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Becoming a free dandelion
Exploring rebellious cuirnaturecultures through the creation of
an online safe place with cuirs in the Andean Ecuador during
Covid-19 times

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Abstract

Siento que se está escribiendo una historia que yo no pude escribir (Alex, 2020).
(I feel that a history that I could not write, myself, is now being written)

This *cuir* paper narrates the stories of six *cuir* bodies in the Andean Ecuador, who co-*cuired* art and cyberspace, during the *cuir* times of Covid-19. This paper moves away from mainstream forms of knowledge production. It presents instead a *cuir* way to do research in which we become *copensantes* (cothinkers). This term represents our decision of collectively reflect, feel, experiment and be rebellious. Based on the stories we shared in our co-created online safe place, and through the queer ecology (QE) framework, this paper contributes to disrupt the culture/nature divide and its resulting natural/unnatural distinction used to justify the rejection and violence against *cuirs* in Ecuador. I situate this discussion by unpacking the construction of femininities and masculinities in this context, the ways they are abscribed on *cuir* bodies and their implications. Finally, I explore the personal and political dimension of *cuir* art, that by travelling across the cyberspace, are depicted in this paper generating contagion through new *cuir*naturecultures. In this paper, we generate noise and motivate the reader to rethink with us the possibilities of going beyond the binary of masculinity/femininity; to reflect with us about the right of *cuir* lives to exist; and to embody with us a *cuir* meaning of freedom.

Keywords

Cuir, online safe place, *copensantes*, art, *cuir*natureculture, Covid-19 times, Ecuador.

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Acronyms

FPE	Feminist Political Ecology
ISS	International Institute of Social Studies
QE	Queer ecology
SP	Safe Place (Method of research employed in this paper)

Becoming a free dandelion

Exploring rebellious cuirnaturecultures through the creation of an online safe place with cuirs in the Andean Ecuador during Covid-19 times

1 Welcoming the reader

How to 'read' a queer/cuir paper?

This paper seeks to generate empathy, a cuir sensitivity, that can invite the reader to embody the experiences and emotions of living as cuir. For this reason, this RP cannot only be read, it needs to be sensed and embodied.

Allow yourself to experience the emotions that these stories might generate on your body. Take the opportunity to identify them and allow yourself to feel them.

Take some time to contemplate the artistic expressions that this RP presents. Dive into the details, the colours, the contradictions they bring. Let them talk to your soul.

This paper employs terms that have become part of our daily lives, during Covid-19 times. Confinement, lockdown, restrictions... Pay attention to these words and to the sensations they might produce on your body by reading them.

A cuir paper is not compatible with restrictions. The word limit did not allow many stories to be part of the document. Please, give yourself time to visit the appendices and learn more about the cuirs who reflected together throughout this paper.

Finally, if you do not identify as queer/cuir. I invite you to find your inner cuirness, what locates you at odds of the so called 'normal' and 'desired' in society. Please take this, and its resulting emotions, with you throughout this paper. Let your cuirness inform the way you understand these stories... We all have a cuir part that has been confined in the sake of fitting in a restricted world. This is an opportunity to explore it with us. Let's embody the feeling of becoming a free dandelion!

1.1 What is this research about?

Figure 1
“I’ll shout it out like a bird set free”



Source: Alex, SP, 2020. Available at:
<https://www.dropbox.com/s/mwpo66s2ybqzq7b/Alex%20dance.mp4?dl=0>

When the music starts, Alex is motionless waiting for the beat that will trigger his movement. Showing his back to the camera, he faces the only visible door. In the meantime, we can observe his setting. What seems to be the living room of his house, was about to become his scenario. Due to the position of the items around him, we can notice that this room was not built to host his performance. He had to make some space to allow this expression to occur: he queered/*cuired* this room.

The walls that before appeared to be a possible limitation for his expression, become his allies. He employs them to impulse himself from one side of the room to the other. He makes the apparent restrictions of this space part of his performance. The intensity of the emotions that motivate his movements escalates in synchrony with the song. After some seconds, the sensation of being trapped, and all its derived emotions, have been transmitted to the audience, making each of his spectators feel related to his experience. Despite of the pixelated and flat image through which we see him dancing, pain, despair and tears are now under the surface. During his entire performance he seems to be looking for an exit. He tries to reach the doorknob, transmitting the hope that ‘outside’ there is more space for his expression. Even in the restricted space of this room, he found the possibility to move, feel and explore, which makes us wonder how would his fullest expression look like if he could be ‘outside’ and become a “bird set free”¹, just as the name of the song he dances.

¹ By Sia.

This video was extracted from one of our SP² sessions in which we discussed about the (un)natural distinction and its employment in the Ecuadorian context, to label/allow/silence certain bodies. Before dancing, Alex said: “the more natural thing are bodies”. This was a powerful statement, coming from a body that has been labelled as ‘unnatural’, and whose wounds originated from not ‘sufficiently’ conforming with normative ideas of masculinity and sexuality. Alex’s statement, his powerful dance, and the abnormal circumstances of the global outbreak -when the boundaries between the natural and unnatural blurred- raised many questions. What makes ‘unnatural’ what we, as queers/*cuirs*, so ‘naturally’ feel? Which ideas are informing these conceptions? Why expression and freedom were so present in our conversations, becoming even the central theme of Alex’s dance? How do we, as *cuirs*, understand these terms? And which possibilities have we, just as Alex, found to express, move and *cuir* the spaces/places within which we live?

