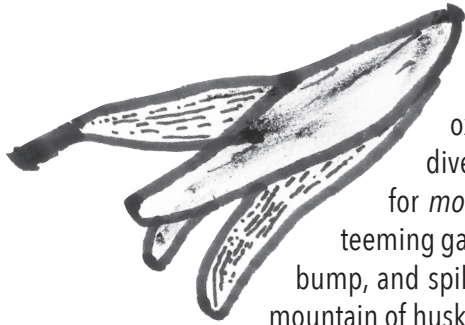


# The Queerness of Compost

Koby Omansky



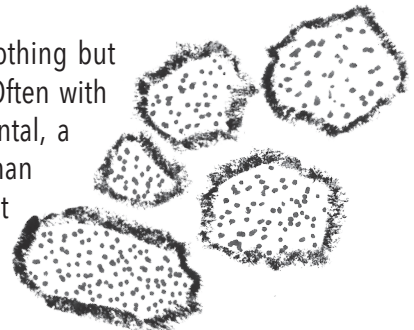
Compost is a pile of organic discard enabled by oxygen and nitrogen to become its own ecosystem, a diverse community rich with life that becomes the base for *more* life. It is 'black gold' from waste – it is the seedy, teeming gay bar off the main drag of town where the outcasts flirt, bump, and spill into each other. A relegation of society's garbage, a mountain of husks and peels responsible for some of the richest art and culture in human history.

Most of us don't really love compost itself, we love what it *does*. We tolerate the wormy damp and loamy stink because of what it gives us in the end: lush tomatoes, watermelons the size of our heads, marijuana heavy with flower. Similarly, society does not love the fruit salad of *us* – it loves the *use* of our refuse. It holds its nose when we draw near, then fawns over the parades and music and lexicon that bloom. Society wants glitter, not filth. It wants Queen, not Freddie Mercury.

One of the most infamous images of the AIDS-era is that of artist and activist David Wojnarowicz's leather jacket, emblazoned with the words "If I die of AIDS - Forget burial - Just drop my body on the steps of the F.D.A." Sometimes our only weapon is the refusal to be hidden from plain view, the insistence on decomposing in public – to not go gently into that good bin.

Compost without oxygen is just rot. Without air, the cultural approach to queerness is much the same. Without visibility, representation, and precedence; queer people are treated as a rot – a thing that has 'gone bad' and may spread to others if they don't keep their distance. In the backyard where they are thrown, the outcasts turn themselves over to get air to the centre. They march from funeral to funeral with banners a city block-wide. "Why do they have to shove it down our throats?" comes the gentile whisper of shock. Because: if we don't breathe, we'll die.

While I associate queerness with resistance, there is nothing but acquiescence to natural law when it comes to compost. Often with elevation and revolution there is a return to the elemental, a 'giving over' to the only process with no agenda other than the continuance of life: nature. In the end, we're all just biomass. In Donna Haraway's 2015 article "Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making



Kin,"she emphasises the crucial intersections of "biotic and abiotic" forces as we become increasingly alienated from natural processes. In a world of climate emergency and refugees of every species, Haraway proposes the dissolution of the boundary between person and fungi: "I am a compostist! We are all compost." The central message of the piece is "My purpose is to make "kin" mean something other/more than entities tied by ancestry or genealogy."

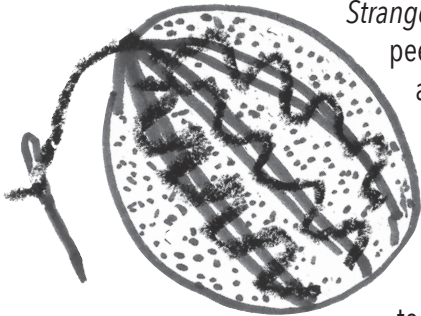
This tension and ultimate conclusion is embodied by Zoe Leonard's *Strange Fruit* (1992-97), an installation piece of hundreds of fruit peels and skins sewed and zipped together with bright string and wire. The exhibit is an exercise in mourning in honour of Zoe Leonard's late friend, AIDS activist David Wojnarowicz. At first, Leonard sought a way to preserve the piece by arresting the process of decay, working with a German conservator for over a year and a half before deciding that to preserve the fruits would undermine the art's intention:

to decay publicly, to allow viewers to experience its death. In a 1997 artist's statement, Leonard stresses that "The very essence of the piece is to decompose." In other words, "time is a co-creator of the work; decomposition is understood not as damage but as process."

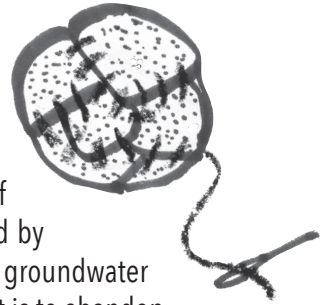
The chosen family, a core tenet of queer survival, is the making of kin as more than ancestry or genealogy. It is a transformation of both choice and inexorable will, the way decay is not a choice but the commitment to the real is – and all things that are 'real' end. Only the synthetic can last beyond time: the Chiquita stickers and red thread still vibrant on the rotting skins. Only after Leonard held the perfectly frozen banana that conservator Christian Scheidemann laboured to get right did she realise she wanted nothing to do with preservation. Change is natural; stasis is usually forced.

The resistance to art that endures in favour of art that is ephemeral is radical in a world where conservation is currency– a permanent piece can be loaned, bartered, and sold. No one gets rich on rotting, only on commentaries on rot. The queers don't get liberation, just museum wings dedicated to their mixed media dreams of freedom.

If we need any further proof of nature as the enemy of authority, we need only look to the ongoing battle for natural burials in the U.S. In most states, 'human composting' is illegal. Despite the massive environmental ramifications – a body must be preserved, contained, and buried on designated land (by paying for it). This is due largely to the Catholic Church's opposition to 'green burials,' which they consider to be an affront to the sanctity of the human



body: "We believe that the 'transformation' of the remains would create an emotional distance rather than a reverence for them," said Steve Pehanich, a spokesperson for the California Catholic Conference. Even as the messiah's body is transubstantiated into the communion wafer in a ritual of ultimate reverence, our bodies are considered to be disgraced by the natural transformation of flesh to earth. By this view, to be a groundwater pollutant is to be honoured, and to become one with the forest is to abandon dignity. So much of what we are taught (read: Euro-Christian hetero-normativity) is centred around the shame and exclusion of what makes us animal.



Despite religious lobbying, as of last month, my home state of New York has officially allowed its residents to become soil through facilities that accelerate the biological process of natural organic reduction. Human remains can become soil before being introduced back into the ecosystem. In a world where things that simply *are* – like decay, Earth, and love – are twisted into moral obfuscation and legal quandary, nature is a riot of existence. To be born and live freely is revolution; to die and rot after is resistance.

If they kill me, don't let them keep me from fruiting with formaldehyde. If I die, let me become fertiliser for a better world. If I live, let it be formidable with love, out in the open beside all things.



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