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Into the Woods: Queer Natures in Malinda Lo's Ash

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It has been just over ten years since the release of Malinda Lo's influential, queer young adult reimagining of the classic Cinderella story, *Ash*. This coming-of-age narrative uses fairy tale magic as a backdrop for the exploration of adolescence and queer identity, reinventing Cinderella as the young Aishling—who goes by Ash—a vocal and inquisitive young teen whose grief acts as a catalyst for her entry into the supernatural world. Much like the classic tale, Ash loses both of her parents within a few years and is left to the mercy of her stepmother and two stepsisters. But instead of discovering and marrying her Prince Charming—in this novel, the mysterious fairy Sidhean—Ash falls in love with a mortal (female) hunter from the King's Guard, Kaisa. *Ash* is filled with fairy tale tropes turned on their heads: asking us to reimagine the tropes traditionally associated with the “Cinderella” tale type¹—magical assistance, persecution and sacrifice, a young heroine and a dashing prince—in relation to a queer coming-of-age story. *Ash*'s initial release took the YA literary world by storm, heralding Lo as a pioneer in queer YA with her “sombre and lovely” depiction of a queer fairy tale with a happy ending (Marler 27). As with many queer coming-of-age novels, *Ash* is marked by its protagonist's simultaneous progression towards and delay from adulthood, embodying what Kathryn Bond Stockton terms “sideways growth” (4). This “Cinderella” story inhabits a queer temporality, pushing back against the structures of time and expected trajectories of adolescent growth inherent in young adult narratives. Within the practices of analyzing sideways growth, I believe there is space to push the reading of Ash's queer journey beyond her sexual or romantic interactions and in this way define her queer encounters, and queerness in general, as an expansive space which holds queer relational (sexual, romantic) experiences in equal consideration with other queered spaces,

¹ The “Cinderella” tale-type, classified by the Aarne-Thompson-Uther system as ATU510A, is also known as the “Persecuted Heroine” tale-type and is characterized by its reliance on a supernatural helper to ensure the young female protagonist's escape to a new life.

experiences, and understandings²: specifically, the opportunities for sideways growth exhibited in natural spaces. For while forest spaces are traditionally sites of danger and forced maturation for female fairy tale protagonists, *Ash* posits a different opportunity for young girls within the forest space—one of queer becoming.

The spaces within *Ash*, though constructed through the frame of fairy tale conventions and queer coming-of-age narratives, encourage a further framing through queer ecology, one that asks us to read the “queer” alongside the “natural” in an effort to more deeply engage with Ash’s queer embodiment. Queer ecology refers to a “constellation of practices that aim [...] to disrupt prevailing heterosexist discursive and institutional articulations of sexuality and nature” (Sandilands, “Queer Ecology”); in other words, it is the study of the interrelation of space, place, and identity in the formation of social, cultural, and political understandings of selfhood and community formation. In relation to *Ash*, queer ecology offers a space for considering how the queer formation (“coming-of-age”/“sideways growth”) of a young protagonist is affected—troubled, nuanced, reimagined—by nature. Specifically, how moments of delay and growth for Ash must be reconsidered when nature plays an active role in her queer becoming.

The Origin of Retelling

If we begin by stepping back into the diverse field of children’s and young adult literature, we see that there is no shortage of books that reimagine classic fairy tales, from those that align closely with original plots to those that seem entirely untethered from the original tales. These texts span cultures, genres, and age groups in their effort to reimagine what fairy tales

² As Angel Daniel Matos and Jon Wargo note in their introduction to queer futurities in youth literature, the use of “queer” as a broad, inclusive term encompasses all “nonheterosexual and noncisgender people, cultures, and experiences” (1), Reiterating Michael Warner’s definition of the term as the diverse ways “people can find themselves at odds with straight culture” (38).

might mean for us today.³ Even since the time of the Brothers Grimm, fairy tales have been adopted and altered to fit within a desired cultural or social narrative (Zipes 29), and the persistence of fairy tales speaks to this adaptability. One of the most persistent contemporary modes of retelling is the feminist fairy tale: a reimagining of traditional tales in order to alter and empower female characters within those narratives.⁴ A second, and related, tendency within this genre of fairy tale retellings is the production of texts specifically for young adult audiences. These tales are no longer reserved for the moralistic instruction of children—though they are not necessarily free from this impulse—but rather tackle the complexities of adolescence and adolescent experience.

