began with a focus on creating videos to document three regenerative agriculture projects that i have been a part of, with the goal of sharing these videos with a wider audience in hopes to demonstrate what is possible through community-based agriculture and ecological living. these projects were the forest restoration project at drew university, the community garden at drew university, and grow it green's urban farm in morristown. not just an observer, i was an active participant in all of these spaces before i even had the idea of making work about them. these spaces and their communities have been essential teachers and

inspirations in my life, contributing to my ideas around liberation and giving me hope that is possible for humans to live ecologically; outside of current harmful and extractive systems, in reciprocal relationships with the land, plants, and nonhuman beings around us.

the university in the forest

drew university is known as "the university in the forest", or sometimes just "the forest". the campus has many trees, and some areas of completely untamed forest. there are two forested areas that were fenced off around 15 years ago and have been the focus of ecological restoration work led primarily by Dr. Sara Webb, Dr. Tammy Windfelder, and a slew of student and faculty volunteers and paid workers, which as of this past summer include myself among their numbers. the restoration project really got on its feet when Sara Webb had the stroke of luck that was meeting Dr. Christine Hepburn. Sara was out in the woods one, accompanied by fish and wildlife services who were cutting down an invasive tree with a chainsaw, when she was approached by an angered Christine, who lived in a house near drew's campus and heard the racket. Christine was upset that someone was cutting down a tree, until Sara explained to her that it was invasive, meaning it came from a foreign location and was harming the local ecosystem. Sara and Christine became fast friends after this, and Christine ended up donating funds for massive deer fences, native plantings, and the continuation of the restoration work. one of the enclosed areas was named "hepburn woods" in honor of Christine's contribution. (7)

i recently interviewed Sara about the glacial history of drew university and its current relevance. over the last 2 million years a lot of glaciers have advanced and retreated. the most recent glaciation was about 2 million years ago. when a glacier expands it carries materials in the bottom layer of its ice. when it melts, it drops some of those materials, and leaves some large chunks of ice. twelve thousand years ago the climate warmed enough for the glaciers to melt. the whole geology of the northern part of the world, including northern new jersey, was shaped by this glacial retreat. this includes all of drew's ponds, valleys and other depressions. the hill behind sw bowne, the dells behind toley, and the pond in the zuck arboretum, are all from ice blocks. drew was what is known as a terminal moraine - glacial deposits where the glacier has reached its most southern point, so there is more geography. this resulted in large heterogeneity of the soil at drew, meaning it is composed of different particles, namely sand, silt, and clay. drew's heterogeneous soil-rock mixture is very efficient at holding water, there is even a large aquifer (underground deposit of water embedded in particles of soil) beneath the ground of the forested sections of the campus. aquifer water, including drew's, can be pumped out by farmers and municipal wells. much of the water in northern nj comes from glacial deposits. however, due to the massive expanse of american pavement, these aquifers are becoming scarce, because instead of filtering through the soil, the water hits pavement, and cannot enter the soil. much of the water goes into a sewer and ends up in bays or rivers. drew's aquifer is thus a geological rarity and high value resource, providing a high percentage of several local towns' water supply. drew's forested land is also valuable for its biodiversity, which has risen dramatically since the addition of the deer fence 15 years ago. Sara referred to drew as *"an island of biodiversity in a*

sea of green lawns", referring to the monocultured grasses of suburbia which surround the drew forest and take up a significant portion of american land. (7)

i come to you

"i remember the first time i came to you - i couldn't see the lake. it was dark and shawn threw a rock and i heard a splash and i thought there might be a lake there but i wasn't sure. it's funny to me now, because for the past 4 or 5 months, i've sat on a log in the lake almost every single day. my glasses fell in the lake here. twice. the second time i spent almost an hour wading around looking for them. i know you so intimately now, spent months tending to you, learning about you, learning from you. now, i can walk around you in the dark and not get lost, following a path built from memory alone.