These questions were at the center of the conversations maintained among six *cuirs* -including myself-, or *copensantes* (co-thinkers), as we decided to call ourselves. Reflecting on these topics implied intimate and painful stories that we could share in the SP. As you can see, Alex’s video captures the conditions under which our encounters took place, and how the online environment felt like. During Covid-19, I was not able to travel to Ecuador, as I had originally planned, so that our SP had to be online. In chapter two, I reflect further about the methodology and method that informed this paper.

Based on our reflections within the SP, in chapter three, I will employ the queer ecology (QE) framework to problematize the social constructs of femininity and masculinity that are conceived as the ‘true nature’ of women and men in Ecuador, upon which oppressions and violence against *cuir* bodies rest. I will reflect on how these constructions shape interactions at home; and the consequent emotions and feelings experience by *cuir* bodies. I will close the chapter by bringing stories about the realities faced by these bodies during Covid-19 times, which are as diverse as our subjectivities. Although Alex’s dance produces relatable feelings, such as the despair and anxiety that confinement generates, living different cultures as well as different natures, shaped our realities in different ways, even if we were facing the same virus. In this paper, I seek to shed lights on these particularities.

During our conversations we notice that we, just as Alex, found forms to make the restrictions part of our “performance”. Our wounds informed who we are nowadays and the ways that we see and interact with the world. Our *cuir* histories allow us to rethink nature and the (un)natural, and to contest the dominant ideas that have limited us. Thus, in chapter four, I will bring some of the artistic expressions created by the *copensantes*, discuss the personal and political dimensions of art and explore the queernaturecultures they propose as well as the possibilities to rethink masculinity and femininity, the right of *cuir* lives to exist and the meaning of freedom.

I conclude by reflecting about my main learnings and proposing themes that might require further exploration. This discussion is guided by the

² Paper method. See chapter two.

following research question: what is the role of art and nature in the expression of *cuir* identities in Ecuador during the Covid-19 outbreak in 2020?

1.2 A brief history of being cuir in Ecuador

Cuir history in Ecuador is very recent, not because *cuirs* did not exist, but because they were silenced as well as the murders and rights violations committed against them. Around 1986, activism for LGBT rights started to gain the public attention, without much actual success. On June 1997, this struggle acquired a different dimension when 100 people were unjustifiably detained in the club *Abanico*, located in the city of Cuenca (Ávila 2018). A known hairstylist, nicknamed *Nacho*, was sexually abused and decided to publicly denounce it (Wambra Radio n.d.). In fact, stories of abuses from the police and the society in general were not a novelty. What made this one different was its public denunciation. This event triggered national protests for LGBT rights. From this rage the organization Coccinelli emerges.³ Coccinelli led the national mobilizations and signature recollection to decriminalize homosexuality in Ecuador. They were particularly supported by feminists and heterosexual allies, due to the existing stigma that is ascribed to *salir del closet* (coming out of the closet) as homosexual (Garrido 2017: 26-28).⁴

These efforts materialized on November 1997, when Ecuador decriminalized homosexuality, delegitimizing any violent act against non-heterosexual people, committed either by public forces (police or army) or by citizens. Subsequently, and with the increasing activism of LGBTQI+ organizations, the Ecuadorian legal framework continued incorporating rights for this community. For instance, the Article 66 of the Constitution of 2008 ensures “the right to make free, informed, voluntary and responsible decisions about sexuality, and life and sexual orientation” (OAS 2008: 30). On 2019, Ecuador became the fifth Latin American country legalizing same sex marriage after Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay and Colombia (Registro Civil Ecuador 2019). Despite of this apparent progress resulting from the long history of activism and resistance undertaken by the LGBTQI+ community, queer bodies continue to be conceived as ‘unnatural’ and face daily discrimination and violence.

This mobilization is now known as LGBTI movement, but before only the terms gay and homosexual were used to refer to any person who did not conform with the normative ideas of gender and sexuality (Garrido 2017: 28). Although in Spanish, the term queer does not have a negative connotation, I do believe that the complete rejection to it is not a smart strategy to contest the heteronormative system. I employ the term *cuir* first because the ambiguity of this word (Whittington 2012: 158) allows us to move away from specific labels and its limitations, still stressing that these bodies do not conform with “normative or dominant modes of thought” (ibid 157). Additionally, according

³ Alberto Cabral, founded and named the organization in honor to the French actress and singer, Coccinelle, who decided to change sex despite of social prejudices; and who visited Ecuador in the 70's.

⁴ *Salir del closet* is a common expression in Spanish whose connotation coincides with “coming out of the closet”.

to Trujillo (2016: 5) *cuir* serves to situate the struggles, to decolonize the term, and to reclaim the “latinamericanization” of “queer”, all without disregarding the political history of the term “queer”. Thus “*cuir*”, “recognizes the epistemological point of departure, while also acknowledging its insufficiency to speak from the global South (Chernysheva et al. as cited in Trujillo 2016: 5). In fact, our Andean-Ecuadorian identities and subjectivities are informed by particular ways of conceiving family, space, time and nature, that I seek to highlight in this paper, without overlooking to other knowledges, but rather create a “dialogue between both geopolitical positions” (ibid).

