

# Queerness in the age of surviving climate change

EMILIE A. KOSTECKA

## ABSTRACT

This essay looks at Elizabeth Weinberg's book *Unsettling: Surviving Extinction Together* through the lenses of interconnectedness between communities, understanding of the role of queerness in the fight against climate change, and the importance of understanding just how connected everything on this planet is to everything else. Through personal reflection, photos, consideration of current events, and shared memories, the writer looks at Weinberg's work as a call to a better future with the hope of prevailing against problems of white supremacy, climate change, and human turmoil through the lessons being taught by the youth.

## TURNING POINT

Our planet is at a turning point within a turning point, a crossroads within the interglacial. We have a choice of what we will become, but I'm not sure we're prepared to make it (Weinberg 2022: 29).

The publisher, Broadleaf Books, describes Elizabeth Weinberg's *Unsettling: Surviving Extinction Together* (2022) as "a new way of thinking about climate change—one that is rooted in queerness and antiracism."

*Unsettling* explores human impacts on the environment through science, popular culture, personal narrative, and landscape. Using the stories of animals, landscapes, and people who have exhibited resilience in the face of persistent colonization across the North American continent, science writer Elizabeth Weinberg explores how climate change is a direct result of white supremacy, colonialism, sexism, and heteronormativity. (Broadleaf Books 2022: par. 3)

Throughout the Weinberg's book, we are presented with a collection of environmental case studies and a variety of interdisciplinary topics which showcase just how universal the themes of nature are. Weinberg draws upon a diverse set of case studies, including how melting glaciers impact the world through both rising sea levels and a loss of access to ice cores and the information they hold (pp. 34–35), the last known thylacine dying in a zoo in Tasmania and the history of how this species' extinction was hastened by humans (pp. 87–89), and the removal of sea lions to help restore salmon populations before fully understanding how their removal would impact the broader ecosystem (pp. 159–160). There are times when, reading through her work, you will be chasing her thoughts as she reflects on times throughout her life where nature has played a role, and the even bigger way in which how she identifies (as queer, white, a feminist, etc.) has affected those times. This helps contribute to Weinberg's central idea of interconnectedness and the reason why, she argues, we must reconnect to the planet and each other.

We are not so different from the busy network of organisms feasting upon a whale carcass at the bottom of the ocean. We rely on the things and beings around us while we simply try to make sense of what role we might have.

Weinberg flexes her creative ability by taking large—and, one might consider, scary—topics, such as the extinction of animal species and the deep impacts of racism, and narratively writing about them. Weinberg does an excellent job making the text accessible to non-academic audiences. This helps introduce the field to readers outside of academia and provides an access point to other excellent writers with unique perspectives—such as Samantha Powers and James Worsley, both of whom focus on equality in outdoor recreation using academic writing and studies. It may be

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Forest in Big Hole, Montana, 2022 EMILIE KOSTECKA

hard to understand that social justice and climate change are one and the same battle, but Weinberg makes this idea easy to digest as you jump from the role an organism has in an ecosystem to queerness in nature.

What is most interesting, though, is that she is very clear-cut in connecting the issue of climate change with white supremacy, capitalism, and the “sins” of humanity’s past. While this idea may not be new in some academic fields, within the field of outdoor recreation and land management it is refreshing to get this and get it from a queer point of view—especially one that is so open to identifying how unexamined existing privilege has shaped conservation.

Queerness has, within itself, both a sense of *otherness* and belonging. The US Supreme Court decision *Obergefell v Hodges*, which requires states to license and recognize same-sex marriage, is only eight years old, and its stability is constantly threatened by politics and the other court decisions. There is always the feeling that at any moment queer legal equality can be stripped away from us, and you can feel that throughout her work. Yet, the sense of belonging within the queer community is highlighted in her work as well. You can see where she comes into herself once she understands her queerness, and how she finds love and joy through it.

