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On Becoming Appalachian Moonshine

ELIZABETH STEPHENS & ANNIE SPRINKLE

We are two ecosexuals in love – with each other, with our planet and with the Universe. We are also ‘sexecologists’, researching and exploring the places where sexology and ecology intersect in art, theory, practice and activism. Over the past seven years we have created fourteen art weddings. Eleven of these were ecologically themed weddings involving thousands of participants – both human and nonhuman. We married the Earth in a magnificent redwood grove in Santa Cruz, California, the Sky in the garden of an old manor house in Oxford, England, and the Sea at the Venice Biennale. We also married the Snow in a decommissioned Catholic cathedral in Ottawa, Canada, the Coal in Gijon, Spain, and the Sun on our neighbourhood hill in San Francisco at sunrise. This article will focus on our Purple Wedding to the Moon and our Purple Wedding to the Appalachian Mountains, which were held two weeks apart and connected by the theme of water.

Originally we staged our weddings as a performative protest against the fact that same-sex marriages are prohibited under United States federal law, although they are recognized by some states. During the first three years of our seven-year project, we held three human-centred weddings. Then we came to realize that our performances needed to explore larger issues than the right to join together two human beings. We believe that the Earth needs to have similar legal rights to those bestowed by the institution of marriage.

Our first eco-themed wedding was our *Green Wedding to the Earth*, on 17 May 2008. Performance artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña was our ‘High Aztec Priest’. We asked for no material gifts, but 150 people participated in co-creating



■ Reverend Billy officiating vows to moon with Beth Stephens and Annie Sprinkle.
Photo: Leon Mostovoy

the ceremony, including fluxus artist Geoffrey Hendricks, environmental artists Helen and Newton Harrison and performance artist Linda M. Montano. Four hundred people attended the ceremony. From that performance wedding forward, our art and lives became dedicated to deepening our connection with nature, building the ecosex movement (a movement based on erotic attraction to the Earth) as an environmental activist strategy and garnering more empathy with the Earth. We re-imagined the metaphor ‘Earth as mother’ to become ‘Earth as lover’.

As with any movement, unexpected things were bound to happen, especially as we created new spaces in the closed system of heterosexual state-sanctioned marriage and inserted sexology into environmental discourses. Instead of trying to replicate existing norms, our ‘weddings’ oriented our co-creators and us towards different kinds of relational practices and possibilities. We tried to stay with the differences that came up during our weddings as we co-created, performed and navigated from one wedding to another throughout our seven-year project. Even the colour themes

that we requested our guests wear for wedding attire (inspired by Linda Montano's use of the colours and themes of the seven chakras) produced numerous variations within each colour. Throughout, we kept orienting towards deviation instead of towards norms. We changed accepted notions of marriage for our co-creators and for ourselves, forever. As we normalized ecosexual marriage, we made the notion of human-centred weddings strange in order to show that the institution of marriage is not the only kind of serious, committed relationship possible. After we invited nature with all of her, his or its forces to join us in unholy matrimony in our *Green Wedding to the Earth*, there was no going back to human-centric issues of gay rights or the sanctity of human marriage. We were pursuing, to quote Elizabeth Grosz,

a theory of the impersonal (and ultimately a 'politics of imperceptibility', the opposite of identity politics, a politics of acts, not identities), in which inhuman forces, forces that are both living and non-living, macroscopic and microscopic, above and below the human, are acknowledged and allowed to displace the centrality of will and consciousness. At the very least, this means that there are wills, forces, powers that can be ascribed no humanity, no life, but which have 'their' perspectives and interests, their own trajectories. Forces have their own intentionalities – to win, to expand, to become. (Grosz 2002: 470)

Drawing on Grosz's theory of the impersonal, we see our wedding project as being much larger than relationships exclusively between humans. Although loosely curated, we never entirely knew what was going to happen during the performances. Our rituals were an expansion and a becoming that evolved throughout the various ecological weddings that we performed.

LUNAR LUNATIC, LUNAR LOVE

Generally our weddings evolve from an arts organization invitation to perform or from an opportunity to address an important issue (such as prospecting for water on the moon). During our seven-year project we chose an entity to marry based on what colour chakra we were

working in and where we 'performed'. Each wedding was site-specific and factored in local needs, interests and available resources to create the performances. We requested 'no material gifts' but sent out a call for collaborators to help co-create the weddings, and then we welcomed all gifts of collaboration. Sometimes friends and colleagues were involved, and sometimes we didn't know anyone until rehearsal. Anyone could volunteer to be in our bridal parties, perform, be on the production team, document, create our costumes, decorate, make sets or play any other wedding creation role.