almost two years after that first encounter, i to you because i don't know who i am, only that i'm sick and broken can't seem to get better, and something inside of me is calling me to you, and i come, and you hold me, at the bottom of a tree, you hold me.

and the more i come to you the more i begin to remember who i am, to forget the noise of the outside world, forget about time, forget who i was trying to be for someone else.

and just as i'm about to lose you and go back to suburbia for the summer, i see a job posting, 'forest preserve manager' and i apply and i set up a meeting with dr. Webb and i'm scared she'll think i'm a hippie and maybe she does but she hires me anyway and i move back into riker only this time i'm on the third floor and right next to my window is the top of a beautiful tree and sometimes squirrels play on the branches and when there's a storm the world outside looks like a rainforest.

and i have to pay rent and i barely make any money but it's ok because i start teaching Dobyto to drive and he takes me to the food pantry and my diet becomes mostly bread and sugar because it's what's there, but it's ok because you give me golden oyster mushrooms and chicken of the woods and wineberries. and i'm living alone and i'm finding food on my own and i'm cooking on my own and i'm finally on estrogen and i work in the forest and i work in the garden and i meet so many wonderful people. and sometimes matt and hayley come and visit me on and we go for walks or we film, and when i'm not working i make music and i make art and i write and write and i'm falling in love with life, for the first time since i can remember. "

my relationship with the forest has been profound and transformative. my perception of it changed along the way, going from a place i hardly knew about, to a place i would occasionally spend time, to somewhere i began to spend time almost every day, to somewhere i was able to spend hours and gain an income caring for. it is a place i return to, again and again. in times of doubt, uncertainty, grief, confusion, i often find myself opening the metal latch stepping out of

the world of concrete and boundaries, into timelessness. the forest holds me, the forest heals me. the forest helps me remember the beauty of being alive, spending time there makes me feel alive and makes me *want* to be alive, a feeling that is often hard to find in our modern industrialized lives.

community garden

when i began my employment in the forest and found out that i would be staying on campus for the summer, one of the first things i wanted to do was create a community garden on campus. as i began to look into how i would going about doing that, i stumbled upon the fact that one already existed! i quickly connected with dr. Laurel Kearns, a professor at the drew theo school who has been running the project for about 15 years, who added me to the garden practicum whatsapp group chat, where interested parties discussed meeting times and other garden related happenings and information. since i showed up so frequently, i was given the title of garden steward, and added to the subsequent garden stewards group chat. being part of the garden and developing community with humans and plants was another profound experience that changed my way of being in the world.

the garden is a small patch of land located at the back of the tilghman parking lot on drew's campus, surrounded by a fence for keeping animals out. the project was started about 15 years ago, when students in a religion and ecology course taught by Laurel Kearns became interested in starting such a space on campus. though she has acted as a sort of unofficial "director" since its inception, she emphasizes that the garden was not started by her, and it is not maintained solely by her. it is rather a **collaborative** project that requires time and dedication by students, which has been consistent across the years. since its primary operating time is during the summer months, many of the students who end up tending to the garden are international theo students who stay on or near campus through the summer. (8)

despite my interests in agriculture, i had never worked in any sort of collaborative garden until that summer, and i really loved the experience of doing so. connecting to other people passionate about plant care and climate change solutions had brightened my worldview, and gave me hope for our collective future. seeing how much time, energy, and care that people were willing to put into the project was deeply rejuvenating. we were not producing a significant enough amount of food to sustain ourselves, but we were getting more locally grown food in our diet, and we were connecting with the land, the plants, and each other, forming relationships and social groups based on **collaboration** instead of competition.

working in the garden felt so *natural*. i often felt a sense that i was remembering what it is to be a human, what life was like before industrialization. despite the heat and the sweat, the work felt rather effortless. at the end of a long day of hard work in the garden and/or the forest, i would feel exhausted, but i would also feel more **filled**, more **nourished**, than i had from any other kind of work i've done.

