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SABINE LEBEL

Strolling and Scrolling: On Mycologies and Queer Environmental Futures

I was as seduced by the “going on a stupid walk for my stupid mental health” TikTok memes as the next mentally-ill person trying to survive a global pandemic. I discovered walking in the woods, birdwatching, and foraging as ways to not only deal with my stupid mental health, but also to take a break from increasingly loud anti-queer organizing locally and beyond. During this time, my partner and I adopted the dog of an elderly family member who could no longer care for him. Tiny is a short, jaunty, strong-willed mutt of a dog with a sweet disposition and, as a rural dog, no previous experience walking on a leash. Tiny and I have navigated leashes and trail walking together over the last several years and he has changed my relationship with the woods. Chasing a willful and untrained dog into the woods as he screams at the squirrels that he is trying to murder has slowed me down and gotten me off the beaten trail. Both slowing down and getting off the path are excellent for mental health and for mushroom foraging. Without Tiny’s guidance, I never would have found my first lobster mushroom (*hypomyces lactifluorum*).

Lobster mushrooms are large, bright orange mushrooms that can be found in the Acadian Forest starting in midsummer. They are good beginner mushrooms because they are easy to spot and have no poisonous lookalikes. They have a firm texture, very faint seafood taste, and are delicious in a lobster mushroom roll. What is remarkable about lobsters is that they are created when a fungus invades a white *Russula* or *Lactarius* mushroom rendering them edible. There is something delightful, and also maybe a bit awful, about this fungal transformation. Mushrooms in general seem to evoke these kinds of contradictory responses. Neither plants nor animals, fungi are in their own biological category. As Patricia Kaishian and Hasmik Djoulakian note: “Mycology disrupts our mostly binary conception of plants versus animals, two-sex mating systems, and discrete organismal structure, calling upon non-normative, multimodal methodologies for knowledge acquisition” (4). Fungi eschew binary gender, they reproduce in a variety of ways, they defy easy categorization, and they are often misunderstood and hated. In other words, there is something very queer about mushrooms and their kin.

When I become overwhelmed with fears about the future because of lack of action on climate change and anti-queer and anti-trans organizing, walking in the woodlot, making foraged

mushroom duxelles, and drying goldenrod leaves for tea are fundamentally grounding. These solitary activities provide enormous emotional relief. Often put forward as a way to “get back to nature” or to become more self-reliant in the face of rising food costs and job insecurity, foraging needs to be understood in the larger context of Indigenous sovereignty, histories of colonization, and agribusiness in late capitalism. It can also be politically aligned with neoliberal individualism and right-wing homesteaders, as evidenced in comments from many online mushroom foraging sites and communities. There is a real and overlapping interest in foraging amongst left-wing environmentalists and right-wing preppers. Walking alone with Tiny and learning to forage mushrooms has connected me to a network of queer and trans environmental thinkers who consider these issues on social media, in accounts like Feminist Birders, Black Forager, and Queernature; and in the Acadian forest, through my relationships with non-human intelligences including the dog, mushrooms, and slime molds. Part of what precipitated walking in the woods was seeing an occupational therapist for burnout because of equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) service, especially related to 2SLGBTQIA+ issues. My occupational therapist patiently explained to me the science of burnout and how to better sequence work activities. She told me to work less and walk in the woods more, and she is thus partly responsible for my new relationship with perambulating my aging body through the woods. Living through the pandemic and burnout, I have found myself spending more time both on social media and walking.

Mycologists note that traditional botany methods do not work well when studying fungi because they are overly standardized. Rather, mycologists rely on a “combination of intuition, sensing, and an intimate knowledge of the landscape” (Kaishian and Djoulakian 21-22). Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing refers to the interaction between foragers searching for matsutake (*Tricholoma murrillianum*) and the forest as a dance “pursued through senses, movements, and orientations” and shaped by the region, its histories, and the cultural knowledge of the pickers (241). The best mushrooms are often revealed by getting off the trails, onto the forest floor, and using sight, smell, and touch. Matsutake are often found by tracing bumps on the forest floor with your fingers. This essay adapts the method of the “timed wander” used by mycologists to connect foraging walks with Tiny to ecological crises and the rise of anti-2SLGBTQIA+ hate (Victoroff qtd. in Kaishian and Djoulakian 21-22).