Gathered together in a magnificent 1930s outdoor amphitheater in Los Angeles on the full moon night of 23 October 2010, we married the Moon to protest human abuse of the Earth's only satellite, to celebrate its wildness and to send our love. Five hundred guest-witnesses were in attendance, 150 of which were artist-collaborators who helped us create the wedding, and all of whom were also, in essence, brides and grooms. Activist performance artist Reverend Billy Talen officiated the ceremony in collaboration with us. Twenty performers presented offerings of ritual, dance, performance and other creative acts. The Church of Earthalujah Choir performed several pieces. Billy also invited his class of performance students from CalArts to participate. We used the 'wedding script' to communicate the message of the connectedness of water on Earth with the Moon. Below is an excerpt of Billy officiating the ceremony.

Reverend Billy: We are gathered here today because we love the Moon and the Moon needs our love. We have been informed that NASA has bombed the Moon prospecting for water.¹ Meanwhile the water on our own planet, Earth, is being wasted and destroyed at an alarming rate. Now it is time to make your vows to protect the Moon as well as the water here on Earth. Let's all howl and chant to the Moon together.

All: Ahuuuu! Ahhuuuu! Lunar lunatic! Lunar love! Lunar, lunatic! Lunar love...

Billy: Do you promise to love, honour and obey the Moon until death brings you closer together forever?

¹ The National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) was trying to find a source of water in space that would alleviate the need to transport water, which is very heavy. If water is discovered in outer space there will be less reason to protect water on earth, which will further empower industry to destroy the environment in search of raw materials.

■ Beth watering Annie.
Photo: Julian Cash



All: We do.

Billy: Do you promise to be more conscious of your water consumption, in order to protect the Moon from more human exploitation?

All: We do.

Billy: To remind you of your vows each day, you will have rings. For your rings, reach your hands up to the Moon, take the rings from around the Moon and draw them down around you. I now pronounce you married to the Moon! You may now kiss – and moon – the Moon! Earth-a-lujah! Moon-a-lujah!

MOUNTAIN LOVERS

Two weeks later, on the afternoon of 6 November 2010, at Ohio State University's Galbreath Chapel, we married the Appalachian Mountains. Beth was born and raised in Appalachia, and her family still lives there. We love this area deeply and visit it often. This wedding was intended to highlight the fact that coal corporations are bombing the Appalachian Mountains daily in the process of using a destructive form of strip mining called mountain top removal (MTR). MTR provides cheap, easy access to coal, which is used to generate electricity. Over five hundred mountains have been decapitated and many more are threatened. Thousands of miles of streams have been completely buried with 'overburden' (excess soil, rocks, dead trees, plants, animals) or polluted by toxic acid run-off whose ingredients include arsenic, selenium, mercury and other pollutants. Entire communities have had their water poisoned and cancer is at an all-time high. Our project asked, 'How can we allow the decapitation of five hundred summits?' and 'Can we stop MTR through more love, appreciation and care for the Appalachian Mountains?' Can love raise consciousness?

Some of our collaborators came from as far away as New York and California to participate. Beth's family drove across the West Virginia–Ohio border to join us. Our call for collaborators attracted many local environmental activists, musicians and even two athletic dancers from



■ Group Portrait, Purple Wedding to the Appalachian Mountains. Photo: Elizabeth Dobson

Kent State University, whom we had never met before. All offers of collaboration were accepted. Native West Virginian hero Larry Gibson, who is renowned in environmental activist circles as the 'mountain keeper', delivered our Appalachian homily to 150 guest-witnesses. Gibson is known for his tireless fight against MTR in Appalachia and for his efforts to educate people around the world about the ecological effects of this horrendous practice. California sex educator Joseph Kramer facilitated the vows in the lovely chapel decorated with branches and pine cones:

Joseph: Do you promise to help defend and conserve mountain water and mountain air?

All: We do.

Joseph: Do you promise to lower your electricity consumption in order to use less coal and help save the Appalachian Mountains?

All: We do.

Joseph: Do you promise to speak out, act up and raise hell about mountain top removal?

All: We do!

Joseph: Will you vow to love, honour and cherish the Appalachian Mountains until death brings you closer together forever?

All: We do!