urban farm

i was first introduced to grow it green's urban farm by Laurel Kearns, who brought myself and some of the other garden stewards there on a learning trip. i was immediately in love. the farm is located behind a preschool in the town of Morristown, and grows food at a high enough scale to sell to their community at a discounted price. they have a **csa** program which allows people to financially contribute to the farm's well being throughout the year in exchange for a certain number of pounds of food each week of the summer market. in addition to its role as a food production site, the farm is also used for education of kids from pre-k to college age, allowing them to become familiar with food production from a young age, and get hands on environmental learning.

the farm stands out to me as an example of what we need more of in the world, particularly in america. it exists explicitly in the context of an industrious city with lots of wealth inequality, and allows underprivileged individuals access to healthy and organic food. the farm also has open volunteer hours, allowing people to participate in the production of food and learn how to do it themselves. it is a reminder to anyone who drives by it that food is not disconnected from labor, that there are real people who are working to grow the food that they eat. the farm employs several individuals, educates children about plants, food production, and climate change, gets healthy food out to residents for affordable prices, and allows anyone to learn about food production and plant care. it is a beacon of hope for the world, demonstrating what our societies could look like if we center plants, food, education and community.

volunteering on the farm feels like its own gift, but in addition to the gift of work volunteers are also given the gift of food at the end of their shift. the first time i volunteered on the farm i took home enough food to supplement any vegetable purchases from the store for about a week, and i was notably living alone and cooking for myself at the time. working on the farm, similarly to working on the garden, nourished my soul and filled me with hope. while i was more deeply connected to the garden community, the farm's real world impact was significantly larger and in that way it was more inspiring to me regarding what can be done to create change in the areas that need it.

art

notebook drawings

my practice of art is integral to the way i practice and experience liberation, and how i understand myself and the world. my own personal liberation from the role thrust upon me of "male" began crawling through the dirt of my mind, making art.

from around the age of 11, i was deeply depressed, often suicidal, and i didn't really understand why. i remember one day, coming from from school, my mom asked me how i was doing, and i said "*bad*", but when she asked me to elaborate why, i found i was unable. this was the first time i began to become aware that i was unhappy, unsatisfied, with something about life, or myself, or both. though i didn't consciously recognize it at the time, this shift to depression as a basis for life was heavily influenced by my ability to perform gender the way i desired, and

also by dysphoria stemming from feeling unaligned with my body. both of these grew as i got older, because of both social and physical changes.

at younger ages, gender was less rigidly enforced. at school, i created a feminine version of myself which i presented to others, and i would move back and forth between the two versions, explaining to my peers that i was both a girl and a boy. this was met with largely positive and non judgemental reception, at first. but, as time went on, it became clear to me that this was not socially acceptable, and so i quickly passed it off as just a joke, and eventually completely dropped the feminine name and mode of presentation. this had negative results on my mental health, contributing to the aforementioned depression. additionally, i would soon begin to experience puberty, which for me was a somewhat nightmarish experience of becoming more and more alienated from and confused by my body every day.

by the time i reached highschool, i had relegated all thoughts of my desire for a different body and mode of presentation to a corner of my brain which i labeled "thoughts that aren't allowed and don't make sense." i did not have any trans representation growing up, and the only things i had heard about trans people were occasional complaints from family members about "these kids and their pronouns" and "dangerous body modification." i had come to accept that there was something fundamentally wrong with me and that i would be stuck with misery as a baseline state of existence for the rest of my life.

though i did meet some other trans people in my freshman year of college, it wasn't until my senior year that i found myself, a discovery which came largely as a result of beginning a practice of consistently drawing in my notebook. there were certainly other significant factors, like starting a journal and discussing trans people in class, but the act of drawing, specifically exploring self perception, had a tangibility to it that felt undeniable. my drawings of myself began as twisted, hideous, misshapen things, mirroring my mental state at the time. i was slipping out of depression, and into a state that felt somewhere in between schizophrenia and spirituality.