1.3 Meeting the *copensantes* of the SP

This paper is built on the stories shared among six people (including myself) who are part of the very small circle of *cuir*s that I have met in Ecuador, due to my reduced exposure as *cuir* in my community.⁵ I reached to these particular people thinking about diversity and art. We decided to call ourselves *copensantes* to contest the dominant forms of doing research and empathizing that within the SP we allowed ourselves to have a voice, to feel and think together.

Even if our stories are diverse, we share many similarities that were the base of our connection within the SP. We are all from the Andean region of Ecuador, which exposed us to similar cultures and natures. Besides, our family interactions are informed by values and practices of small cities. We all have already come out of the closet with our families and are navigating different levels of support/restrictions. We self-identify as mestiza(o). And although we feel strong affinities to the indigenous or the afro-Ecuadorian histories -due to different circumstances of our families’ or our own histories- our challenges of living as *cuir*s are not shaped by the struggles confronted by these communities.

⁵ Further developed in Chapter two.

Figure 2
Meeting Néstor



Néstor is twenty-seven years old and identifies as gay. He was born in Ambato and currently lives with his parents and brother in Quito. He works as a professor in a project implemented by a non-governmental organization in Ecuador. His family is from Loja, a city located at the south of Ecuador. He enjoys drawing, literature and photography. I met him eight years ago, after I moved to Quito to pursue my bachelor studies. We studied the same career and some years later we worked together in the Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock in Ecuador. Néstor supported me since the beginning of my struggle to come out as pansexual. Three years later he came out of the closet, and we found a stronger connection. We worked together for a Facebook page called "El Closet es para la ropa, no para las personas" (Closet is for clothes not for people), that is currently a civil society organization in Mexico. Activism has always been a connection in our friendship. His force and hope have highly inspired my political action.

Source: Author, pictures retrieved from Néstor's Instagram account, 2020.

Figure 3
Meeting Nicole



One of my closest friends in college considered that introducing me to "another lesbian", as she said, would help me to deal with the tough process of coming out of the closet. In this way, I met Salomé and her partner, Nicole. She is twenty-eight years old, and identifies as lesbian (although she prefers the term gay). She was born in San Pablo and currently lives with her partner in Quito, working as a doctor on call. We know each other for three years now during which we have marched together in the streets of Quito, and raised our voices for feminist and LGBTI+ causes. She loves poetry, reads it since her childhood and writes it since her adolescence. I feel grateful to Nicole for teaching me that voices can shout in paper.

Source: Author, pictures sent by Nicole, 2020.

Figure 4
Meeting Alex



Alex is thirty years old and identifies as gay. He was born and currently lives in Quito, his father is from the south of Colombia and her mother from Tulcán, a city located at the north of Ecuador. Although he graduated from the school of medicine, his passion became his profession and works as a dance teacher and choreographer. I met him almost two years ago, as we were hired by the Quito Municipality to dance together. His sweetness and passion for dance inspired me from the very first moment I met him. He shared with me some stories regarding his yearly performances in the pride parade. To my surprise, I had seen some of them. I met his resistance before even knowing much about his struggles, as this SP later allowed me to do.

Source: Author, pictures retrieved from Alex's Instagram account, 2020.

Figure 5
Meeting Alejo



Alejo is thirty-three years old. He was born and currently lives in Riobamba with his grandmother, mother, aunt, two sisters and brother. He works as a graphic designer. He feels passionate about music, plays guitar and loves to sing. We were born and lived in the same city, where the reduced number of inhabitants allows people to easily know each other. One common friend spoke to me about his talent as singer and musician which motivated me to follow his Instagram's profile. Two years ago, he published a post about his decision to undergo hormonal treatment to adjust his gender identity to his body. His regular posts about the challenges and emotions that he experienced during the process caught my attention. He was very brave to come out and live his sexuality in a city where I have not had the courage to come out yet. His digital expression motivated me to learn more from him and invite him to join the SP.

Source: Author, pictures retrieved from Alejo's Instagram account, 2020.

Figure 6
Meeting Carlos/Lilith



After inviting Alex to participate in the SP, he talked to me about Carlos and his drag Lilith. Driven by my curiosity about the drag scene and Lilith's picturesque Instagram account, I decided to reach out to Carlos. He was very keen to participate. He saw this, as a way to continue his already experienced path of activism. He is thirty-four years old and identifies as gay. He was born in Ibarra and currently lives in Quito with his partner. He works as a university professor, practices theater and enjoy different kinds of body art. He created Lilith, his drag, as his artistic platform to denounce heteronormativity, and oppressive discourses around religion, class and race.

Source: Author, pictures retrieved from Carlos/Lilith's Instagram account, 2020.

Figure 7
Meeting Ximena



I am twenty-six years old. My family come from Tixán, a small town located in the countryside, near to Riobamba. I enjoyed music in all its forms. I sing, play ukulele, and dance. I develop further my story and positionality in chapter two.

Source: Author, pictures retrieved from Ximena's Instagram account, 2020.