Joseph: I pronounce you married to the Appalachian Mountains. You may now kiss the Mountains and each other.



■ Reverend Billy and the Earthalujah Choir at Beth and Annie's Purple Wedding Wedding to the Moon.
Photo: Leon Mostovoy

A MOUNTAIN-MOON UNION

We are madly in love with the Appalachian Mountains and the Moon, and this love was the main reason we wanted to marry them. In choosing 'love' as one of the driving forces behind our art-making, highlighting the strangeness of corporations bombing the mountains and NASA bombing the moon (in our press releases, wedding invitations and in the weddings themselves), our performances work towards de-normalizing state practices of environmental destruction while also denormalizing the institution of marriage itself. Simultaneously our weddings allow us to celebrate, and further define, the concept of ecosexual love.

We proposed to 'marry the Moon' to expose the dark irony of NASA's bombing the Moon on 18 July 2009 in search of possible future water sources. We wanted to shed light on the fact that the collateral damage caused by mountain top removal is the destruction of thousands of miles of creeks and streams throughout the watersheds of these savagely flattened mountains. We reasoned that if US industry, operating with the clandestine support of governmental agencies such as the Environmental Protection Agency would stop destroying water sources here on Earth, then there would be no need to search for water on the Moon. Meanwhile the 'now wounded' Moon needed 'our love and affection' in order

■ Beth, Annie and the Moon. Photo: Julian Cash



to 'heal itself from the pain and damage' this bombing caused. By using performance art to symbolically counter NASA's violent prospecting, we intended to expose not only the existing power imbalances between the unarmed moon and US government's explosively armed military agencies, but we also wanted to expose the presumed entitlement of humans who call attacking another celestial body a 'success'.

Brian Swimme, who teaches evolutionary cosmology at the California Institute of Integral Studies in San Francisco, created the metaphor, 'gravity is love'. Gravity is the law of attraction, and the Moon has been attracted to the Earth and its inhabitants since the Big Bang. Gravitational love creates the ocean tides and is believed by some to influence women's menstrual cycles and accompanying moods. The Moon's gravitational love also can affect men and queer-gendered folks, as well as plants and animals, because we all share the quality of being largely composed of water. Appalachian Mountain people are known for their moonshine; both the reflections of the moon, as well as a special home-brewed liquor that makes one howl at the moon like a coyote. The Moon encourages wild behaviour and this is in part why we love the Moon so much. Moonshine liquor can erase categories between human and nonhuman while blurring boundaries between the heavens and Earth. Moonshine is romantic.

THE HONEYMOON

With these weddings we wanted to raise the following questions. Can the Earth, with its Mountains and orbiting Moon feel our love? How can humans join together with nonhumans to create mutually sustainable relationships and communities that flourish in the face of extinction? Can ecosexual unions be consensual? Is anthropomorphing nonhuman entities really helping, or is it another form of violence or both?

We have no conclusive answers to these questions. What we hope is that through the embodied offerings of performance, poetry,

music and art we are creating rituals that open human hearts to all life forms and perhaps this love helps the Earth continue to flourish. Many of our collaborators and wedding guests told us that they have taken their vows seriously and feel more connected with the Moon, Mountains and Earth since the wedding. Some have said that they have changed their habits to more fully embrace sustainability. We certainly have changed our daily habits, being more aware of water usage, gas, recycling and other sustainability practices. The weddings created empathetic spaces where many of the participants could fully commit to 'love, honor and cherish' the entity they married. Even if our weddings only generate a temporary fecund zone, we feel that this is much more desirable than the destruction of spaces and the life within them that industry, especially extractive industry (such as coal, oil or gas), continuously produces.

Our weddings also generated some controversy and negative feedback. The Los Angeles Sheriff's Department, along with the LA Parks and Recreation Department, illegally cancelled our venue contract for the Moon Wedding after they read our press release, declaring it was 'not a real wedding' and could present a 'threat to public safety'. A wonderful lawyer volunteered and we got the venue back. Even so, the sheriff sent an armed S.W.A.T. team to our wedding. In Ohio we were accused of being witches by a preacher on a fundamentalist Christian radio station. At our Wedding to the Earth in Zagreb, Croatia, where queer weddings simply do not happen in public, we received a death threat.