sightings:

she's starting to show up again
in the pages of my notebook
she escapes from the tip of my pencil
and i look around *bewildered* because
i don't know how she got there

(how i got there)

and this can't be what i want
this can't be what i want
what i *want*?
who i *am*?
who am i?
i've always just assumed

i never stopped to ask and
 i'm sorry for that i'm sorry
 i never asked you what you wanted
 but i couldn't because i know the answer
 and i can't-
 can't be that
 (can't be her)
 can't be seen like that
 and maybe when we're *alone*
 maybe then
 but never
never
 seen

ode to the public bathrooms in holloway hall,

where i first saw her in the mirror, peeking out
 from the angry young man she was pretending to
 be. but that was later. first came the darkness, and
 the light. one night after smoking weed i went to
 the bathroom and i looked in the mirror and i saw
 spinning fractals - the next day walking in stop and
 shop felt like i was slipping in between dimensions.
 god, i travelled through *time* in the public bathrooms
 in holloway hall- i had cosmic visions and i had hellish
 ones. i saw spinning fractals and i saw my face morph
 and one night i woke up unable to move, maggots
 crawling in my wall and a man in a hat leaning
 over me. that year felt like an eternity, frozen in winter.
 time wasn't moving right and life was pain. breakdown
 after breakdown, i was there and i was gone. i had
 cosmic visions and i had hellish ones. that year felt
 like an eternity, frozen in winter. i swear the days
 were repeating themselves, playing on loop. my mind
 was a desolate wasteland, full of horrifying creatures
 and beautiful darkness and so much light. i'm not sure
 how exactly i managed to emerge from that timeless,
 liminal space. i swear, the days were repeating themselves.
 playing on a loop. god, i was *travelling through time* in the
 public bathrooms in holloway hall, my mind a desolate
 wasteland full of horrifying creatures, when i first saw her
 in the mirror. she was peeking out from the angry young
 man she had been dressing up as. when i came out, the
 public bathroom in holloway hall became my favorite place.
 i would get high and shower and play my music and close
 my eyes and in the darkness i would be her. those were

magical nights: laura jane grace blasting from my little blue speaker on the sink, i would stand under the shower and close my eyes and i would be her. the first time i shaved my legs it must have taken an hour, the razor was dull and i cut myself more than a few times. i felt like a trans prostitute from the 80s. my legs felt like they were on fire for almost a week afterwards but i didn't care, because i felt like a trans prostitute from the 80s. it must have taken an hour, but lou reed was singing from my little blue speaker on the sink:

*shaved her legs and then he was a she
hey babe, take a walk on the wild side*

before i saw her in a literal mirror, i saw her in the mirror of my sketchbook. at first, she was warped and hideous, at first i thought she was a monster, out to get me. but as time went on and i allowed myself to draw more freely, she began to show up in a more true way, smiling, loving me and loving life. it took a long time to allow her to come off of the page and allow myself to live as her, to live the way i want. it's something i still struggle with, day to day, and something that my practice of art helps me to do. a significant part of my art practice is understanding myself, working in my own internal dirt.

collaborative video

in addition to drawing and other more traditional media, i am also highly interested in creating documentaries, video essays, and experimental short films. my video essays and short films often continue the work in the metaphysical dirt of myself, or share that process with others. these projects are often highly intimate, appropriating text from my journal or audio from my voice memos. my documentary practice, however, is more straightforward and is focused on the work that happens in the physical dirt, particularly within ecological communities i am involved in.

while working in the garden over the summer, i began to develop a desire to create a documentary about the project, with the primary goal of getting more recognition and awareness about its existence, and hopefully garnering support. footage for this project was recorded and compiled **collaboratively**, often several of us would pass phones around and film each other. i would hand my phone to others to record me, others would hand me their phones to record them. this echoed the overall practically collaborative environment of the garden itself. the history of working together, sharing tools, learning how to use tools, teaching each other how to use tools and how to care for plants lent itself naturally to collaborative footage gathering. when i interviewed my friends in the garden, i asked them to choose their favorite spots instead of choosing a spot for them based on cinematic quality. the interviews were strengthened by our relationships, and our shared understanding of the importance of communicating why we value this project.