Scrolling and strolling is my adaptation of the timed wander and I use to situate myself and the rural Canadian province of New Brunswick, where I live, in the larger context of kinship relations, community organizing, anti-queer sentiment, and, to some extent, global warming. The timed in the wander refers to how long I can walk on a given day depending on a variety of factors including my schedule, my responsibilities, the weather, but most of all, my body and mind. The timed wander also refers to how I decompress through the forking and unmarked trails of social media. The timed wander is both a check-in and a check-out. In this way, I see the timed wander as imbued with a crip logic that enables mad people to survive in a neurotypical world (see Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha’s *Care Work*). This timed wander is not self-care — that mean, individualistic, neoliberal strategy to keep us all just well enough to be productive to late-stage capitalism. The timed wander lets me check in with some of my favourite thinkers when I cannot leave the house. It connects me to meme intelligence when I

lack concentration. And, when the conditions are right, it takes me to the woodlot, the rail path, and neighbourhood streets. With yearly flooding and forest fires in my region alongside the growth of anti-LGBTQ sentiment and legislation in New Brunswick, Canada and the US, it sometimes feels as though we are living in a constant state of emergency. We cannot outrun these emergencies, but I will be walking through them in the company, protection, and brilliance of my queer kin.

After hosting a series of townhalls for QTPOC students at the University of New Brunswick, the 2SLGBTQIA+ Wellness Coordinator Nadine Violette releases a Call to Action. The report contains damning testimonials from students who have experienced racism, harassment, queerphobia, and transphobia while pursuing their studies. It outlines recommended actions the university can take to improve existing EDI initiatives. (May 2022)

Donna Haraway explains the ways that dogs and humans are “mutually adaptive partners.” She observes: “We are training each other in acts of communication we barely understand. We are, constitutively, companion species. We make each other up, in the flesh. Significantly other to each other, we signify in the flesh of a nasty developmental infection called love” (Haraway 16). My partner and I love Tiny. He is curious, funny, and good company. Some of his behaviours, especially walking, have required research, patience, and time. When Tiny first came to live with us, he had never walked on a leash before. He had been living with an elder in the country and was accustomed to going outside tied up on a long rope so he could visit with neighbouring dogs but not run into oncoming traffic. I had expectations about leash walking that were fully outside of his life experience. We needed to improve our communication.

Humans, including past-me, often believe that communication with animal others is one-way; humans train animals to do our bidding. Anyone who has lived with animals knows this idea is patently false. Haraway explains that interactions between humans and other animals are more complex and fundamentally embodied so that it “depends on looking back and greeting significant others, again and again” (Haraway 27). At first, when Tiny was on the leash he would pull and dash and stop and sniff and pee and change directions. We would shorten his leash and lengthen his leash and cajole and bark commands. Everyone was frustrated. Over time, we found a better collar and leash combination. We found that if we stuck to the same routes, he pulled less and it was more enjoyable for everyone. Around that time, I heard that for many dogs smelling is more stimulating than running, so I slowed my gait and started paying attention to important dog locations. Certain trees and telephone poles need to be sniffed and peed on every walk, but others can be passed. I stopped trying to rush Tiny at critical dog community places and began noticing squirrels before him. I remarked to my partner that it was the dog who was training me. Over time, I started to notice Tiny responding to things that I thoughtlessly said to him on our leashed street walks. He would often bolt at corners so I would say “this way,” more for myself than him. He began pausing at corners and looking up at me, anticipating my “this way!” When I stopped to pick up his poop and he would pull, I would crossly say “wait!” He began to stop and gaze around. To paraphrase Haraway, we began learning how to “look back” at each other again and again and again.