WEDDINGS AS INTERVENTION

Our weddings incorporate humour and critique to acknowledge that the wedding ritual is an example of exploitation and servitude as well as love, collaboration and community-building. Many see the sanctity of marriage as beyond reproach. Others see marriage as an institution that affords legal rights to those who make their vows. This is where same-sex couples enter

the wedding fray. Gays and lesbians desire the right to wed in order to receive the legal rights, privileges and protections that any heterosexual bride and groom receive upon uttering the performative 'I do'. We see the wedding ritual as a perfect platform from which to expand this human-rights discourse to nonhuman entities without seeking the approval of dominant institutions that hold marriage to be sacred.

Although we believe that we are not separate from the Earth, or nature, as some religious institutions and social constructs claim, our weddings provide a dynamic form to unite us all. We believe that the act of making vows and sharing the benefits of love, caring and responsibility that the institution of marriage claims to represent and guarantee must be extended beyond humans. The quest for same-sex marriage rights, especially here in the United States, where the federal government still refuses to recognize same-sex marriage, is largely driven by gender discrimination embedded in the legal institution of marriage. Marriage has been highly effective in creating a legal contract that privileges the patriarchal nuclear family while excluding those who are labelled 'single' or otherwise fall outside of the federal Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA), which defines marriage as between one man and one woman.

Our large-group wedding performances embrace the irrational panic of right-wing conservatives who declare that allowing same-sex couples to marry each other will quickly lead down a slippery slope, to human beings marrying anything. Nonhuman marriage or communal human marriage threatens to disrupt time-honoured patriarchal power relationships. To propose the possibility for more than two people to be married, or for humans to marry nonhuman entities, is simply antithetical to the Judeo-Christian based foundational beliefs epitomized by the nuclear family upon which some claim the United States was built. Conservatives view couplings beyond the traditional human male-female twosome as a threat to the state regulation of private morality, and they believe this must be prohibited.

■ Beth and Annie with the Earth and the Moon.
Photo: Julian Cash



■ Reverend Billy and Naomi Pitcairn.
Photo: Leon Mostovoy



Conservatives view same-sex marriage as the next step in the further demise of the institution of marriage, just as interracial or even Catholic-Protestant marriage was seen in the past.

As we hope to hasten the demise of state-sanctioned, legally delineated couplings, our weddings are not so much about the binary patriarchal space of the marriage institution, which ultimately creates subjects who serve to maintain their oppressive status quo. Instead, our weddings are about creating a space of being beside trusted others in a slowed-down time as we face immediate and future challenges of surviving with this planet all together. We believe that it is our ethical duty to continually try to understand and counter the environmental damage that we are complicit in causing, from the personal to the global.

LIVING ON EARTH

The work that we are creating around ecosexuality has emerged from the fields of sexology, ecology, fluxus and queer and feminist art. We engage metaphor in order to invite people to approach environmental and social justice movements from different perspectives than those created through the facts and figures of statistics, economics or the hard sciences. Imagining the Earth as lover is also a way to intrigue and seduce a broad range of others to join the environmental movement by making it more sexy, fun and diverse. We believe that our art performances can generate new energy and perspectives for engaging the depressing prospects of our planet's dwindling future. While we applaud and support the hard work of our environmental activist friends, our networks include artists, sex workers, academics, drag

queens, queer folks and others whose voices do not necessarily fit easily into the existing environmental movement. Sometimes we use humour to disarm audiences who are tired and overwhelmed by hearing how dire the plight of the planet really is. What we bring to the table is style, creativity, love and fun in the face of disaster in order to allow people to experience and connect with the Earth anew. Our performances explore queering nature, and yet we realize that adopting terms such as 'wedding' and 'queer' anthropomorphizes nature while continuing to situate it as separate from humans. This is the separation that our weddings attempt to narrow if not erase. Just as Bolivia's Law of Mother Earth granted nature equal rights with humans,² we believe that the protections afforded by the institution of marriage should be extended beyond heterosexual couples, beyond same-sex couples, beyond human beings to all entities and living beings, animals, plants and minerals.

We are interested in constructing a community that understands our relationship to the Earth in a radically different way. As we propose partnering as lovers with the Earth, we begin to re-think, re-imagine, re-conceptualize the Earth as part of, not separate from, us. We imagine that 'Mother Earth' is tired of taking care of humans, is depleted and very possibly cannot continue to provide in the way a mother continuously gives to a child. We must create a more mutual sustainable relationship, and give much more back before it is too late. We promise to love, honour and cherish the Earth until death brings us closer together forever. As Reverend Bill would say, 'Earthalujah!'

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