Ash, as one of these retellings, has received relatively little critical scholarship, with a significant amount of discussion around its release and re-release being moderated by Lo. In the time since *Ash*'s release, Lo has remained vocal about the need for diverse representation in queer young adult texts and on *Ash*'s tenth anniversary released a blog post with the statistics of “LGBTQ YA” publications from 2009 to 2018. On the social and publishing realities surrounding *Ash*'s initial release, Lo writes:

Ash was one of 27 books about LGBTQ main characters or issues published by mainstream American publishers. Among those 27 books, nine of them featured cisgender queer girls as main characters [...] *Ash* was not alone when it came out

³ Popular culture and literary websites such as *Book Riot* and *Good Reads* consistently produce lists with titles such as “100 Must-Read Fairy Tale Retellings for Adults and YA Readers.” These lists offer readers a seemingly infinite number of choices to suit their particular interest in the retellings. For example, do they want dark stories, stories about the villains, romances, feminist stories, queer stories, etc. Two examples of these lists can be found here: <https://bookriot.com/2018/05/01/must-read-fairy-tale-retellings/>; <https://electricliterature.com/10-fairy-tale-retellings-that-are-deeper-darker-and-sexier-than-the-originals/>.

⁴ Classic feminist retellings include Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* (1979) and Emma Donoghue's *Kissing the Witch: Old Tales in New Skin* (1993), with more recent interpretations such as Marissa Meyer's *Cinder* (2013) and Helen Oyeyemi's *Boy, Snow, Bird* (2014) reinforcing Anne Thériault's heavily quoted argument that “fairy tales are women's tales” (“Fairy Tales”).

in 2009, but over time I've come to see that it was distinctive for a few reasons. The style of the book—the voice—was somewhat old-fashioned. It was a third-person fairy tale fantasy in the tradition of Robin McKinley, and it was published during the height of *Twilight*'s popularity. Although there is plenty of variety in YA, even I can see that *Ash* didn't feel like most YA at the time. ("Decade")

Lo considers herself a "keeper of memories" for *Ash* ("Decade"), having been trusted with the stories of many teens who saw themselves within the queer content of her novel.

Ash is part of a greater history of queer speculative novels, yet the explicit queer content and "happy ending" of the novel was ground-breaking within the realm of young adult literature. The reception of the novel led many to consider Lo's *Ash* as a critical broadening point for queer fantasy YA novels; for, as Lo notes, the past decade has seen not only an explosion in YA books, but also an increase in the diversity of representation found within LGBTQIA2S+ novels. In her most recent study of queer YA, Lo finds that in 2018:

108 LGBTQ YA books were published by mainstream American publishers. That's a 300% increase over 2009, when only 27 were published. Among those 108 books, 56 of them are about cis queer girls, which is a 522% increase from 2009, when only nine were published. ("Decade")

Yet, in interviews and on her blog Lo frequently parses her initial hesitancy around writing this novel as a queer story. Reflecting on the novel in 2015, Lo writes that:

Part of the reason I had been hesitant to transform Cinderella into a lesbian was because I did not want to write a coming-out story. Thankfully, during the course of editing out the failed heterosexual romance, I realized that I didn't *need* to

write a coming-out story. *Ash* was set in a fantasy world, and there was no need for same-sex love to be taboo there. ("Reimagining")

In this way, Lo adapts the Cinderella tale to confront the tropes of queer coming-of-age narratives. But we also see the complication of the "return to nature" trope popular in YA literature, which has the young protagonist seek refuge in a natural space (usually a forest) in order for them to learn and grow. Traditionally natural spaces act as transformative spaces, preparing the protagonist to re-enter society and become an adult, but here nature is a space of delay and non-linear time.

