

Audio file

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Transcript

Chloe

Thanks for joining me today, SK. I just wanted to start with asking a little bit about yourself, why you've come to Queer Natures.

S.K. Marley

I'm a creative writer wannabe, interested in pre-history and the sort of unknown grey zone spaces of that place. Coming at it from a sort of trans non-binary perspective and Mostly just because in my own experience, happening upon these things really felt valuable for me as a person with that identity. So it felt like something I could share. And I've been friends with Ina, the project owner, for a long time, and she knew I was writing a novel for young readers. which explored loads of this stuff. It was set in where one of these objects is from. And I guess out of that, we talked a lot. And then when this project came up, she invited me to take part. And at first I was like, I have no idea what I'm going to do. But then it did form over a really fun phone call.

Chloe

Today we went out. We're in kind of deep Devon. And today we went out and you guided us around the kind of campsite that we were at that has a quarry and then has a really lovely valley. which we stood by as well. So what is your kind of relationship to the landscape that we were in today and how did it make you feel?

S.K. Marley

When I'm out and about on my own in landscapes like this, I feel natural, quote unquote. And that's actually quite an important feeling when, you know, if you're a trans non-binary person, you're kind of consistently told that that's not what you are. So it felt really important to me, this project at Transscapes is primarily, at the moment, gonna be aimed at trans participants. And so it felt really important to me that, you know, going into places of quietness and where the noise of sociocultural attitudes and prejudices aren't present, it can just remind you that you're just an animal. It doesn't really matter what that looks like, and we belong here. So I wanted a landscape that felt somewhere we could actually be absorbed in and absorb ourselves, have a relationship with through the session, but also little patches of that landscape, the quarry full of water, we could hear sounds of dripping and water

trickling, and the animals that came with that, with our lovely frogs and ducks, and then the wider expanse of the hills, because they both represented different periods of British landscapes that were relevant to what we were talking about. So it just helped us picture and maybe time travel a little bit to those times.

Chloe

Yeah, and could you share a little bit more about the kind of history and the kind of ancient artefacts that you brought to the session as well?

S.K. Marley

I would love to. So the first artefact I bought was the starkar antler frontlet, or a headdress as some people call it. It's a little replica that's been made by the wonderful ancient craft. Check them out. They're basically the first object I ever found that started this all off for me. And I just, I remember going into, I think it's the Cambridge Anthology and Anthropology, I can't even remember what it was called, but something like that, museum. And I saw these headdresses. And they're basically just, they are modified by people from one of the earliest ages we have evidence for in prehistoric Britain, from the Mesolithic, the Middle Stone Age. And they are modified deer skulls. And there's elements of them that make us feel that they've been made to be worn as headdresses, so we don't really know that for sure. And so what on earth were people doing, wearing those? Why? And then also, they were all treated in a certain way after whatever their use had been had passed, all deposited into the same bit of water next to the settlement where people were living. And that's really fascinating. And instead of it being like, they've been useful, let's get rid of them now, which was a major narrative in archaeology for a long time. Actually, it seemed really intentional that these specific objects that helped people kind of almost become more than human, you become a bit of a deer while you're wearing that. It was intentional to put them in a landscape that was also a bit of two different things at the same time. You know, water bodies in land is a contradiction, right? And so there's something in the space of being two things at once, or being neither, or like having blurred boundaries between being a human being and a deer, and then putting these objects into a place that's both water and land. So that's the first one. Yeah. And then we time travel to the Iron Age, which is a really different landscape in Britain. We've got farming now, people have settled permanently in places, and loads of the trees have gone. But we still have a really big wetland-based landscape in the lowlands. And the object I bought there, which also represents a really interesting play with non-duality, but in more specifically sex and gender ways, were god dollies. So these wooden anthropomorphic figurines that have interchangeable or ambiguous or both sets of quote unquote binary biological sex markers, which is really, really interesting. And again, these objects were deposited into wetland spaces, landscapes of blurred, blurred lines. And this was a time where that we think

people had a way more sort of social hierarchy, gender roles, and all of those things, but there's still this persistent thread from what is a 10,000 year gap between the Middle Stone Age, the Mesolithic and the Iron Age of something in between and there being some sort of power to that. And we think wetlands were seen as a sort of almost like a gateway to a spiritual place for these communities in very different ways because they're really far apart in time but there's something there about spirituality and non-dualism.