a similar process took place while i was gathering footage in the forest. my primary coworker, Doby, and i would often photograph or video things in the forest that we found interesting, and send the footage back and forth. sometimes, when dr. Webb or her husband Chip were there, i would hand one of them the camera and ask them to record. this can be seen in one of my thesis videos, *what can be done*, where dr. Webb is holding the camera and passes it to me, still recording. this moment in the video communicates the collaborative nature of the creation process to the viewer without any need for explanation. there is a sense that the individuals featured on screen are not so individual, but rather they are all supporting each other, participating in community and working towards common goals.

this collaborative nature became much more difficult to achieve when i filmed at the farm. for one, i have much less experience and connection with the people on the farm i was interviewing, as i only volunteered there every week or two for a few hours, and most of my work would be with rotating fellow volunteers. additionally, i was filming on a day of a farmer's market, so there were more unfamiliar faces than typical. i had a large, professional looking camera, i am a tall amab (assigned male at birth) person and i was wearing makeup, visibly signifying my queerness. these factors all contributed to a sense of tension and awkwardness that reduced opportunity for collaboration. despite this, i was still able to achieve collaboration. i was joined by a friend, Anna Beth Lee, who was doing her own thesis on the farm and recording her own footage, which she generously shared with me after. additionally, i maintained the practice of allowing my interviewees to choose where they wanted to record.

i also want to note that this tension and awkwardness were not entirely absent from the process of the garden or the forest. being a non-passing trans woman makes every new person i meet into someone who could potentially reject me, or worse. often, when i tell people my name, or they notice my makeup or clothes, there is a visible change in their attitude towards me, a bristling, or at least a tension, an awkwardness. sometimes people have kind intentions but struggle to move past their established cultural norms, and sometimes people have explicit bias against me that comes out through veiled or direct comments. this can make doing collaborative work difficult, draining, and even dangerous.

despite these challenges, the reward of working collaboratively, whether it is on a garden or on a documentary, is always worth it. as a result of my transness, my existence in social spaces is almost always inherently political, since my right to exist is being actively debated and eroded by lawmakers. this is exhausting, disheartening, and confusing, especially when mixed with dysphoria. however, it is also something i see as a gift. whenever i interact with someone, i am giving them exposure to trans people they may have never had, actively participating in the understanding by the culture at large of our existence.

expanding the scope

as i became interested in living a more ecologically engaged lifestyle, i began to look for others in the world who were doing the same. the first place i found something like this was the social media homesteading movement, individuals or small groups who bought land and created

self-sufficient lifestyles. while i admired these individuals and was initially drawn towards that lifestyle, as time went on i realized that i wanted more focus on community, not isolation, and expanded my search. eventually i came across the **permaculture** movement, and **ecovillages**. while these are not the only examples of large scale community based regenerative agriculture movements, they are the ones that have resonated with me the most, and the ones that i feel are most widely accessible and understandable. both of these concepts can be looked to for inspiration at how we can collectively move forward as a species, a larger scale.

permaculture

the word **permaculture** is a contraction of "permanent agriculture," coined by Bill Mollison and David Holmgren in their 1978 book *Permaculture One: A Perennial Agriculture for Human Settlements*, in which they define permaculture as an "integrated, evolving system of perennial or self-perpetuating plant and animal species useful to man." (9) soon after this publication, Mollison began travelling and teaching 'permaculture design courses', or 'pdc's, which helped the term gain traction. Mollison was inspired by a variety of conditions, experiences, and thinkers, including the unsustainable practices that he saw becoming standards in the world, the abundance and interconnectedness of natural ecosystems, scholars studying and writing about permanent agriculture, and influential individuals like Stewart Brand, Ruth Stout, Esther Deans, and Masanobu Fukuoka. (10) Stewart Brand's *Whole Earth Catalogue* was a magazine published between 1968 which consolidated various ends of the 1960s counterculture, focusing especially on new technology, sustainable living, and the intersection of the two. Ruth Stout, Esther Deans, and Masanobu Fukuoka advocated for various new kinds of sustainable agriculture; respectively 'no work gardening', 'no dig gardening', and 'natural farming'.