I find myself in a similar situation to that of Weinberg. I am a queer woman, which does pose threats of violence and prejudice from others; though I am a white queer woman, so there are privileges I have compared to others in my community. Weinberg, who also is white, doesn’t shy away from this idea. Instead, she takes it and uses it as a jumping-off point to reflect on how and why she can

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enjoy the land the way she does. This also positions the books as a means to help support other academic work done by Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) writers who touch on the very same topics as informed by their firsthand experiences and research.

She divides each chapter into themes that will drive the conversation. Each chapter has a similar layout, beginning with an introduction to a history she has with a specific type of nature, whether it be tundra or ocean. From there, she looks at a related animal issue, and the way we connect this to human history or pop culture, before wrapping it all together in a bow. Some chapters work around diverse issues, and you aren't exactly sure how they will connect to one another. Yet in the end it all makes sense.

Her interdisciplinary technique really highlights exactly how interconnected the issue of climate change is with issues of race, civil rights, and everything in between.

The depth of research and the lack of gatekeeping is also deeply refreshing on each page of *Unsettling*. On topics such as climate change, there are times when writers can get bogged down in academic jargon and similar issues, making it next to impossible for those with little knowledge of the topic to jump into the work. Yet that is not the case for Weinberg. Her background and interest in a variety of topics, as sad and depressing as some are, let her present them easily to all. I believe the true feat of Weinberg's work is that there is a sense of relatability throughout it. As I read, I reflected so much on my ideas about conservation, privilege, and my place in the queer community. The personal connections and reflections she provides throughout allows you to understand exactly how place-based conservation topics connect to the topic of climate change and how that can be a starting point to talk about ideas such as white supremacy, racism, and other issues.

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In the end, this is what matters. Weinberg makes understanding the connectedness between each other, climate change, and social justice easy to read and easy to understand, both for a seasoned reader on the topic and a novice. The book is something that can be recommended to students, friends, family (chosen or from birth), and everyone in between. The ideas are universal, even when they reflect the tales and questions of a queer woman as she experiences the outdoor world and reflects on the issues it presents as humankind deals with the future of climate change.

On this note, I believe it's important I use the rest of this article to reflect on myself and how my own queer experience has many similarities to hers. Inspired by Elizabeth Weinberg, I look inward and assess my own connections to nature, to the queer community that has brought me so much joy, and to my own journey understanding collective action in the age of climate change.

### **STOP AND REFLECT**

Every day I feel as if I am watching the world burn around me. I have only been on this earth for 26 years, but it feels like there is always some disaster happening. Images of oil spills contaminating our planet, the extinction of animals, violence and hate towards African Americans, guns being used on queer individuals in places that we thought were safe—seeing all of these, I can't help but feel like the “ship is sinking.”

Animals are dying, plants are dying, people are dying, and the planet is dying.

I was deeply reminded of these feelings, this pain, as I dove deep into the book. They are reminders of how we have turned our backs on, not just the animals and plants on this planet,





Wild bighorn sheep near Challis, Idaho, 2022 EMILIE KOSTECKA

but also on each other. However, I'm also reminded of the collective memories and deep connections we all share. So many of Weinberg's stories remind me of my own stories, memories, connections to nature, and optimistic hope for this planet.

Summer of 2022, I drove from southern Indiana to Challis, Idaho. A 27-hour drive through the Plains of middle America. I was on my way to start working with the Bureau of Land Management as a park ranger and I was excited. So many of my academic mentors had worked with the federal government in land management and had made a difference. I wanted to do that. I wanted to see mountains taller than any other mountain range I had ever seen, to smell sagebrush, to be part of a larger-than-life land management agency, to camp under the stars, to see wild animals that I had only ever seen on TV and in movies. I was simply an outdoor recreation enthusiast heading to a place that many consider America's outdoor recreation playland.