Chloe

And for me as a kind of participant in the workshop today... learning about this history, being embedded in these different landscapes, the quarry, and then out into the kind of open kind of fields with the valley, just kind of really brought home these interconnections to kind of land and nature. And also the ways in which kind of queerness as we know it in the contemporary, obviously, through your talk, you have made it quite clear that we can queer prehistory, but we can't assign queer identities to the people that lived during that time, but kind of bringing it all together just felt a really kind of satisfying and nourishing experience. And then, so after that, could you talk a little bit about what we then came into the yurt and did?

S.K. Marley

Yeah, sure. And thank you. That's also wonderful to hear. So we came into a yurt, which is a lovely circular space, and we sat in a circle and we popped the replica headdress on a log in the middle. And basically just kind of closed our eyes and sort of sank into ourselves a little bit and just sat with or explored or just played with all the stuff we had just sort of talked about. And then using a sort of creative writing inspired technique, I guess, sort of shifting our perspectives from ourselves, our modern day, but also our bodies and what we think of as being a person. to these much more fluid historical times. Like, what would life have been like if you were an animate headdress celebrated for the fact that you're an in-between thing, or a ruse car figurine, or a god dolly with various biological sex markers that means people had made you on purpose to be uncategorisable. and they saw some semblance of spiritual hope in that. So you're made by the community for the community and it's something to be proud of, the fact that you are not in that category sort of space. And I, as a person, have felt very moved by that sort of thinking because it allows me to step out of my maybe like body trauma or identity trauma as a trans non-binary person, where all the time, all we're hearing, particularly at the moment, is anti-trans narratives in the mainstream media, just, you know, the classic scapegoating, whatever. But right now, we're the target and the main key phrases. that we're unnatural and we're new and trendy, that kind of an attitude. But these headdresses were made 10,000, 11,000 years ago by people who valued the exact qualities that we're now demonized for. And I think that is very empowering to step into outside of

ourselves. And I liken that to authorship. As a writer, You often write what you know as subject matter, but you have to step outside of your own personal experiences in order to access your character's experiences, you know, and build those stories. So there's an element of like being a witness to your character's world, still knowing them emotionally, intimately, but also stepping away. So you can witness. And I wanted to create that stepping out. a space where we can step out of the ***** that we live in at the moment in order to actually just possibly maybe reframe something about who we are.

Chloe

My question was going to be what do you want people to take away with them but what... you're kind of saying there is that you want people to be in this space fully to kind of experience maybe somewhere that is bounded and safe and able to explore these things whilst also taking yourself out of maybe yourself to explore different characters. And it makes me think about the ways in which the kind of queer community might use role-playing and Dungeons and Dragons and that kind of thing as ways to explore like queer identities and that kind of thing. And that really offers a playful but I don't know, really... It's like, it's not authentic because obviously you're playing a different character, but it just allows you that kind of exploration, that discovery. So is that what you're kind of wanting to take away? Or is there something else that you've not kind of talked about that you're looking to kind of get people to think about or take away with them?

S.K. Marley

Yeah, that really is it. And actually, that's a really good point. I mean, like dystopian sci-fi genre in fiction at the moment, it's absolutely exploding from queer authors because you shift a stage And suddenly you're able to shift the cultural baggage that comes with it a little bit, at least for that period of time. It's not going to fix everything, but it is going to give you maybe just this little crack of light, which is like, oh, but what if it wasn't like that? And that's like the classic line you always get in counselling, right? Like you've got this narrative, you've got this story. Well, what if it wasn't like that? And you're like, oh, what? Oh, there's alternatives. And then there's a part of, there's something freeing in that. So I guess it's just even if all people do is go away after coming to this workshop, if they've had one little moment where if they have absorbed that transphobic narrative, as a lot of younger trans people are, it's very evident across a lot of social media spaces just how difficult people are finding being alive as trans people right now. it gives you this alternative, this opportunity to go, that's a story. That's actually just a story. It's not the truth. Just like this antler headdress, we don't really know much about the people who made it, but we can think of a story that empowers us, right? And storytelling is... Storytelling can be

harmful. It can also be really liberating and joyful. And I think choosing that you have agency, to some degree, the stories that you believe about yourself.