permaculture can be described in many ways, but the primary ways in which it will be helpful to think about for the purpose of this essay are as a *design system*, as a *mindset*, and as a *movement*. manifested physically, permaculture is a *design system*. it is a way of shaping land around you in a way that mimics natural environments and is maximized to produce food for humans, provide habitats for animals, regenerate soil, build biodiversity, reduce waste, reduce energy use of those interacting with the system, and grow the interconnectedness/communication of all members of the system/community, all with the ultimate goal of creating **sustainability**. this design system is centered around the core concept of the **food forest**, or **forest garden**. these food forests are groups of structures and plants which harmonize in various ways and are layered in space to maximize production of food, medicine, and other natural resources, and minimize the amount of labor required to maintain the spaces. some examples of plants, practices, and structures that are common features of food forests are fruit trees, herbs, chop n drop (practice of planting fast growing crops that can be consistently cut and left on the ground as compost), sheet mulching (practice of placing cardboard and mulch on land to kill large swaths of unwanted plants like lawn grass and prepare the soil for new planting), swales (holes dug to increase rainwater catchment), and lakes. food forests are typically designed with seven layers, allowing for maximum utilization of vertical space.

equally if not more important to permaculture is *mindset/perspective/paradigm*. there are three ethics that make up the core of the permaculture mindset: earth care, people care, and fair share. earth care acknowledges that the earth is a living being, that human beings have a responsibility to treat with love, care and respect. people care, which includes self care, is a recognition that when the needs of human beings are met in simple and compassionate ways, the environment around them will prosper; care begets care. fair share celebrates the abundance of resources that are available to us which allows us to share with others, and acknowledges that when resources are hoarded it is harmful to the earth and its inhabitants. these ethics are simple, clear, and able to be integrated into one's life both in and out of the garden. in addition to these core ethics, there are also several permaculture principles. both Mollison and Holmgren have separate lists of principles. there are more principles than i feel like including in this essay, but i have pulled a few which i feel are particularly impactful in shifting to a permaculture mindset. **observation** is a key principle in permaculture - developing a sense of close looking at your environment. this principle asks us to engage with the land with all our senses, over a period of time. before building a large scale permaculture project, it is ideal that you observe the land for at least a year, so that you can understand how it functions through various seasons. there is also a focus on observation of whole **ecosystems** rather than observing in isolation. another important principle is **using and preserving biological intelligence**; bees for pollination, owls for pest control, and similar naturally intelligent systems. permaculture also emphasizes **using on site resources** and **making the smallest changes for the greatest effects**.

permaculture as *movement* complicates things, because of the trendiness that the word permaculture has gained. permaculture practices have become standards for almost anyone engaging in urban agriculture, homesteading, or any sort of lifestyle based in self sufficiency. there are hundreds, if not more, of youtube channels focused around sharing and spreading permaculture as design system and mindset. however, with this overwhelming number of individuals and communities who identify as permaculturists, there are bound to be a variety of harmful viewpoints and practices that grow into the movement. additionally, permaculture was founded by two white men, and many of its most significant figures are also white men, despite the fact that many practices are inspired or directly taken from indigenous cultures who remain unacknowledged. while permaculture does hold **diversity** as one of its principles, this principle is not always met, though there are an increasing number of people of color, queer people, and women who are entering the permaculture scene and building space for themselves.