1.4 Main concepts informing this research

This paper is mainly informed by the contributions made by FPE and QE scholars that seek to break the existing divorce between the study of gender/sexuality and nature. This approach suggests that there are no biological groundings to explain the gendered understandings of, and responsibilities for, nature but they “rather derive from the social interpretation of biology and social constructs of gender [and sexuality]” (Rocheleau et al. 1996: 3). Disrupting the separation between nature and culture allows me to unpack how meanings and conceptions of bodies and sexuality are constructed (Mortimer-Sandilands 2005: 3) and to problematize social inequalities and violence against queer bodies that rest upon the natural/unnatural distinction (Stein 2010: 286).

To this end, this paper employs the concepts of socionature and natureculture. According to Nightingale (2017: 1), society and environments are intertwined and produce each other in a process of co-emergence, in fact their boundaries are a construction of how we think about them. In using the term socionature, it emphasizes nature as a social construct (ibid), “an empirical fiction” (Whitehouse 2011: 59), that is profoundly linked with culture and what we imagine it to be (Nightingale 2017: 1). Additionally, I employ the concept of naturecultures, proposed by Donna Haraway, that also contributes to disrupt the existing “binary opposition and hierarchy of nature and culture” (Harcourt and Bauhardt 2019: 9-10) and look instead at how these concepts as mutually informed and “co-producing each other” (ibid). Through queernaturecultures (Bell 2010: 143) I then analyze the construction of socionatures in relation to sexuality and dominant heteronormative discourses informing nature, sexuality and the body. This paper highlights the political dimension of queernaturecultures, or cuirnaturecultures in this case, to contest these discourses.

I would like to sound a note of warning: that the theory that informs this research is mainly formulated by Western scholars. For this reason, I employ the concept of place, proposed by feminist geographers, to situate the natural/unnatural distinction in the specific context of the *copensantes*, with subjectivities⁶ that are determined by the place they were born and raised (McDowell 1999c), the Andean region of Ecuador.

Additionally, I use bodies as a concept to challenge the “often taken-for-granted notions about the nature of our bodies” (McDowell 1999b: 35). I see body as the material place through which we experience the world and where memories, knowledge, violence and resistance reside (Harcourt and Bauhardt 2019: 11-12), and thus, as the first place where the (un)natural discourses of gender and sexuality are ascribed and policed, where our wounds emerge. For this reason, in this paper I pay attention to how experiences, resistances and cuirnaturecultures are embodied. Through embodiment I seek to show the

⁶ According to Nightingale “the ‘subject’ is constituted by power, both power over and the power to act” subjectivity then “refers to the discursive processes through which people become subjects of states or other types of authority” (2013: 2366).

fluidity of the body that becomes and performs specific practices and emotions, in specific time and space (McDowell 1999b: 39).

Finally, *cuir* art plays several roles in this paper. It represents a language within the SP, a form to express the *copensantes*' subjectivities and a tool of contestation through which new queernaturecultures emerge. In all cases, the employment of the term *cuir* is not limited to describe who performs it. As Halperin suggested "queer", or "*cuir*" as we used it here, also describes a position, "whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant... it demarcates not a positivity but a positionality vis-à-vis the normative" (in Whittington 2012: 158). And thus, *cuir* art is a political expression in itself.

2 Cuiring research: creating a safe place (SP)

I decided to join the Sexual Diversity committee at the beginning of my studies at ISS. Creating and participating in a safe space within this committee, I now realize, marked an important moment for my future research process. The people who I just met for few days became my strength to deal with all the challenges that living abroad and being *cuir* imposes. We created honest connections based on empathy and respect, and most importantly, we gave ourselves permission to show our vulnerabilities.

Given the level of intimacy, trust and sensitivity that this topic requires, I decided to replicate the safe space as a method of research, which brings an opportunity to go beyond traditional research methods of ‘subject and object’ and build a space of empathy, connection and healing, where silenced voices can be raised. Building a collective safe space implied co-construction and taking ownership of the space. It implied becoming *copensantes*, a term that we chose because it implies agreeing to think and feel together.

In this chapter, I discuss how feminist epistemology informed this paper, I present my positionality and the process of construction of the SP.

2.1 From where am I writing?

This work adopts a qualitative collaborative approach and includes some elements of ethnography in order to explore meanings, feelings and emotions by posing questions about everyday struggles (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). The ethnographic sensitivity, mostly applied during the SP sessions, favored my understanding on the relationships, practices and processes that produce and reproduce (Cerwonka 1995: 14) the existing heteronormative social structure.

The research process is informed by feminist epistemology (Harding 2005) and contributes to the reflection about the limitations of the conventional understanding of objectivity, particularly its inability to perceive the existing power relations that not only inform society and its dynamics, but also the process of knowledge production (*ibid*). Ignoring our positionality and assuming our ‘neutrality’ during research only makes us complicit of reproducing dynamics of exclusion and marginalization (*ibid*). Thus, theorizing about the world becomes an immense responsibility that we need to navigate carefully.

For this reason, I attempt to contest the uneven glances of objectivity (Harding 2005), first, by producing theory from the voices of the marginalized, second, by acknowledging the complexity of our identities without aiming to generalize our experiences, and third, by understanding my position as subjective and fluid.