In *Ash*, we see the dynamic collision of fairy tale tropes with queer re-imaginings, as the titular protagonist deviates from her anticipated maturation narrative, "growing sideways" in a way that subverts social and temporal expectations of adolescence (Stockton). Yet, how is this sideways growth facilitated in the narrative? This, I argue, is where nature plays its critical role: developing in *Ash* a "more critical, [...] more ecological," and queerer bodily politics (Sandilands, "Unnatural"), and redefining queer understandings of subjectivity and relationality. In this way, eco-queer readings of young adult literature are "uniquely positioned as a mechanism by which to explore the intersubjective and interactionist [queer] relationships people develop by interacting with the environment as they mature" (Trites 61). First, though, a brief history of eco-queer theory and environmental critiques of children's and young adult literature.

The Origins of Queer Ecology

The emergence of eco-queer theory or queer ecology arose simultaneously with other interdisciplinary approaches to engagement with the environment, specifically the popularization of ecofeminism in the 1990s. In their article "Towards a Queer Ecofeminism," Greta Gaard

provocatively stated that “liberating women requires liberating nature, the erotic, and queers” (122); despite its dated, and arguably essentialist, hypothesis, Gaard’s argument began investigating the nuances of queer relationships to environmental space and place. In response to these initial eco-queer readings, many scholars have argued for the distinction between the oppressive structures which artificially promote connections between women and nature and the inherently antithetical structures of queerness and nature, for while “ecofeminist analysis of the persistent (and usually demeaning) association of women and nature is, with some biased selection of sources, defensible, it is clear that queers have consistently been condemned as ‘against nature’ in Western homophobic culture” (Garrard 77). Queer bodies and experiences “violate the ‘natural order’” (Garrard 78), which leaves us to ask what benefit, if any, arises from seeking the interconnections of an “eco-queer” theory.

As one of the prominent voices in this field, Catriona Sandilands argues that the intersections of queer identity and environmental politics are multivalent. They write that “there is an ongoing relationship between sex and nature that exists institutionally, discursively, scientifically, spatially, politically, poetically, and ethically, and it is our task to interrogate that relationship in order to arrive at a more nuanced and effective sexual and environmental understanding” (Sandilands and Erickson 5). In queer ecology, we explore what queer discourse can offer our understandings of the environment, and, simultaneously, what ecological discourse can offer our understandings of queerness. In their seminal article on queer ecology “Unnatural Passions?: Notes Toward a Queer Ecology,” Sandilands argues for the extension of the principles found in environmental justice movements and ecofeminism towards queer theory in the environment. They ask us to consider what “it means to think about nature as a site in which the social relations of sexuality are played out, and vice versa,” exploring the social and political

history between sexuality and nature.⁵ Sandilands argues that “modern understandings of sexuality are deeply influenced by historically specific ideas of nature, perhaps most obviously in the classification of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer bodies as, somehow, unnatural” (Sandilands, “Unnatural”). Sandilands further notes that, in isolating queer people from nature, nature itself has become heteronormative, erasing the presence of queer bodies from these spaces and reinforcing the “unnatural” existence of queer identities.

Sandilands' eco-queer arguments take on a distinctly political ideology, framing sex, nature, and queerness around explicitly challenging “hetero-ecologies” in contemporary society (Sandilands and Erickson 22), whereas, I seek a more reparative (or perhaps diagnostic) eco-queer reading, focusing on how eco-queer theory can engage with, challenge, and expand the existent literary conversations around Lo's *Ash*. For, as Sandilands notes, rather than seeing these modes of thought as antithetical to each other and to literary critique, it is more compelling to consider the possibilities invited by eco-queer interconnections. Yet, the figure of the child in children's and young adult literature is generally “constrained by the intrinsic commitment to maturation narratives” (Trites 60-61), the desire for the growth of the young protagonist into a proper social role or position. While ecocriticism emphasizes the “intersubjective relations of others” (Trites 60), children's literature maintains a structure of expected growth, and therefore even children's narratives which are explicitly environmental will “necessarily be anthropocentric” (61). In introducing the queer child into this structure, the “expected” trajectory of growth is disrupted and the narrative's anthropocentric impulses are, potentially, similarly undermined. This turns us to fairy tales and the possibilities brought forward by their intervention in eco-queer conversations. In seeking connections for the importance of nature to