We both began to look forward to our morning walks around the block. He became more patient when I stopped to take photographs. I began noticing unfamiliar birds and plants so I installed bird song and plant identifier apps on my phone. He would get in a long nosy sniff while I identified a song sparrow call. It was on one of our short morning walks when Tiny was being nosy that I found my first dryad's saddle (*Polyporus squamosus*) mushroom growing on a dead hardwood stump in a patch of fleece flower (*Reynoutria japonica*) just off the walking path downtown. A spring mushroom, dryad's saddle has a pattern that resembles pheasant feathers on its cap. (It is also commonly known as pheasant's back.) It gets its name because it can grow large enough for a dryad, or tree nymph of Greek mythology, to use as a saddle. Although they can grow up to sixty centimeters, they are only tender enough to eat when young, under ten centimeters in diameter. One common way to identify this mushroom is its distinct smell of cucumbers or watermelon rind. Even though it is a dense, meaty, and delicious mushroom, dryad's saddle is typically overlooked when foragers get spring fever for the elusive morel (*Morchella elata, esculenta, and semilibera*). Dryad's saddle may be kin to mythological creatures, but they are underestimated by many human mushroom hunters.

Haraway narrates the field work of Barbara Smuts, a bioanthropologist, who studied baboons in Kenya in the 1970s. She discovered that accepted scientific field methods of acting neutral, "like a rock," and blending into the forest confused the baboons and seemed to make them resent her presence, making her research impossible (Haraway 23-24). Humans behaving like rocks do not meet baboon social expectations for other primates, so Smuts began holding her body in baboon fashion and responding to their social cues, such as moving away when a baboon gave her "a dirty look." The social life of baboons is fully enmeshed with the other creatures of their environment, from rocks to trees to humans. My enmeshment is quotidian and domestic. Through my walks with Tiny, I have become more attentive to the "weeds" growing beside the walking path. From the local foraging Facebook group, I learned about Japanese knotweed as an edible plant that tastes like rhubarb. Because it is wildly invasive, it is one of the few plants that can be ethically foraged in large quantities, although care must be taken in disposal so that it does not spread further. Downy woodpeckers, cardinals, and other birds also frequent this old railway line turned walking path. This is not some bright-eyed optimistic suggestion that walking the dog can connect a human with her environment. Rather, it is an accounting of one mentally ill, burnt out, aging lesbian who has found solace and community by starting her day with a walk around the block. With the help of Tiny, the unassuming and often overlooked dryad's saddle became the first edible mushroom that I identified, harvested, and ingested. Like walking, it is a quiet mundane earth magic.

A queer student tells me they came home to find the pride flag in their front lawn had been set on fire. There were burnt fragments all over the lawn and the small iron flag holder had been ripped out of the ground. My student and their partner collected the burnt fragments, carried them inside, and put them in an envelope. Several weeks later they decided to report the incident to the Fredericton Police. The officer told them that the incident does not qualify as a "hate crime" and filed the incident as "mischief." The student decided to name it a hate crime in their victim impact statement. The Fredericton Police never followed up. (October 2022)

We discovered that dog parks are not fun for Tiny because he prefers the company of most humans over the company of most dogs. One day we went for a walk on an off-the-leash trail with human and dog friends. Tiny had never been off the leash intentionally with us before. The elder dog seemed to model off-the-leash dog walking behaviours for Tiny. We had such a good walk that I continued to take Tiny to the off-the-leash trails several times a week. He did not run away, but neither did he run back. He bolted after squirrels and ran into the woods far out of my eyesight. Typically, he did not return in what I consider to be a timely fashion. I became frustrated and worried. Tiny and I entered into a period of lengthy negotiation involving a lot of whistling, cajoling, treat distribution, and yelling on my part. I often had to walk deep into the woods to get him back. I began rewarding him with his favourite treat every time he came back after an overly long triumphant gallop through the woods. When he treed a squirrel, I let him yap, only calling him back after the ecstatic barking waned. The mutual training continued. Stepping off the path brought into focus mushrooms, lichen, and slime molds that were invisible to me mere feet away.