In order to build this research from the narratives of *cuir* people, I adopted a collaborative approach. Although the character of this paper did not allow me to apply a full collaborative approach (from its design to its writing process), due to time and authorship restrictions, I attempted to incorporate collaborative features in key stages of this research, as elaborated further

below. This allowed me not only to shed light on those that have been excluded by the dominant heterosexual discourse but also to recognize *cuirns* as reflective agents and open up space to participate in the process of knowledge production (Skarohamar and Whittle 2019: 62). By doing this, rather than being a tool of “dominant groups in their projects of administering and managing” (Harding 2005: 222), knowledge production can also represent a form of resistance.

For this reason, and informed by feminist geographies, I decided to use the word ‘place’ very deliberately as a theorized concept in this work rather than space. While the cyberspace can be understood as what Massey (1994a: 168) would describe as “a simultaneous coexistence of [digital] social interrelations”, the SP that we created was intentional, delimited and political. It was formed by the particular interactions of six *cuirns*, in a particular time and a particular location, the Zoom session -that we might even compared to a room-, whose social interactions are unique and particular and “will in turn produce new social effects”, i.e. creating a place of mutual recognition and curring the cyberspace, among others.

This research does not intend to generalize the forms in which cuirness is experienced in Ecuador. On the contrary, the term *copensantes* points to situated, contextual and intersectional (Rose 1997: 305) subjectivities as we navigate our cuirness in different ways. Producing such situated knowledge is an act of love and care; two important values for this work. It also represents my intention to be faithful to our stories and their particularities. In this sense, the paper speaks about the particular experiences of the six *cuirns*, which are read not from a ‘neutral’ position but through our collective subjectivities.

However, as the author, particularly in the context of writing out the method, I have “the final power of interpretation” (Gilbert 1994: 94), therefore my own identity needs to be distinctly situated even as I am too part of the ‘we’ as a copensante.

2.2 Meeting the author of this text

I was raised in Riobamba, a small city located at the center of Ecuador, where sexuality was conceived as taboo and homosexuality was a synonym of travesti, transsexual, transgender, deviant.⁷ In my experience, only few people were brave enough to come out of the closet and confront these discourses and, very often, the resulting physical and emotional violence. They and their families were openly criticized and repudiated and this violence was socially accepted and even supported.

This was my background when, after turning seventeen years old, I travelled to Belgium to spend one year as an exchange student. To my surprise, two of my classmates identified as gay and lesbian, as they openly said to me when we first met. I felt sorry for them and even a little horrified for their openness. I shared this feeling with another classmate. He laughed and stated that he did not see any problem with their sexual orientation. This event

⁷ Cross-dresser

triggered a new question on me: “Why would it be wrong?”. For a first time, I problematized what I was told about the ‘naturalness’ of heterosexuality.

When I went back to Ecuador, I moved to Quito, the capital city, to pursue my studies in International Relations. My previous experience and the critical thinking of my studies helped me to continue problematizing, not only gender but also sexuality. Definitely, feeling attracted to a woman was a turning point in this process. My closest friends in Quito did not take this as a big issue, although their body language still revealed a difficulty to completely accept my cuirness. Riobamba, on the other side, was a different challenge for me. As a single child of a single mother, I decided to come out with my mother at the age of nineteen. When this happened, her personal history, religion, class and age, informed her reactions, which were very painful for me, and for her. Her background made her construct my sexuality as a mistake in her parenting role, a result of the absence of a masculine model in the house, and something that needed to be fixed. I cannot imagine the pain that she must have felt at learning that her only child, of whom she was always so proud, had come to her with such a difficult revelation. She decided to remain silent about it, even with our closest relatives. It became an unmentionable topic in our house. I had to hide a big part of myself in order to ‘conserve’ our relationship.

Living in Quito, allowed me certain freedom but I was still very restricted to live my sexuality openly. Receiving painful comments and expressions of disgust in the streets were regular episodes. Yet, I was a very active online activist, by using pseudonyms and asserting myself behind the anonymity I shared my writings about my unspoken loves and my ‘unnatural’ desire in social media platforms.

All of this is to say two things about my positionality. First, my openness and political activity is very recent (since living in The Netherlands). And second, these struggles generate a strong feeling of empathy through which I read and understand the experiences and stories of the *copensantes*. My experiences derive from the layers of my identity, and thus create a particular standpoint in this research. As a mestiza, born in Ecuador, middle class, twenty-six years old woman, coming from an urban setting and being a single child, among other specificities of my identity, I experience specific, non-generalizable struggles. At the same time, I have the privilege to spend one year in Europe as a teenager, to move to the capital of Ecuador to study and now to pursue my master’s degree in The Netherlands.

The fluidity and shifting character of my identity, or as Rose (1997: 314) describes it, an “un-centered, un-certain, not entirely present, not fully representable” self-complicated my process of self-reflexivity. For instance, experiencing partial and total lockdowns, informed differently the ways that I perceived the *copensantes’* stories, i.e. sometimes being more sensitive with the emotions of feeling trapped, and thus, emphasizing them in my narrative. Several times, I found myself going back and forward with my reflections, contradicting myself, problematizing my assumptions and hesitating. Following feminist epistemology guided me on embracing my subjectivities and allowed me to be honest about them. It also reminded me on the importance of producing knowledge with the people, and so to engage in new conversations

with the *copensantes* and collectively decide what should or should not be said⁸. Deliberately deciding to interact as a ‘participant’, or rather a *copensante* was therefore for me a mechanism to acknowledge and embrace the impossibility of ‘detaching’ from my subjective self when producing knowledge.