I remember on my way across, I looked up issues happening in Idaho. I had little knowledge of Idaho at the time, besides its connections to potato farming. After some searching, I found myself on an Instagram page of young students in the Pacific Northwest who were protesting for the removal of dams on the Salmon River. Youth Salmon Protectors, young people from all over the Pacific Northwest, joined together in climate activism. They saw the injustice that existed, both for the rights of salmon and with respect to the claims that multiple Indigenous groups have with this river. This river was more than water, more than a river. I recognized their fight—hell, I agreed with it. We were killing the salmon population and had a deep history of killing off the Indigenous Peoples to control resources. Save the Salmon River, Save the Salmon, Save, Save, Save. It was a fight that was easy to get behind, a rallying cry, as I drove into new uncharted territory.

The fight may have been easy to get behind, but being in Idaho was hard. I was a queer woman in a long-distance relationship, far from home, and even farther from friends. There were no queer groups in Challis. Challis is a town of about 1,000 people, a blink-and-you-miss-it sort of town between Stanley and Salmon, Idaho. Much of the town had large Trump flags displayed all over. I felt unwelcome, from being both a government employee and queer woman, though my queerness wasn't easily identifiable. Sure, if you looked at my water bottle, you would see Pride flags all over, but if you didn't notice it, I was passing. This didn't provide me with a lot of relief, I was still worried. I was queer, I was the “*other*.”

I sought shelter from these fears and worries in nature: the expansive nearby national parks, the small bits of nature throughout the rural town, the animals roaming through the neighborhood I lived in, the Salmon River, and the

Salmon River by raft, 2022 EMILIE KOSTECKA



nature in the rock I kept in my pocket as I drove the government truck around Challis. Nature was around me and it provided me with safety, an escape from those who would have—had they known—hated me for a part of my very existence.

**Because these potentially diverse spaces are not recognized as valued habitat, they are often weeded or mowed if they are managed at all.**

I knew I was privileged in these thoughts and in my deep connection to nature. Outdoor recreation resources have historically been designed with the needs of white middle-class Americans, such as myself, in mind. I was the expected demographic in outdoor recreation spaces and there was some security in that. I had the privilege of never feeling out of place. Nature would be my great safety blanket.



**I'm currently in graduate school.** By the time this article is published, I will have earned my Master of Public Health with a concentration in Parks and Recreation degree from Indiana University. I study the positive impacts that nature brings, both in building community and health. I look at what impacts our current ideas of recreation and who has influenced them. The idea of outdoor recreation is hugely impacted by a white male-dominant point of view. Rafting on the Salmon River, picnicking near the river, and camping near it were something that was seen as normal, for example. The ways that Indigenous Tribes have interacted with this land, though, have always been seen by white people as “other” or “different.” Their ways are considered not the “correct” way to interact with nature. Though, are they? Indigenous Peoples have been interacting with this nature, the Salmon River for example, for so many years. Collective traditions, memories, and histories exist here for them.

There is this idea that we can interact with nature only in one way: the “right way,” or the “white-male way.” We, white people, have largely erased other ways in which humans historically have interacted with nature. We often view these different ways to connect with nature—and, indeed, nature itself—as “other” or even “wrong.” However, this way of thinking ignores the intersectionality of social identities and experiences in and with nature. Rejecting this kind of binary thinking is a necessary step toward creating a more inclusive and equitable relationship between all people and nature.

This fight against the binary has always been a core value in the queer community. Queerness has always been outside the “norm” of society, being viewed as the “other,” as not quite fitting in with the rest of society. Even with different elements of legal equality still fresh, there is still this otherness. People are still getting killed because of their identity, people are still losing family because of their queerness, and queerness is still the “other.”

So, the fight continues. It evolves into demands for representation and in the continuing conversation about the importance of queer community. I think of Dylan Mulvaney and Pattie Gonia on social media, fighting for queer visibility through their respective TikTok and Instagram photos. They fight against the binary every day, using kindness and their respective talents. We have also seen similar conversations within other communities, such as racial minority communities and disability communities. It's a fight for rights, a fight against the “us” versus “them” model, a fight for inclusion, a fight for a seat at the table. It's all a fight against the binary.