The only way to find mushrooms is to slow down and get off the path. Tsing refers to walking through the woods searching for mushrooms as a dance: “each dance is shaped by communal histories, with their disparate aesthetics and orientations” (241). In *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, she forages for matsutake with Americans for whom the activity connects them with their Japanese and Cambodian heritage and provides income (241-248). Mushrooms are the fruiting bodies of mycelium and they often grow in the same place every year. Tsing describes the “windshield wiper” eye sweep that foragers use to locate signs of mushrooms. She explains how the landscape reveals memories for experienced mushroom foragers: “When one arrives in the spot, the memory washes over one, making every detail of that time suddenly clear – the angle of a leaning tree, the smell of a resinous bush, the play of light, the texture of the soil” (Tsing 244). I return to this slow dance every year in my local park to find to my chanterelle spot. Chanterelles are prized gourmet mushrooms that are delicate, orange, and funnel shaped. Because of their strong mycorrhizal relationships with hardwood trees, they cannot be cultivated, which only adds to their queer mystique.

Christian Cooper has been an avid birder since he was a “queer and nerdy and not particularly popular” child in the 1970s. In an op-ed for The New York Times, he reflects: “I was suffocating in the closet, and birding offered me a way to escape.” He explains that: “One of the things I love most about birding is how it shifts your perceptions, adding layers of meaning and brokering connections—between sounds and seasons, across far-flung places and between who we are as people and a wild world that both transcends and embraces us” (Cooper). Like a mushroom dance, birding requires humans to adapt how we move: to slow down, to get off the trail, to look up, to listen, to be still, and to listen some more. Both foraging and birding ask humans to notice small seasonal shifts in the land and weather, and we are rewarded by communing with a scarlet tanager or eating some dryad’s saddle.

Cooper’s bird dance, to paraphrase Tsing, is shaped by his life experiences, and those of the larger community and country. Cooper is, of course, the Black birder who captured video that went viral of a white woman threatening to call the police on him as he was searching for a

mourning warbler in New York City's Central Park. He notes that: "An understanding of the racial as well as physical geography of our country is often top of mind for Black birders and outdoor enthusiasts. We write our own sort of "Green Book" — the segregation-era travel guide that listed establishments where Black people on the road could hope to find safe lodgings and a meal—keeping a mental map of where we do and don't feel we can bird, camp, hike, climb or simply exist safely" (Cooper). Similarly, Alexis Nicole Nelson, or the Black Forager as she is known on social media, often forages in dresses and full makeup in order to "look [like] the most palatable version of [herself]" and to reduce the risk of being harassed (qtd. in Gravalese). In interviews, Nelson describes foraging as a community practice passed down by enslaved people to supplement their meagre rations during slavery. After the Civil War, she notes, foraging practices became illegal, in large part to keep Black and Indigenous folks impoverished (Gravalese). Systemic racism and colonial legacies fundamentally shape how bodies move across the land.

As a white, cis, middle-aged woman, my queer slow dance rarely elicits more than a curious question or strange look. I do not, however, tend to forage without being accompanied by Tiny or a human friend. According to Kaishian and Djoulakian: "Fungi show us cooperative, alternative, promiscuous, entangled, interdependent, more-than-individuated, and more-than-human modes of living worth studying, imitating, learning from, and which queerness in humans has often shared" (22). It was a human friend showed me how wolf's milk slime mold grows in little round clumps on dead wood while we were checking my chanterelle spot. Wolf's milk defies classification as either a plant or an animal because it reproduces with spores like some plants. It also consumes bacteria and moves in response to food and light like some animals. A plasmodial slime, it lives part of its life as a large single cell but individuals come together for the common cause of fruiting (Fretwell and Starzomski). For those of us queers who find solace in birding or foraging, I think partly what is so liberating is being in queer communion with creatures that are completely outside of human notions of gender, sexuality, reproduction, or usefulness. While I think Tsing was mostly referring to the dances of human foragers, I like to think of the mushrooms, their mycelia, the trees, and other creatures as all part of that dance too.