2.3 The language of stories and art

when you directly hear from the person who lived that situation,
it changes your perspective (Alex, SP, 2020).

This research is built on stories and their political value. According to Wiebe (2019: 33) stories represent an “intimate approach” to research the political character of personal experiences. It is not only a mechanism to highlight that “community-members are the best experts of their own life-worlds” (ibid 34) but it is also a strategy that allows to depict the way reality is perceived by who narrates it (Willemse 2014). The employment of certain words and body expressions in stories is not innocent. Through storytelling, experiences are “actively reword, both in dialogue with others and within one’s own imagination” (ibid 40). This work recognizes the political value of stories and locates their embodiment at the core of this research.

Figure 8
“A place to flourish together”



Source: Néstor's drawing, 2020.

This work recognizes the diversity of forms to narrate stories (Knowles and Cole 2008) as well as the different preferences of the *copensantes* to express themselves. For this reason, art expressions often became a language within

⁸ See fourth stage of the method.

our SP. As mentioned by Alex, through art “we portrayed our essence, mind and soul”. This not only allowed us “to get to know each other in a different way” but also to let “our imagination and creativity to transmit our emotions and sensations”. In fact, art allowed us to articulate emotions, experiences and their embodiment in ways that oral expression did not, just as Alex’s dance at the beginning of this paper.

Even if the forms of expression offered by art are diverse, what allows me to speak of art in a broad sense is their “common mission of achieving expressiveness” (Eisner, 2008: 8) and the possibilities it offers to create an emancipatory environment energized by empathy and solidarity. Art is about feeling and feeling allows our embodied emotions to travel and be embodied by other bodies. For this reason, art can “generate a kind of empathy that makes action possible” (ibid 11). This way, by creating art together “we produced difference and equality, at the same time” (Lorenz 2012: 17).

2.4 Method

The ethics of care and concern proposed by Sörensson and Kalman (2018) informed this research at all stages, but especially during the design and implementation of the research method. Given our shared values and histories, as well as the time in which the research was being undertaken, the wellbeing of the *copensantes* was the main priority of the research process. For this reason, the methodology can be seen as the product of all the steps that I followed as a researcher in consultation with the other *copensantes*.

All the encounters were held in Spanish, and all the quotes in this paper were translated by myself. The following sub-sections will describe the four stages of the collaborative method.

First stage

After informally reaching out to the *copensantes* through different online platforms, I conducted one-on-one meetings to discuss this research idea with them. I presented it as a project, whose main goal was to create a SP where we can share our memories, experiences and struggles of being *cuir* in Ecuador. In total, 5 initial on-line meetings were held on Zoom (one with each *copensante*), during which we discuss about confidentiality, availability, interest, how to construct the SP and how to use art in our exchanges. Considering the existing restrictions of mobility, we also discussed their conditions in terms of privacy and safety to engage in an online SP from their houses. From these discussions, I created an initial timetable, including some activity proposals, that was co-modified in the process.

Second stage

In this stage, we held ten online sessions: twice a week during 5 weeks. Each online encounter lasted around two hours and, because of their daily occupations, were held at night (Ecuadorian time)—wee hours in the

Netherlands. I must admit that this required an immense effort. I needed to be sufficiently awake and mentally prepared to participate in the SP, which meant being up two hours in advance and sometimes it was difficult to get back to sleep after our moving conversations.

Each session was constructed around one specific topic (proposed by myself before the sessions started, based on themes raised during our on-going conversations). We engaged with the chosen topic through a specific activity, often related with an art expression that was proposed by the *copensantes*. Before each session, one-on-one online encounters took place with me and the *copensante* leading the session, in order to plan the activity and the facilitation guidelines and to understand together how best to engage with the particular art expression. This gave us the opportunity to learn from each other and explore other forms of expressions. The following table shows an overview of these sessions:

Table 1
Topics and art expression within the SP

No.	Topic	Expression	Description / Opening question
1	Introduction	Open conversation	Meeting the participants
2	Queer/cuir	Free drawing (led by Néstor)	What does it mean to be queer/ <i>cuir</i> ? How have the idea of <i>cuirness</i> been integrated/experienced/felt by each of us? Do we identify as <i>cuir</i> ?
3	Nature	Free (each participant employed a different art expression)	Bring an object, an expression, experience that represents what 'natural' or 'unnatural' mean to you?
4	Unnatural sexualities	Poetry (led by Nicole)	Stories of oppression and discrimination resulting from the 'unnatural' discourse. Presenting poems that portrait the experienced feelings and emotions.
5	Unnatural sexualities	Poetry (led by myself)	This theme was treated twice, considering that two of the participants could not attend the previous session.
6	Context and background	Sharing circle – Early memories	Early memories and discourses that informed the formation of meanings of gender and sexuality.
7	Pause and feedback	Open conversation	Icebreaker. This session was concentrated on reflecting on the safe place, as well as strengthening relations and connection among participants.
8	Art	Storytelling	What is/has been the role of art in your life? How is this related to your <i>cuirness</i> ?
9	Bodies	Body movement (led by Alex)	Living an 'unnatural' body. Activity: choose 8 daily actions and perform them by representing different emotions, guided by Alex
10	Closing session	Free	Diverse experiences of living Covid-19. Thanking each other through art expressions.