⁵ Similar arguments are made in Nicole Seymour's work on queer ecological imagination (*Strange Natures*), and Myra Hird and Noreen Giffney's work on queering the more-than-human environment (*Queering the Non/Human*).

queer bodies and, even more subversively, the importance of queer bodies to nature, we open up a multiplicity of readings for both the queer and natural spaces found in *Ash*, as Jon Wargo notes in his critique that “*the land and aid of magic plays a critical role in Aishling’s individuation*” (emphasis mine, 45). The spaces within *Ash* encourage a queer ecology, asking us to read the “queer” back into nature.

The Origins of the Girl in the Forest Trope

There exists a long Anglo-narrative tradition which sees the appropriation of natural space for the temporary suspension of social norms and expectations, ranging from the classical works of Milton and Shakespeare—*The Faerie Queene*, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, and *As You Like It*—to modern adaptations such as Stephen Sondheim and James Lapine’s Broadway musical *Into the Woods*. In fairy tales, specifically, we see the use of forest spaces for the transformation of young girls into women: La Belle au Bois Dormant (Sleeping Beauty) pricks her finger on a spinning wheel and awakens a century later to her new husband, while Little Red Riding Hood’s encounter with the wolf in the woods is interpreted as her movement from sexual innocence to experience. Within all of these works the forest acts as a liminal space, enabling a temporary, yet pivotal, transformational space for the wayward protagonist to gain knowledge and understanding—and often find themselves—before their inevitable return to society and their expected social roles.

Traditionally, scholarship on children’s or young adult literature and nature negotiates the appropriation of natural spaces by specifically examining its use as a setting for the narrative

growth of the young protagonist.⁶ In their discussion of ecological ambivalence in J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan*, M. Lynn Byrd writes that "the pull of fantasy and escapism in the Peter Pan story is obvious as is the allure of youth and youthfulness," yet there is an interesting study to be made "on Peter Pan and the impossibility of nature" (48). For, in narratives for young people, "not only are nature and natural space constructed entities and confined spaces, but also the idea of nature is distorted into domestic or fantasy spheres that ultimately elide nature itself" (Byrd 49). Recent scholarship on ecological young adult literature has specifically attended to the implications of appropriating the natural spaces inhabited by queer bodies or the queer experiences which occur through natural environments.⁷ These critiques draw the fairy tale into the contemporary, making room for discussions between and across theoretical fields in an effort to parse the complexities contained within literature for young people. Following these scholars, I believe Malinda Lo's *Ash* invites a similar interdisciplinary critique through which we may discover new points of interest and connection between queer becomings and natural spaces.

Queer Natures in *Ash*

In *Ash*, the characters—specifically the female-identifying characters—not only have connections to the natural world, but also present various queer potentialities. Within this fantasy realm, fairies, mothers, greenwitches, and huntresses all present models of alternative living which may identify them as "queer" bodies. However, *Ash* is the predominant embodiment of queerness in this text, bridging worlds and identities which manifest in her bisexual (or perhaps

⁶ For example, Alice Curry's *Environmental Crisis in Young Adult Fiction*, Megan McDonough and Katherine Wagner's discussion of nature and female dystopian YA protagonists, and Maude Hine's study of nineteenth-century didactic children's tales.