A queer graduate student comes to me looking for advice because a guest speaker from an anti-LGBTQ church spoke in one of their required classes. After getting all the details, they decide that they will approach the instructor after grades had been submitted. I mentor them through sending an email, doing preparatory research, meeting with the instructor, and debriefing. (April 2023)

"Becoming with" is Haraway's way of describing relations. Human bodies are made up of vast cultures of bacteria and viruses, relations with our human and animal families, and our communities. She notes: "The ordinary is a multipartner mud dance issuing from and in entangled species" (Haraway 32). In "becoming with" Tiny on our walks, we change the woods. He licks dog butts, rolls in dead things, tramples plants as he runs through the trees. I step on plants as I walk through the woods, I carry home leaves, berries, and mushrooms, I uproot plants and then discard parts in the woods. We are loud, barking and whistling, changing the

acoustic landscape of the forest. We are regularly scolded by the squirrels. There are surely microbial and chemical transfers. We are also changed. We are both calmer and stronger than before we started our walks. The bacteria, viruses, and dogs that I am entangled with are the result of centuries of human and nonhuman processes related to the colonial divisions of Mi'k ma'ki over the centuries, including with the introduction of smallpox and COVID-19; the changing infrastructures of travel from river to railroad to highway; and the distribution of land and its designations for resource extraction, human dwellings, or leisure.

The parks we walk in are the result of settler notions of recreation and likely previously logged. They are designated leisure spaces, not intended for human food or medicine gathering. Settler society seeks to catalogue everything and these colonial traces are everywhere. Every season, local foraging Facebook groups warn members not to pick certain species of rare or endangered plants. A favourite is lady's slipper, the delicate, stunning pink or white spring orchid. These orchids were nearly driven to extinction as plant hunters, including Emily Dickinson, overharvested them for their herbariums and collections in the nineteenth- and twentieth-centuries (Humphreys 19). They are slow growing, need specific conditions within which to grow, and can take up to twelve years to reach maturity, even seventeen before their first bloom. They have been plentiful in the wood lot that Tiny and I frequent and knowing this history makes their presence even sweeter.

Another mark of the settler drive to catalogue is the use of scientific names. The practice of using Latin names by the average mushroom forager is widespread, even insisted upon, to ensure clarity about what mushroom is being eaten and to prevent accidental poisonings. I prefer the poetic approach to mushroom naming because I enjoy the stories which serve as a memory aid for me, but have included both in this essay for obvious reasons. Unsurprisingly, it is more difficult to locate the Mi'kmaq or Wolastoqey words for specific mushrooms online. However, the online Mi'gmaq/Mi'kmaq dictionary has the following astute advice in its sample sentence using the words mushroom and mushroom gathering (*letue'get*): "Lgetue'gej wen amujpa welnenuaji lgetu'g" ("If one goes mushroom gathering, they should really know mushrooms").

The late winter woods have a quiet beauty. Fewer humans are out. There is heavy deep snow in the woods that Tiny is too short to walk through so every step is a leap for him. The streams start to melt. Witches' butter (*Tremella mesenterica*), old man's beard (*Usnea*), and all manner of bracket fungi are plentiful. Witches' butter is an orange jelly fungi that grows on trees. It got that name because finding it on your door means that a spell had been cast on your household in European folklore ("Witches' Butter"). It is edible, has very little taste, but an interesting texture. Old man's beard looks like its name—long, pale green or gray, hair-like moss that hangs from trees. It is considered edible after several soakings. More often it is used in tinctures or salves because of its strong antibiotic and antiviral properties. Some foragers advise not to harvest it while it is on a live tree because of their symbiotic relationship, which is good both for the tree and the usnea. Spring storms that bring down trees make for good old man's beard collecting.