some examples of these groups and individuals are **parkrose permaculture**, a popular youtuber who actively critiques these issues in the permaculture space, **permaqueer**, a permaculture organization focused on providing safe space for queer people in the permaculture movement, and **flowering tree permaculture institute**, a native american women run organization in pueblo, new mexico. the existence of these organizations does not imply that they somehow cleanse permaculture of the problematic things about it. as a movement, permaculture is complex, nuanced, and incredibly multi-faceted. however, it is undeniable that permaculture practices, as well as permaculture design courses have helped many individuals and communities

become more self-sufficient and in closer communication and cooperation with the earth. its popularity and accessibility allows for both effectiveness in dissemination and ability to be co-opted by problematic groups and individuals.

ecovillages

some of the most successful examples of sites where humans live in harmony with plants, nonhuman animals, and the earth are **ecovillages**; sustainable self-sufficient communities often with a focus on a broad undefined spiritual connection to nature and the universe. the term ecovillage first came into use in Robert and Diane Gilman's paper, *Ecovillages and Sustainable Communities*, a study conducted for the organization **gaia trust** in 1991. this led to a 1995 conference in which the **Global Ecovillage Network (GEN)** was brought into being, an organization which has acted as a centralized connecting force for ecovillages all over the world ever since. the term is not monopolized and does not hold particular requirements or qualifications, any group that wants to identify as an ecovillage is free to do so. (11) GEN defines an ideal ecovillage (which, according to them does not yet exist) as "a sustainable human settlement which is in harmony with all aspects of life, including the cultural, ecological and spiritual dimensions." they also reference several other suggested definitions that have been suggested over the years, including the original definition suggested by the Gilmans, which is still widely used: "a human scale, full-featured settlement, in which human activities are harmlessly integrated into the natural world, in a way that is supportive of healthy human development and can be successfully continued into the indefinite future." (12)

in GEN's latest report in 2017, there were around 10,000 ecological communities around the world, in 114 countries. with the high number of ecovillages and the broad definitions, it can be easy to get lost in abstraction. it is helpful to look at some **specific examples** of some well known, successful ecovillages that have been around for many years.

ecovillage at ithaca is located 2 miles from ithaca, new york, on 175 acres of land, housing 230 people across 3 neighborhoods. the village was established in 1991 by a kindergarten teacher and an anti-nuke activist, who gathered a large group of interested people who used community loans to finance themselves. the community grows food for itself and to sell in local farmers markets and stores on 4 organic farms, and as a result has become integral to the local food economy. many residents also have their own gardens in their backyards, reducing the need for spending externally. about 45% of villagers work from home (many own their own businesses), on village farms, or in village office buildings. strategies like rainwater catchment, composting toilets, and solar power all contribute to lowering the villages environmental impacts and carbon emissions. (13)

another pioneering ecovillage is **findhorn**, scotland, founded in 1962 by Peter Caddy, Eileen Caddy, and Dorothy Maclean. another particularly large village, housing around 300 residents, findhorn is focused heavily on spirituality, which ties its residents together and even goes back to its roots. its founders were interested in close listening and communicating with nature spirits they referred to as devas, claiming that these beings were the ones who inspired

them to create the project. similarly to ecovillage at ithaca, findhorn has high food production, is energy independent enough to feed surplus energy back to the grid, uses eco-friendly buildings, and manages its own waste. findhorn even has its own local currency, "Eko", and various community enterprises including an organic food store and a complementary medicine center. the site serves as a training center offering courses on sustainable communal living (14)

i also want to talk about one smaller ecovillage, **dancing rabbit**, in missouri. founded in 1997 by stanford alumni on 280 acres, dancing rabbit currently has about 60 residents, though they hope to grow to 500-1000 people, creating a replicable sustainability prototype. members adhere to strict ecological covenants, including bans on personal vehicles and fossil fuels for heating/cooling, instead opting for a car co-op and solar panels, creating enough energy to give their surplus back to the grid. homes are built with straw bale, cob, and reclaimed materials. the local economy features small businesses, bartering, and a community currency, with residents consuming just 10% of the average american's resources. dancing rabbit also emphasizes education, featuring visitor programs and various workshop courses, where people can learn skills or learn about life in an ecovillage. they also have a work-exchange program, allowing individuals to live on the property and learn about the village in exchange for labor. (15) notably, i am heading to dancing rabbit this summer after graduation, to be a part of the newly forming queer collective there!