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This fight also extends to climate change. Understanding our role in climate change is critical in fighting for the rights of each other and all nature around us. We are

just as much a part of nature as the grass on someone's lawn, as the mountain lion deep in the wilderness, and the sky around us. There is no "us" vs. "them." We are all part of nature; we are on nature's spectrum, just like we look at the spectrum of sexuality by Alfred Kinsey. It's all a spectrum of belonging.

This idea isn't just seen in the queer community; instead, it is a lesson being taught by many marginalized communities. There has always been this call for action to come together, all communities, and be intersectional. I feel as if now we are seeing the youth rise. They are looking at different ways of knowing, connecting to each other, helping connect communities, and showing that we need to come together to save each other. They have learned the lessons of many communities, such as the queer community, and are taking those lessons to a wider audience to help ensure we all have a future. The fight against climate change will be, and must continue to be, intersectional. Climate change is disproportionately impacting many marginalized communities. It's happening so quickly. We can't wait anymore. The youth can't wait any longer. Laws are changing that are removing rights and young people are fighting tooth and nail against climate change. There is no more time left to spare. *The youth are fighting for us all.*

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**Throughout my travels in Idaho and the rest of the Northwest,** I saw firsthand the youth breaking the idea of binaries and of taking intersectionality to climate change movements. Young people now view spectrums and connections that many others still don't recognize. They see the injustice and are coming together because they know that we are all connected; that we all come from the earth and will eventually go back to the earth. They see the collective traditions, memories, and understanding of the nature of Indigenous People as something to uplift and guard from the effects of white supremacy and capitalism. I know many young queer individuals, such as myself, who are part of organizations that look at interconnectedness and interdisciplinary actions to fight against issues of climate change, white supremacy, and everything in between.

Queer communities, and other marginalized communities, are still fighting for their rights. They are also helping create a strong foundation of solidarity for generations to come. Stories of queer elders, queer individuals, and queer survivors of hate and injustice are spreading and inspiring the future. This reminds me of a quote from the book: "We have to be the ones to force the change. It can't just be some of us, and the change can't just be a tiny shift. We have to be our own heroes" (Weinberg 2022: 37).

Young people all over this country, all over this planet, are trying to make our future better. They are trying to make the outdoors equitable. They are trying to save the planet. They protest, march, petition, rally, and vote. Maybe we will make it. Maybe the future is bright. Maybe we can come together as one. We might succeed.

#### APPLYING LESSONS FROM *UNSETTLING* AND QUEERNESS

We have to learn to grieve for this planet and everything we've done, to let ourselves cry for the orcas and the sea lions and the coyotes and the rivers and the mountains (Weinberg 2022: 169–170).

*Unsettling* calls for us to recognize the pain that we have caused to the earth and all those who inhabit it, and to fight against it and look for the possibility of a better tomorrow. We are all interconnected, and we must understand that white supremacy and capitalism are our enemies as





View from Logan's Pass, 2022 EMILIE KOSTECKA

we look to fight against the rapid encroachment of climate change. It is killing us, all of us, and the planet we inhabit. It's erasing deep historical and spiritual connections and communities, all while destroying places and organisms older than the snapshot in time that is the history of humankind.

While young people have taken up the heavy task of starting the fight, everyone must continue it as a collective. Understanding intersectionality, and fighting for it, has always been foundational in queer communities as we fight against the binaries of society. Intersectionality is the future of the fight against climate change. As Weinberg shows us, it is also the foundation for our understanding of ourselves and the world around us. It's time to find solidarity in each other as we rally. It's time to take the lessons from *Unsettling*, and from our queer communities, and use them to realize our dreams for the future.

I want to know that in our future—next year, next century—those sounds won't turn to silence (Weinberg 2022: 171).

## REFERENCES

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