⁷ For example, Joshua Whitehead's discussion of "camp" spaces and the appropriation of Indigiqueer experiences, or Roberta Trites' discussion of materialism and the environment in children's literature.

pansexual) experience. And within the exploration of her queer identity, her coming-of-age story, Ash heavily relies on the natural world to inform and support her decisions. Lo notes Ash's attraction towards the forest space, as she looks "out across the meadow at the budding trees of the King's forest, and she felt something inside of her turning toward those trees" (*Ash* 61). Children's literature scholar Roberta Trites asserts that young female protagonists represent a liminal space which allows for their association with nature, as the young women are:

poised in the liminality of adolescence, they understand exploitation and can discern the connections among self and place, self and other, self and nature, the world and other-worldliness, and among cultures, including those that have been othered. The very liminality of female adolescence is, by its very nature, a time of transition and a time of shifting ontological awareness, it seems only natural that these characters demonstrate an ontology that "takes seriously the agency of the natural." (83)

We see, then, that on the one hand Ash's sympathetic relationship with the natural world is cohesive with other children's stories, as "children are still presumed to have a privileged relationship to nature" (Dobrin and Kidd 6). Ash's inhabiting of a natural space is not unlike Peter Pan's roaming of Neverland or Alice's journey through the looking glass: a childish (and temporary) alignment of the child with a fantastical natural setting. While on the other hand, Ash's embodiment of a queer—and therefore sexual—body resists narratives of the "innocent child" which are so often linked with nature. Her engagements with the natural space are, in many ways, untethered from "childhood"—radically making room for joyful and unproductive "homes for all sorts of queerness" (Kidd 185). Yet, these tensions are productive in navigating Ash's relationship to her environment and her identity.

Jon Wargo argues that “Lo’s magical setting of Taninli becomes a central focus for the story and sustains the second part” of the novel, as “Lo uses this land of magic to create an alternative world apart from the ‘lived’ realistic setting of Rook Hill” (45), and a queer ecological perspective might push this analysis further. Ash’s connection to the forest as a safe space is established from the outset of the novel: on travelling through the woods Ash reflects on how she and her mother “had sometimes taken [that path] to gather mushrooms or wild plants” (Lo, *Ash* 31). Ash feels at home in this forest, which magically extends from her childhood home and mother’s grave to her stepmother’s home near the palace, and she repeatedly returns to its shelter in times of distress. When—like her classical predecessor—Ash is mistreated by her (wicked) stepmother, she does not lie dormant amongst the cinders of her kitchen fire but instead goes to the forest, intent on escape, and “when she reached the treeline she felt a compulsion to continue into the forest instead of turning west. [...] As she walked into the rich smell of sunlight and growing things, a path opened wide before her like an old carriage road just rediscovered” (Lo, *Ash* 62). Coinciding with the “return to nature” YA trope, the forest responds to Ash’s distress and provides a space in which she can escape her life, if only for the time she remains in that place. Yet, Ash’s relationship to the forest is not only mediated by negative emotions and experiences: she also is drawn to the forest in times of joy and excited exploration. Travelling with Ash through these natural spaces, we see an embodiment of Ash’s subjectivity that is restricted in her daily life, as she recognizes her freedoms reflected in the forest, where “all around her she felt the Wood breathing, her senses alive” (Lo, *Ash* 62-3). This differentiation from the usual function of natural space in young adult literature—the appropriation of space for

the healing of traumas and growth of the protagonist⁸—is, I argue, a queering of this natural space.

Ash does not present the all-too-familiar *bildungsroman* home-away-home structure expected of a coming-of-age YA novel. Instead, the very concept of “home” is deeply embedded in the freedoms and antihierarchical structure enabled by a queer natural space. This synonymy of queerness and nature is not without its issues, as Lo’s world is predicated on the right—and perhaps the unique ability—for Ash to inhabit any space she desires, a culturally and historically fraught assumption which decenters any existent relations in this space which are independent of Ash.⁹ Yet, Lo’s narrative invites reparative readings for the relational imperative placed on those who engage with the forest space. Ash chooses to be in relation with the forest space, embodying the “fluidity, über-inclusivity, indeterminacy, indefinability, unknowability, the preposterous, impossibility, unthinkability, unintelligibility, [and] meaninglessness” irrepresentability of a queer ecological relationship (Hird and Giffney 4).