Source: Author, 2020.

Although some *copensantes* did not facilitate any particular session due to personal preferences (not feeling comfortable with taking the lead) or time

limitations, all the chosen forms of expression were explored, especially during session 3 and 10.

Finally, and since care and safety were at the core of our SP, we were often in regular conversations checking on each other. Also, when emotions were highly mobilized, I often contacted them individually in order to discuss with them their emotional stability and wellbeing. In case it was needed, I generated extra one-on-one sessions or written conversations to address particular situations.

Third stage

After two sessions to which some participants could not attend due to personal reasons (some related to the implications of covid-19 outbreak), one *copensante* suggested having an extra individual encounter at the end of the ten SP sessions. Consequently, the third stage entailed one-on-one interviews in order to close the process, ask specific questions, get their insights on the reflections that emerged in the sessions that they could not attend and reflect together about the SP.

Fourth stage

During the writing process, I contacted them regularly to clarify stories and decide together on certain orientations of this paper. Also, despite of the time zone difference, some *copensantes* attended the second seminar and commented the document during and/or after the seminar.

Finally, as agreed in a tenth SP session, the final draft was translated by one *copensante* and be read by all. In a final SP session, we discussed the accuracy of the stories, re-thought terms of confidentiality and shared general comments that I included to this final version. This allowed us to go beyond this paper and talk about the possibility of continuing with the creation of SP in Ecuador. We reflected about the importance of this connection during these chaotic times and how much this place contributed in generating different relations among us, as *cuirs*, that inspires us to individually and collectively engage in political action.

2.5 Reflecting on the method: what was safe about this place?

Constructing a SP needs be understood as a verb, not a noun. It is a fluid, changing and very uncertain process. It does not ‘magically’ appear after agreeing on its creation. On the contrary, it takes time and results from the continuous negotiation of identities among its members. In this case, the *copensantes* knew very few or even nothing about the other members and I was the only person that had known each of them before starting this process.

I knew that initially I was the reason why everyone was reunited online, and I desperately wanted to change that, due to my intent to produce collaborative knowledge. However, it was not in my hands, or at least not only

in my hands. It required patience and collective work. The required level of flexibility to co-construct a project challenged me considerably but I could feel over the sessions a shift in our interactions.

Figure 9
What is a SP?

This was a place for “people to share experiences” (Alex), “and recognize our drags... our performances...” (Carlos) it was “the opportunity to be vulnerable” (Néstor) and “from that vulnerability [...] listen and reflect about our lives and identities” (ibid). The safe place “became a place where each of us had a voice, it was a place of empathy” (Ximena). “What we did was to construct a site in which you can feel safe, where you feel you are not judged” (Nicole). “A place of relief” (Alejo), “where we could talk about lot of things that we do not like to talk with the rest of people, or we do not want to talk, either because they might bring back unpleasant memories, or simply because the topic does not come up... We are a minority anyways” (Nicole).

Source: SP, 2020.

Levels of trust and openness increased with every session, but far from being a uniform process of ‘increasing trust’, this process was uncertain and ambiguous. We went back and forward through our exchanges, dealing with different levels of involvement and contribution. Certain phrases or interactions gave me hints on how the place was being experienced by the *copensantes*. I will illustrate this by using two examples, both from the second session. One *copensante* exclaimed “*los deberes, los deberes!*” (“*homework, homework!*”) when I asked who wanted to share some reflections made in advance to that session. His expression made me think that having activities to prepare, or at least the specific approach in that session, provoked on him a sense of “obligation”. Yet, during the same session another *copensante* mentioned “I needed this moment” in a relieved tone of voice. Clearly, every experience was unique for *copensantes* and changed throughout the process, influencing the dynamics within the place we were creating.

Certain activities helped more than others to create and strengthen bonds. For instance, alternating the facilitation role generated a sense of ownership among the *copensantes* and thus to create a comfortable environment to bring ideas and suggestions. Also, being in regular consultation during the writing process reinforced an environment where everyone had a voice. Finally, translating the paper made accessible for all to comment on it.

To make it safe, every session began with a short round of exchanges to check the mood and feelings of every *copensante*. The interventions allowed us to speak about what ever topic we wanted, ranging from daily experiences to more profound anxieties such as emotional health and family situations. All the exchanges, either related to the topic of research or not, were treated with strict confidentiality. Although confidentiality was agreed in the first SP session, its actual application was not completely related to that agreement. It rather was

based on a sort of ‘developed’ confidentiality that emerged from the empathy and care created within the place.

‘Safeness’ did not exclude the feelings of discomfort and anxiety in the place we created. “I feel nervous”, “It is difficult for me to say this”, “it is painful to recall”, were usual expressions during the exchanges. It is never easy to be vulnerable. Besides, some stories had not been even processed by those *copensantes* who were sharing. As Néstor stated “sometimes it is much more difficult to admit things to ourselves, than to others”. Having a SP allowed those feelings to be present and accepted and reassured the participants they were listened and accompanied. We were on this together.

It was a very necessary moment because I would not have found another place to let off steam or talk in the way that I wanted. Especially during quarantine, it helped me a lot (Alex, SP, 2020).