In some small way, foraging literally changes you from the inside as you digest what you gather in the form of teas, soups, or preserves. In my case, it changed how I walk, move, and eat. We have a cupboard of small jars filled with dried lobster mushrooms, goldenrod leaves, and old man's beard salve. In the spring, I like to make a mushroom stock with any dried leftover lobsters and fresh dryad's saddle, and whatever else I might find at the grocery store. It feels good to provide mushroom duxelles for a chosen family meal or to leave artist's conks on a friend's front porch. Kaishian and Djoulakian develop Sara Ahmed's "feminist gut" for mycological purposes. They write:

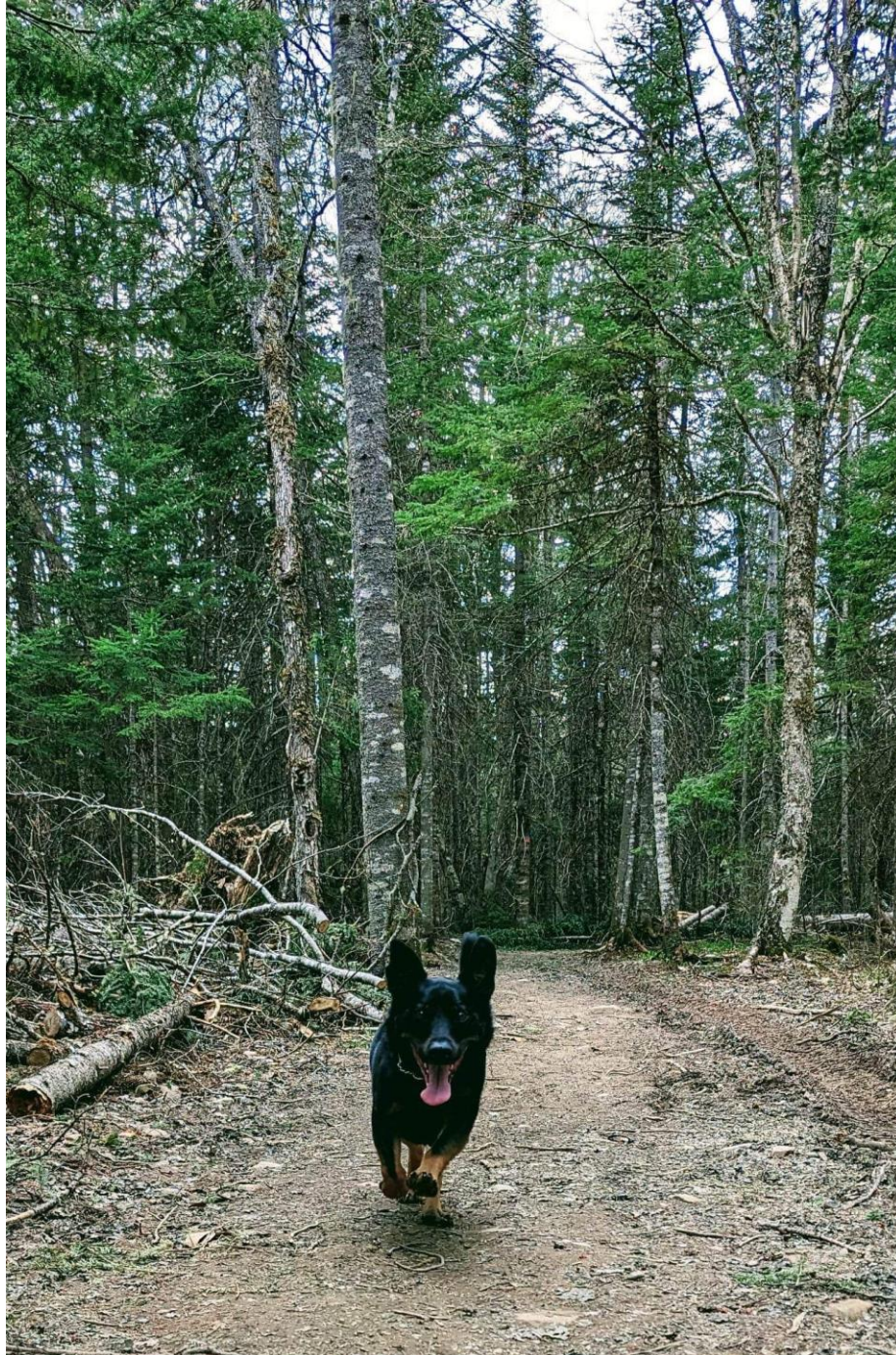
A mycologist's feminist gut demands that intuition, a feminized mode of knowing, be trusted. Fungi, in turn, demand the same of mycologists, and all those who seek to make kin with fungi. Maybe not coincidentally, human guts are home to an assemblage of microbes, fungi and bacteria, that communicate with and impact our brains. (22)