Queer Relations in *Ash*

Just as Ash spends most of her chosen time in the forest, Ash’s chosen relationships also exist within this natural space. There are three relationships—with her lover, her guardian, and her mother—that hold queer and ecological potential in Ash’s story. Specifically, the forest acts as an alternative space in which Ash can enact every element of her identity, seeking relationship

⁸ See McDonough and Wagner’s discussion of the appropriation of space and place, which analyzes the role of nature as a temporary safe haven in coming-of-age stories.

⁹ This use of natural space erases Indigenous bodies, becoming a “space of transformation for settler queerness” (Whitehead 226) specifically and intentionally through the imagined historical and anthropological queerness of the Indigenous past. Natural spaces link adolescence to Indigeneity, using Indigenous histories, traditions, practices, and bodies to “bolster non-Native identities, queered and otherwise” (Whitehead 229), and simultaneously delegitimize the potential for lived Indigiqueer experiences. While *Ash* gestures towards Indigenous epistemologies of knowing and being in the world, it remains at the expense of actual representations of Indigenous experience.

with three otherwise unattainable beings: the huntress Kaisa, whose social class far exceeds that of Ash; her fairy companion Sidhean, who exists between the human and fairy world; and her mother, lost to her in childhood yet a continued influence on Ash's life. These moments of delay and growth remind us of the structures of queer coming-of-age narratives (Stockton; Kidd), yet there is space to push back against these moments of delay and growth as wholly synonymous with queer tropes in young adult literature. As with queer coming-of-age narratives, relational development is also a central tenet for queer ecology. Sandilands writes that queer ecology examines the intersections of queer and environmental relation-building:

with an eye to developing a sexual politics that more clearly includes considerations of the natural world and its biosocial constitution, and an environmental politics that demonstrates an understanding of the ways in which sexual relations organize and influence both the material world of nature and our perceptions, experiences and constitutions of that world. (Sandilands and Erickson 5)

I would expand the development of "sexual politics" to include ways of being in and of the world, an exploration of (queer) identity and place which recognizes the relational obligations and freedoms of nature as a queer space. These moments of delay and growth, then, are nuanced by their engagement with nature, asking how we might reconsider queer becoming when nature plays an active role.

If we turn, then, to Ash's three central relationships, we see queer and environmental relationships which influence—and serve to develop—Ash's sexual politics. Though last to appear in the text, Kaisa is Ash's most explicitly queer relationship: in coming across each other's paths, Kaisa remarks that "I cannot go too long without this forest" (Lo, *Ash* 135), a

sentiment which Ash shares. While it may seem like a convenient trope—girl meets girl in an idyllic forest—there is a deeper connection to the space of the woods that calls to both Kaisa and Ash, and subsequently calls them to each other. Their relationship is formed and mediated by the forest and, unlike the traditional Cinderella tale, this Prince Charming does not ask for her to leave the space she identifies with, but instead embodies the same connections and understanding for that natural space. Wargo’s reading of the novel, though decidedly dichotomist, may assist in forming an understanding of Kaisa and Ash’s other queered bodies, as they discuss the function of space in the novel as a normalizing force where the “natural appears strange while the supernatural may seem common or ordinary” (46). These queered characters ultimately inhabit the natural space, not the supernatural—overcoming, as Cinderella must, their prescribed roles (Zipes 145)—which invites a queer ecological reading of the association of the “strange” (queer) world with the natural world. Or, as Sandilands writes, it is a matter of turning “our attention away from the ways in which sexuality and ecology have been linked as power relations having a negative (if still productive) influence on both queers and nature, and towards the ways in which a queer perspective offers us a unique standpoint on *resisting* these destructive relations” (“Unnatural,” emphasis original). Traditionally, Ash and Kaisa—as young adult female protagonists—ought to “equate the freedoms of nature with the dangers of space, a space to be avoided if possible and quickly traversed if necessary” (McDonough and Wagner 159). Instead, they revel in their natural connection, finding queer potentials available to them in the freedoms and disruption of the forest, resisting the “destructive relations” (Sandilands, “Unnnatural”) of their expected societal roles in favor of making their own queer “happy ending.”