conclusion

liberation begins in the dirt. it's late, i'm tired. i'm exhausted and i'm fulfilled. i've enjoyed writing this paper, it felt meaningful and spiritual, i felt guided by intuition and by spirit/source/god. i've struggled writing this paper, i've cried and i've broken down and i've felt like my writing was not enough, like i was not enough, like everything i've been doing has been wrong. this past semester has been profound and beautiful and confusing in so many different ways, and i honestly feel a little all over the place. but, simultaneously, i feel grounded and ready for my next steps. ready to go to dancing rabbit, see what is there. i hope to come back here, i hope to create my own ecological community with friends i love where i can educate people and provide respite from this capitalist hellscape, i hope to turn this paper into something more substantial, into a book, with much more writing and research.

liberation begins in the dirt. it is confusing, it is messy, it requires balancing grief, hope, love, and anger, it requires balancing surrender and taking action. this path is often not straightforward, there is no one telling us what to do or how to do it, it is an experiment, it is a learning, it is evolution. we're in the dance of creation now, joining that sacred song of becoming.

i want to thank you, from the bottom of my heart, for reading this paper and engaging with these ideas. i see this paper as an act of reciprocity, between you and i, this is my offering, my gift, to you, and by reading and engaging with it you have given of yourself, your time, and for that i offer my deepest gratitude and love. i also want to conclude with a call to action.

liberation begins in the dirt, in the mess. i hope that this paper has inspired you to begin thinking of how you can practice liberation in your own life, what internal dirt do you have that

you can work through? how can you better care for yourself, your community, and your planet? something's gotta change, or we're gonna burn, it's not a threat, it's simply the harsh reality that we are facing as a collective, and i invite you, now, to join me in the dirt, crawling, wriggling, covered in it, creating a world we all want to live in. close your eyes, and let it take you.

afterword: notes on creation

this paper, similarly to my documentaries, was created through a **collaborative**, **generative**, and **iterative** process. i wrote several versions of the paper, and several passages, which were torn down and rewritten, creating multiple iterations of *liberation begins in the dirt*. this process of making various iterations allowed me to develop and workshop ideas, figure out what i wanted to say. much of the paper was written generatively, in free writing sessions where i would simply write for long stretches as if i was writing in my personal journal, and then pull out pieces i was happy with when i was done. it was also a collaborative writing process. my thesis committee, Ryan Woodring, Kate Levy, and Rory Mulligan, all consistently gave feedback on various iterations of the paper that i shared with them, helping me to hone the paper. i also worked with a drew university tutor, JD Mechelke, who was instrumental in the development of my writing and the development of ideas throughout this process.

it became important to me to maintain a lack of obligation to this paper. while i honor the fear and disorientation i feel with the world at large, i do be my best to write from a place of **trust in process** above all else, allowing the work to unfold in the way that it wants to, in the way my body allows for, removing myself as best i can from the culture of stress and self destruction for academic excellence that institutional space are so often seeped in. throughout my journey with this thesis i maintained practices of self care, slowness, stillness, and silence, not forcing the writing to come, but allowing it. throughout this process, the following Rilke quote stayed with me:

"Being an artist means, not reckoning and counting, but ripening like the tree which does not force its sap and stands confident in the storms of spring without the fear that after them may come no summer. It does come. But it comes only to the patient, who are there as though eternity lay before them, so unconcernedly still and wide. I learn it daily, learn it with pain to which I am grateful: patience is everything!" (15)

-Rainer Maria Rilke

deep gratitude to Ryan, Kate, Rory, and JD

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