These entanglements are embodied and intimate, and many layered. They take root where they can: in our guts, in our dances, and in our virtual spaces.

Anti-2SLGBTQIA+ protestors descend on a Professional Development Day in the Fredericton area of New Brunswick, organized by Pride in Education to help teachers make sure that school environments are safe for 2SLGBTQIA+ students. Armed with signs calling the teachers "perverts" and "groomers," the protestors manage to convince Premier Higgs and Education Minister Hogan to reassess Bill 713 which had been in place since 2020. The 6-page document lays out minimum requirements for schools to create safe and welcoming spaces for 2SLGBTQIA+ students and was created after many years of consultation with parents, teachers, and other experts. In the aftermath of the protests and counter-protests, Premier Blaine Higgs and Education Minister Bill Hogan have doubled down on the reassessment of the Bill to national outcry from human rights groups. (May 2023)

The situation is ongoing. The queer and trans community is organized and there has been poster-making, letter-writing, fund-raising, protests, and other events. This essay is interspersed with vignettes of the banal queerphobia that are part of the invisible service load of every equity-seeking prof, particularly racialized ones. The Conservative government in New Brunswick seems to be aligning itself with anti-trans organizing across Canada and the United States. Community organizing, attention to the news cycle, and personal safety are part of daily life for many folks with the rise of white supremacist domestic terrorism. There are days when the attack of queer and trans communities feels like a distraction from the lack of policy change in the ongoing emergency of climate change. In the United States, Patti Gonja, an environmentalist drag queen, summarized it best in a tweet where she captioned a photo of herself holding a banner that read "climate action now": "this one's dedicated to all the republicans/church folks i grew up with who tried to groom me to be straight." Queer and trans activists are continuing to make the connections between lack of action on climate change and anti-queer hate.

In this climate, rest and healing are crucial. My solitary walks in the woods are health maintenance and a certain kind of rest, maybe spiritual and emotional. Settler history is littered with white women like me walking in the woods with their dogs, including Emily Dickinson and others overharvesting lady's slipper orchids. For many, foraging is no more than a charming pandemic activity. Having time and space to wander is class and race privilege. It makes assumptions about mobility. For many others, foraging continues to be a lifeline to food sovereignty, culture, and community. The timed wander is intended as an offering to the discussion of rest and healing. It is an invitation to let the wander take over time, to insist on rest, even in the cracks of life. Tricia Hersey, founder of the Nap Ministry, has politicized rest, especially for Black women, in her brilliant and beautiful public rest events. The Nap Ministry Instagram is a gallery of historic images of Black folks sleeping. Her critiques of grind culture and late capitalism foreground the ways in which Black women, in particular, are responsible for the labour that has created and continues to maintain the US economy. She argues: "Besides making us all exhausted, grind culture has also stolen your imagination. Our thinking is very limited because we are deeply disconnected, exhausted, sleep deprived and don't believe we are worthy of anything unless we burn ourselves out to 'accomplish it'" (The Nap Ministry). Fungi are fantastic collaborators and they spark the imagination. In *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*, adrienne maree brown says: "I love to see the way mushrooms can take substances we think of as toxic, and process them as food..." (9). Dogs can also be great collaborators. They force us to walk, to play, to leave the path. Tiny is also a champion at rest and, like most dogs, he sleeps about twelve to fourteen hours a day.



Tiny, champion of rest and entanglement. Photo by Wendy Narvey.

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