While Kaisa may be Ash’s most explicit queer experience, the fairy Sidhean is Ash’s most explicit ecological experience. For many years Sidhean walks alongside Ash in her

moments of growth and her simultaneous moments of delay within the woods. In this relationship, Ash's desires are manifold, as she wishes to be with Sidhean and "all of his cold strangeness. She wanted to take his hand, and she wanted him to pull her onto his horse, and they would go through the dark Wood at midnight, the moon a pale crescent above," and Ash imagines herself alongside Sidhean as they "would ride to that crystal city where it is said that the fairies have their grandest palace, and she would know, at last," the answers to all her questions (Lo, *Ash* 97); yet, she also chooses to "delay; swerve [...] to imagine relations of [her] own" (Stockton 15), inhabiting her relationship with Sidhean without seeking definitive conclusions. In their critical approach to *Ash*, Jon Wargo engages with the bisexuality of Lo's titular character, arguing that as she navigates both the "real" and the "supernatural" spaces, Ash is simultaneously navigating homosexual desires and heterosexual constraints. As Wargo notes, novels which feature bisexuality are rare, and the texts which do feature bisexual characters are haunted by plots "rooted in homophobia," where "references to sexual possibility and 'community [are] always somewhere else,' often leaving these novels with themes of isolation and internalization" (44). Wargo sees the two worlds in Lo's text acting as "dichotomies of heterosexuality and homosexuality," where the fairy world—embodied by Sidhean—reinforces heterosexual structures of companionship, marriage, and so forth, while the realistic world—embodied by Kaisa—is the environment in which "same-sex companionship, bisexuality, and polyamory are common practice" (47). In Sidhean, Ash finds a connection to the fairy world which, though queer for many reasons, superficially aligns itself with the possibility of a happy, heteronormative ending. While Kaisa may be the ideal love interest for a queer coming-of-age story, Sidhean is the ideal love interest for a fairy tale.

What makes this relationship so interesting, then, is Ash's negotiation of her feelings for Sidhean. Lo explains that when she began writing *Ash*, "I chose to start with something I thought would be easy: a fairy-tale retelling. I figured that since I already knew the plot, I wouldn't get stuck" ("Reimagining"), yet every attempt at concluding this tale with Cinderella marrying her Prince Charming—in this instance Sidhean—felt wrong. She goes on to state that "it turned out that the main character, Ash, had no interest in Prince Charming; instead, she insisted on falling in love with a woman [...] I tried to make Prince Charming more charming, but it was no use: Ash just wasn't that into him" (Lo, "Reimagining"). However, Ash's desire for Sidhean is enwrapped in natural imagery, which continually refuses traditional descriptions of desire—such as physical beauty or strength—in favour of intangible, natural, and perhaps queer, descriptors. As eco-queer theorist Robert Azzarello argues, the "questions and politics of human sexuality are always entwined with the questions and politics of the other-than-human world" (4); Ash's relationship with Sidhean—and its accompanying influence on her sexual politics—is defined and queered by this natural mediation. Ultimately, the queer possibilities of the forest space and Ash's relationship with Sidhean make room for other queer moments in her "sideways" growth (Stockton 4), including, as we have already seen, Ash's relationship with Kaisa, but also lead us to examine Ash's final meaningful relationship in the text, the pervasive presence of and queer relationship with her deceased mother.

