

Black Mountain College

MUSEUM  ARTS CENTER

Kudzu is Queer

Evie Horton

Journal of Black Mountain College Studies

Volume 14: Queer Life at Black Mountain College (Fall 2023)

Article URL: <https://www.blackmountaincollege.org/journal/volume-14/horton>

Published online: September 2023

Published by:

Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center

Asheville, North Carolina

<https://www.blackmountaincollege.org>

Editors:

Thomas E. Frank, Wake Forest University

Carissa Pfeiffer, Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center

Volume 14 Guest Editor:

Ant M Lobo-Ladd

Production Editor:

Kira Houston, Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center

Note:

The *Journal of Black Mountain College Studies* is a digital publication, intended to be experienced and referenced online. PDFs are made available for offline reading, but may have changes in layout or lack multimedia content (such as audio or video) as compared to the online article.

Kudzu is Queer

Evie Horton

Kudzu is an infamous invasive species throughout the American South that can be seen draping over trees on roadsides or blanketing entire hillsides with its ever winding and complex vine networks. Kudzu originated in China, Japan, Taiwan and India, and was traditionally used as a food source, to make fibers, in medicines and much more. Even though in the United States kudzu is commonly seen as a nuisance, this was not always the case. Its first known introduction to the country was at the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition in 1876 and later in 1883 at the New Orleans Exposition, where representatives from Japan showcased the vine. The plant was thought to be excellent in providing shade coverage and decoration during these showcases. Many American gardeners and farmers also used kudzu as a cover crop that could restore nitrogen to the soil, and as a feed alternative for livestock. Kudzu continued to grow at exponential rates, specifically in the South, and the encouragement to use the plant in American culture diminished. It was not until 1970 that kudzu was deemed invasive by the United States Department of Agriculture. Once it was demonized, kudzu became known as the disruptor of the American standard for plant growth, as kudzu defied all the societal efforts to contain it.

Similar to kudzu, queerness is viewed as invasive and unnatural by political and religious groups. The term “queer” is not confined to either sexuality or gender, but rather is inclusive of all identities that do not follow cisgender heteronormativity. Queerness is not just a term to describe both sexuality and gender, but also to describe a praxis. It challenges the norms, systems, and constructs that are in place by society, as scholar Sara Ahmed writes in *Orientations: Towards a Queer Phenomenology*, “any nonalignment produces a queer effect.” Leading a queer life means rejecting cisgender heteronormativity, and questioning social constructs. It also means not conforming to societal standards for gender, marriage, and the tradition that the nuclear family is the only support system one can have.

Both kudzu and queerness demand understanding and attention and disrupt our societal standards. Queer folks have been targeted both historically and presently.

Recently in North Carolina, House Bill 808, House Bill 574, and Senate Bill 49 were passed in an attempt to halt the growth of queerness. These laws specifically target transgender youth and forbid the instruction on sexuality and gender in elementary schools, as well as forcing teachers to notify parents when a student changes their name or pronouns. Likewise, as kudzu is sprayed with herbicides and the attempt to eradicate it from American landscapes continues, the attempt to eradicate queerness persists. No matter the treatment, kudzu plants and queer folks are both remarkably resilient, and grow beyond society's capacity to maintain them.

Inspired by its strength and its non-conforming ways, kudzu became a metaphor for which I began my exploration of queerness through my work. Furthermore, Ruth Asawa has directly impacted my perspectives on vessels. I am inspired by Ruth Asawa's hanging wire sculptures and her use of material that forms bodies. Asawa blurred the separation between the inside and outside with these wire sculptures and formed the perspective of one continuous body. She changed the way I view materials and what they can be capable of. Consequently, I launched myself into forming queer vessels made out of kudzu, the most feared plant in the south. By abstracting the concept of my queer body as a vessel for my identity, I have made two sculptures that interact with each other forming the performance, *My Interwoven Body*.

The first, *Breakout Body*, is made from a found TV that I deconstructed – with the help of my professor. The welded steel structure and roots coming out of the TV help support the woven kudzu creature that erupts from it. The TV used in this piece is similar to the one I grew up with. In my childhood, I was not only surrounded by gender roles and heteronormativity, I was fed those messages through the media. The garment, *Fishnet Body*, is a woven fishnet and chains made out of kudzu fiber that I processed. Some of the garment appears to be unfinished, while one part of it extends to the floor. This represents the parts of my childhood and trauma that I have let go and healed from mentally, while other parts I still hold on to and still feel within my physical body. The *Fishnet Body* allows my emotional body to be worn on my physical body, thus erasing the separation between the two and allowing my body to encompass the fullness of its queer identity. *The Interwoven Body* performance acknowledges the social constructs of my childhood that I felt forced into and the trauma that my body still

feels. The influence of the media was interwoven into my emotional body, and was then projected onto my physical body.

As I have gotten older and grown more comfortable with myself, I broke out of these expectations of who I felt I was supposed to be and am replacing them with who I want to be. Ruth Asawa transformed space into a continuous body and defied limitations. With her work as inspiration, I transformed my trauma into woven sculptures that interact with my body and the space around it, reflecting the growth of kudzu and its ability to transform landscapes. With each kudzu fiber tied to the fishnet I am reminded of the fullness of my body: the trauma that lives within me, my ongoing growth, and my inextinguishable queerness.



Photograph of the artist wearing *Fishnet Body*, 2022.



Evie Horton, *Fishnet Body*, 2022. Hand processed kudzu fibers.



Evie Horton, *Breakout Body*, 2022. 42 in x 36 in x 40, welded 1/8in steel rod, sheet steel, lamp hardware, kudzu vines, deconstructed CRT television.



Details from *Fishnet Body* and *Breakout Body* (2022).



Stills from the performance *My Interwoven Body with Fishnet Body and Breakout Body* (2022).



Stills from the performance *My Interwoven Body* with *Fishnet Body* and *Breakout Body* (2022).

Bibliography

- Ahmed, Sara. "Orientations: Toward a Queer Phenomenology." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*. Duke University Press. Vol. 12, no. 4, 2006. pp. 543-574.
- Eskridge, Anna E., and Derek H. Alderman. "Alien Invaders, Plant Thugs, and the Southern Curse: Framing Kudzu as Environmental Other through Discourses of Fear." *Southeastern Geographer*, vol. 50, no. 1, 2010, pp. 110–29. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26225593>. Accessed 27 Aug. 2023.
- General Assembly, North Carolina. House Bill 574, An Act to Protect Opportunities for Women and Girls in Athletics, *necleg.gov*, 2023, *North Carolina General Assembly*, <https://www.ncleg.gov/BillLookup/2023/h574>. Accessed 27 Aug. 2023.
- General Assembly, North Carolina. House Bill 808, An Act to Prohibit Gender Transition Procedures for Minors, *necleg.gov*, 2023, *North Carolina General Assembly*, <https://www.ncleg.gov/BillLookup/2023/H808>. Accessed 27 Aug. 2023.
- General Assembly, North Carolina. Senate Bill 49, Parents' Bill of Rights, *necleg.gov*, 2023, *North Carolina General Assembly*, <https://ncleg.gov/BillLookup/2023/S49>. Accessed 27 Aug. 2023.
- Published on the occasion of the exhibition *Ruth Asawa: Citizen of the Universe*, organized by curators Emma Ridgeway and Vibece Salthe. *Ruth Asawa: Citizen of the Universe*. New York, Thames and Hudson, 2022.
- Vaccaro, Jeanne. "Felt Matters." *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory*. Vol. 20, No. 3, 2010, pp. 253-266, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0740770X.2010.529245>. Accessed 27 Aug. 2023.