

# WILDNESS

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**IN A NEW** book titled *Wild Things: The Disorder of Desire*, I develop a critical vocabulary to access different, transdisciplinary ways of thinking about race, sexuality, alternative political imaginaries and queer futurity and extinction. Wildness in no way simply signals the untamed frontier, or the absence of modernity, the barbarian, the animalistic or the opposite of civilization. Rather, in a post-colonial and even de-colonizing vein, it has emerged in the last few years as a marker of a desire to return queerness to the disorder of an unsorted field of desires and drives; to the disorienting and disquieting signifying functions it once named and held in place; and to a set of activist and even pedagogical strategies that depend upon chance, randomness, surprise, entropy and that seek to counter the organizing and bureaucratic logics of the state with potential sites of ungovernability.

I make the case for considering modern sexuality as a discursive force that runs in several directions at once – toward the consolidation of self within the modern period, away from the rituals and prohibitions of religious belief and toward indeterminate modes of embodiment. In terms of what Michel Foucault (1985, 101) has called “the history of sexuality,” queer bodies re-enter the symbolic order through a “reverse discourse” where they fashion both classification and rejection into selfhood. The term that medicine used to pathologize non-normative sexual desire, in other words, “homosexual,” now becomes the route to acceptance. This is an *incorporative* model of sexual definition. Another model of sexuality

links sexuality to nature and produces natural and unnatural forms of desire. This *ecological* model looks for connections between environmental ethics and queer politics (Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson 2010). This model is often invested in space, terrain, and geography and tethered to oppositions between rural and urban areas that then give rise to concepts of “eco-sexual resistance” (Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson 2010, 21).

But sexuality has also been cast as a *post-natural phenomenon* and I join with this project by adding the notion of a disordered or wild desire to the post-natural sense of a proliferating set of desires. After nature, desire is profoundly cultural and barely connected at all to 19<sup>th</sup> century narratives of the natural. We are in need of new lexicons for the forms of desire and the shapes of bodily legibility and illegibility that currently make up our post-natural world. And so, the category of “wildness” will stand for the order of things that we have left behind, the anticipatory mood that accompanies all claims of coming after something, and the unknown future that, for now at least, still beckons from the horizon. Wildness is all at once what we were, what we have become and what we will be, or even, what we will cease to be in the event of post-natural climate collapse. And while those who want to go into the wild almost always operate in bad faith, others spin wildness into an orientation to the void, an ontology “beyond the human” as Eduardo Kohn (2013, 41) puts it, and a disorder that reminds us of a time, in Adele’s words “before the world fell at our feet.” But wildness is not simply the opposite of order, nor the intensification of the natural. Nor is wildness a conventionally defined political project oriented towards disturbance; wildness is the absence of order, the entropic force of a chaos that constantly spins away from biopolitical attempts to manage life and bodies and desires. Wildness has no goal, no point of liberation that beckons off in the distance, no shape that must be assumed, no outcome that must be desired. Wildness, instead, disorders desire and desires disorder. Beyond the human, wildness spins narratives of vegetal growth, viral multiplication, and dynamic systems of non-human exchange. But in the realm of the human, a colonial realm within which the human functions as a sovereign power, the terminology of the wild has been a disaster.

Wildness, indeed, has simultaneously provided the lexicon for massive systems of violence and the justification for the removal of native and Black peoples. Wildness, in other words, has historically been weaponized and has provided some of the language for what Sylvia Wynter (2003) has called the “coloniality of being.” Within this structure of being, Wynter proposes, bourgeois humanism produced an imperial order of “man” dependent upon a series of foundational hierarchies all organized around an exaggerated sense of the power of colonial masculinity. This power, furthermore, expressed itself through seemingly neutral formulations of power – order, law, social stability – while actually constituting entire groups of people as irrational, unstable, and violent. Wynter writes (2003):

[I]t was to be the peoples of the militarily expropriated New World territories (i.e., Indians), as well as the enslaved peoples of Black Africa (i.e., Negroes), that were made to reoccupy the matrix slot of Otherness – to be made into the physical referent of the idea of the irrational/subrational Human Other, to this first degodded (if still hybridly religio-secular) “descriptive statement” of the human in history, as the descriptive statement that would be foundational to modernity. (Wynter 2003, 266)

Where a coloniality of being invests the colonial explorer with the god-like qualities of creativity, omniscience, and benevolence, so a system of racialization ascribes everything else to the peoples to be colonized. Wildness takes its place within this new order of being and, in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, could be relied upon as shorthand for the supposed savagery of indigenous peoples, and specifically their “savage sexualities” as Kanaka Maoli scholar J. Kēhaulani Kauanui (2018) puts it. These “savage sexualities” in a Hawaiian context, Kauanui claims, were actually alternative formations of desire and kinship but were cast by missionaries as evidence of “backsliding into ‘heathendom.’”<sup>1</sup> Wildness was also part of a set of alienating languages used to justify slavery. For this reason, working with wildness as a concept risks animating long established discursive connections between native peoples and wildness on the one hand and black people and wildness on the other.

In earlier periods, wildness was less of a racial term and more of a description of states of being against which social norms could be established. Wildness, as Hayden White (1986, 151) comments in an essay titled “Forms of Wildness,” belonged to a class of “self-authenticating devices,” like “heresy” and “madness” which, according to him, did not simply describe a state of being so much as “confirm the value of their dialectical antitheses.” And so, wildness, he proposed, particularly in pre-modern thought, lent value to the term *civilization* while defining through opposition a negative terrain and value, a state “hostile to normal humanity” and a way of being defined as “passionate and bewildered” (White 1986, 165) because not constrained and ordered. But, how does wildness function in a modern context and can it be anything but the opposite of a supposedly positive, indeed normative, value to which it lends weight? I argue that wildness can escape its function as a negative condition and can name a form of being that flees from possessive strictures of governance and remain opposed to “normal humanity.” I offer another account of wildness within which it functions as a form of disorder that will not submit to rule, a mode of unknowing, a resistant ontology and a fantasy of life beyond the human.

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## NOTE

1. Kauanui (2018) writes: "A range of sexual practices drew sustained attention and caused alarm among missionaries and eventually Hawaiian chiefs. [...] Prior to Christianization, Indigenous practices were diverse and allowed for multiple sexual possibilities." Missionaries "also crafted severe penalty regimes for those caught 'backsliding' into 'heathendom.'" Though Kauanui reads as very different archive than I do – she is concerned with the legal archive of Anglo-American colonization in Hawai'i, and I am drawing upon Anglo-American modernism, the language of the wild, the heathen, and untamed possibilities abound in both contexts and around the same time.