Following in the tradition of the Brothers Grimm version of the Cinderella tale, Lo "pays homage [...] to the matrilineal tradition" by emphasizing the connection between Ash and her dead mother (Zipes 142). Arguably Ash's most important queer relationship, her ghostly mother is continually invoked through Ash's connection with the Wood. Ash's first independent

encounters with the forest space are mediated through her desire to reconnect with her mother, as she enters the forest space attempting to protect her mother's grave:

The wind gusted over her, whipping her hair around her face. The dark pressed against her, and she wondered if her father had given up his vigil because of the weight of the night on his back. She heard the hoofbeats then, coming closer and closer. She thought she saw a faint glimmer of white in the dark Wood, a glow of otherworldly light, like stardust caught behind glass. She was frightened, but she would not leave her mother. (Lo, *Ash* 6)

This encounter is mediated by fear, yet even in this moment Ash finds solace, noting that amongst the terror of wind and darkness, there is the beauty of an “otherworldly”—or perhaps not of-this-world and therefore natural—light. Ash's continual attempts to re-enter the forest space are motivated by her perceived connection to her mother in this space—“Ash could smell the scent of her mother's skin now, and it was the fragrance of the Wood, oak and moss and wildflower” (Lo, *Ash* 74). Ash's longing for her mother keeps her rooted in the past, unwilling to move forward yet unable to fully sever the power the past holds. Yet, her mother also propels her forward, showing Ash how her love of the forest is a steppingstone to her love of Kaisa, thus transforming Ash from a young girl reliant on the ghosts of her past, to a woman freed by the knowledge and strength this past provides. Despite her other explicitly queer encounters in the woods, the relationship with her ghostly mother holds much eco-queer potential, as it roots the development of Ash's sexual politics simultaneously in a known past and an imagined future, forsaking linear time in its facilitation—through the natural space—of moments of queer delay and queer growth for Ash.

Queer Transformations in *Ash*

Ash's ultimate transformation comes about, perhaps evidently, in the forest. Given the opportunity to ride in the hunt alongside Kaisa, Ash calls upon Sidhean—her fairy “godmother” in this moment—to help her partake in the hunt without being noticed by her stepmother (Lo, *Ash* 160). A second wish—to attend a masquerade—comes with additional warning that “the enchantment will be weaker, this time, for you will be farther from the Wood” (Lo, *Ash* 206). However, Lo has already forewarned us that this is no fairy tale, and Ash's wishes must come with a consequence. Wargo argues that because of its explicit queerness, this Cinderella tale raises the question of “cost”—social, emotional, physical—more explicitly than heteronormative versions of the tale. Ash cannot simply be granted her two wishes and assume her place within a happy ending, rather she must pay for her freedom and her happiness. Yet in this cost—or perhaps penalty is a more accurate term—of queerness there is another queer potential. In Ash's world, queerness is naturalized yet not idealized: despite Lo's imaginings of sexualities which shape our “perceptions, experiences and constitutions of [the] world” (Sandilands and Erickson 5) as naturally queer, Ash must give in order to receive.

Through this final transformation, *Ash* once again interrogates the traditional use of nature in YA literature—as an appropriated space for queer formation—and instead normalizes queerness in a way that also enables the protagonist's relationship with the natural world to be dynamic and generative. The forest provides Ash with safety and relationship, and in return she recognizes the forest's relational imperative and repays her debts to Sidhean and the Wood. This can be pushed further as we understand this repayment not as a negative obligation but rather as the fulfilled promise of relationship within the forest. For, in realizing her love for Kaisa, Ash does not reject or despise Sidhean, rather she honours her promise and subsequently wishes to

remember “the fairy who, in his own strange way, [showed] her how to save herself” (Lo, *Ash* 258). For in her natural state, and in a natural space, Ash writes her own queer “happy ending,” one which does not ask her to definitively accept or reject her various queer relationships in order for a resolved future. In Lo’s text, then, Ash’s queer formation is inextricably linked to her relationship with the natural world, which provides new potentials and opportunities for Ash to explore and inhabit her queer subjectivity. This relationality, I believe, operates as a model for the reading of further potentials into queer young adult experiences and spaces in literature, asking us to revisit what we deem “natural” and how queerness may be reimagined within and alongside nature.

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