Chloe

Exactly, and I think the people in power obviously tell stories that kind of serve their purpose, their wealth, all of that kind of thing. And at the moment, you know, trans people are used as that scapegoat in order to serve a kind of, yeah, a purpose around kind of capitalist colonisation. Expectations from all the other stuff that they're doing, basically. Yeah, yeah, yeah. Yeah, and this whole session was kind of really impactful on me as well, thinking about these god dolls as those kind of agents of kind of transformation or transgression. And yeah, it was really great to be in the space today. So obviously, this workshop you did today at the Queer Nature's Retreat was a kind of pilot, a way to test ideas, to have a conversation with the other people in the room to see what worked, what didn't work. What do you think you'll take away with you that you'll kind of replicate? And what do you think were some challenges that you still think need fine tuning or tweaking in a sense?

S.K. Marley

I think I learned from Lakshmi's wonderful talk about facilitation in general, that you can show up as a person. You know, it doesn't need to be this authoritative, two-tiered hierarchy thing between facilitator and participants. That was really helpful because so much of me is in this project, right? and I don't need to be perfect, but something that is still a challenge and something I was aware of before, but maybe felt most because we were doing it, we were actually doing it together, was the responsibility. Because if trans people, if any participants come along and they have a difficult relationship with their bodies, and then I'm asking them to embody something that is in between us and celebrated for that, that can go two ways. That can actually be grief-inducing, because that's not the truth for us at the moment. So I think learning really carefully about how to hold that, maybe tweak that activity, I don't know, but that's something I still need to work out because it is such a delicate space. I also learned practically, like it's so much easier to have different types of landscapes nearby. I think originally I wanted this big old hike over a huge boggy wasteland because I love hikes over a big boggy wasteland. And I assumed, of course, because bogs are queer, everybody would love that. is not actually, it was so much nicer to have slow paced meandering where people could talk or not talk, look at things or not look at things. So that's nice. And I want to keep that and definitely have an indoor space for the activity afterwards where we can relax and feel cosy and feel safe and held, you know. Your previous question, something you said, what else did you want to get out of it or participants? I think that's something I missed out. I want people, particularly people who struggle with feelings of belonging and feelings of belonging in ourselves to our bodies, I mean, to just have a space where

they can exist harmoniously in nature. Quite a lot of trans, particularly young trans people, are scared to go into communal outdoor spaces alone.

Chloe

Yeah.

S.K. Marley

There's stats about that. That's so sad when so much of what we're told is good for us is getting outside, getting the vibes of nature, quote unquote nature. You know, so, well, what if that feels dangerous? to you? What if you need community in order to have the audacity to be visible outside? So I'm hoping there's also that element. There's a sort of like, we are safe together. These people understand some of your experience. You don't have to explain yourself, but you can also trust that this is as much of a safe area as it could be. And by being outside and noticing things, like we used a little bit of ecotherapy techniques at the beginning of sort of sinking into the landscape, just noticing around us. When you're having a tough mental health day, it can be really hard to escape your brain, right? So just giving the opportunity to be still and listen and look and one moment of not thinking about what on earth is going on in your own mind. And that helps you reconnect to your body in a way that has nothing to do with gender and nothing to do with being trans. And I think that is something I really want to be a part of it as well. It's like we are animals. Doesn't really matter what our junk is. And when we're with other trans people in a space that does not judge you, I think that's just, that just becomes believable.

Chloe

Yeah.

S.K. Marley

Yeah. And that's nice, isn't it?

Chloe

It takes the pressure off as well. Yeah, you just can be in that space. We were talking about that at the end, weren't we? Just letting ourselves be, not thinking we have to constantly do, maybe do gender, perform the gender identity we want to be perceived as, but rather than just be an animal, be a human in that space. And I think that's a really powerful thing that you're going to invite communities to get involved with. And yeah, I'm really excited to see how this develops and how you'll take the things that we learned today and take them forward. So thanks so much for speaking with me.

S.K. Marley

Thank you.