Considering the stories of oppression and exclusion that these bodies have experienced, creating a SP was already relevant, but the implications of the Covid-19 outbreak made it more necessary than ever. Many other participants felt like Alex and found in the SP a moment of relief of all the intense emotions that are being embodied during this global outbreak. It became a sort of refuge. As Néstor described: “There was a particular week that I felt afflicted, with lot of things in my mind and I just wanted the opportunity to arrive to this place to speak about it...”. Emotions related to the pandemic, struggles that emerged as a consequence of the restricted mobility, or stories about friends and relatives that tested positive for Covid-19, or who passed away were part of our regular exchanges.

3 Silenced ecologies

In this chapter, inspired by QE, I explore the arguments that refer to a so-called natural binary that determines sexuality, and I discuss its implications in *cuir* bodies. I aim to situate the analysis of what are constructed as unnatural/natural embodied sexualities, by understanding the specific importance of the ‘naturalness’ in this context and unpacking their reliance upon heteronormative notions of nature. Based on this, I look at how the supposed ‘natural’ masculinities and femininities are enforced at ‘home’ and discipline the body in, sometimes, oppressive, even lacerating ways. I discuss these ideas with reference to the specific realities that *copensantes* confronted during Covid-19 times, when the body and home became the most inhabited places in their daily lives.

3.1 Situating the ‘natural’/‘unnatural’ distinction

Ecuador is a diverse country in which many cultures and natures cohabit. As middle-class mestizos and city dwellers, we (*copensantes*) were raised in the midst of the tensions of two often contradictory conceptions of nature, culture and its relation. On one side, we were influenced by the dominant discourses that perceive nature as separate from culture, as “unfettered by the trappings of civilization”, as a reference of the “natural” (Alaimo 2010: 57). On the other side, we grew up exposed to the indigenous cosmovision–Sumak Kawsay–that disrupts the supposed separation and hierarchy of nature over culture and brings a different understanding in which culture is part of and comes from nature (Macas 2010: 16). Consequently, we come from a hybrid culture that combines the Andean cosmovision and the Western discourses, and produces a particular understanding of, and relation with, nature. For this reason, QE brings important contributions applicable to this paper, that notwithstanding need to be situated, as I attempt to do here.

In our context, the natural/unnatural distinction has been principally informed by the evolutionary narrative that conceives nature as the reference of the primary “state” of civilization (Hird 2004) where “pure biology” resides (Alaimo 2010: 57). Therefore, it is seen as the reference of how things should “naturally” be and how beings should “naturally” behave. In this sense, what is seen as in a state of nature represents what is good and what is perceived as unnatural depicts the undesirable (Bell 2010). These supposed “laws of nature” have transcended the realm of biology and now inform the social domain (ibid), supporting heteronormative notions of gender and sexuality.⁹ Although, in pre-colonial times, homosexuality did not have a negative connotation and was even sacred in the Andean cosmovision heteronormativity is nowadays profoundly engrained in our culture.

In fact, discourses of nature as heterosexual are constantly informing our context, particularly through formal education. Biology class literature insisted on finding male and female reproductive structures on non-human living

⁹ “the view that institutionalized heterosexuality constitutes the standard for legitimate and expected social and sexual relations” (Ingraham 2006: 315).

beings, although it often felt strained. For instance, we learnt about the “asexual reproduction of plants”: the anthers and the pollen grains as male gametes, and the ovules and ovary as female (Figure 10). The employment of the human-reproduction terms—gametes, ovule, ovary—sheds lights on a biased understanding of nature. Besides, the word “asexual” serves to adjust heteronormative notions to a *cuir* living being. In fact, plants “are hermaphroditic before they are bisexual and are bisexual before they are heterosexual” (Morton 2010: 276). Similarly, the interventions of other beings in this process i.e. bees, was completely disregarded and even seen as “beneficial deviations” (Darwin as cited in Morton 2010: 276) because any trait that disturbs heterosexuality and evinces the existence of *cuirness* within nature—and culture—is considered a ‘deviation’.

Figure 10
Asexual? Bisexual? Hermaphrodite?:
***cuir* and natural...**



Source: Author's drawing, 2020.

This “straight” interpretation of nature produces essentializing ideas that are ascribed to human bodies and their desires. The heteronormative ‘right’, ‘natural’, ‘straight’ and ‘desirable’ forms of sex, sexuality, reproduction and kinship, as well as, how femininity and masculinity should be performed, are assumed to be inherent in biology (Hird 2004; Alaimo 2010). Considering that since childhood, we (*copensantes*) were surrounded by discourses about how magnificent, sacred, female and fertile is the Pachamama (Mother Earth), that we “come from her, and we are part of her” (Macas 2010: 16), the natural/unnatural distinction carries an enormous weight. Not conforming with these normative ideas, thus being “unnatural”, not only suppresses other forms of love and pleasure, but also destroys the groundings of our identities.

Heteronormative notions expel our bodies from the cherished and sacred nature, of which we supposedly “are part and come from”.

By being removed from nature, *cuir* bodies are also removed from culture. Since Andean cosmovision sees culture as embedded in nature anything that cannot exist in nature should be present in culture. Nature is conceived as something that needs to be preserved, and any “unnaturalness” within it, and thus within culture, ‘pollutes’ it and is seen as ‘toxic’. Cuirness, is then seen as ‘deviated’, something that requires to be suppressed, silenced and straighted, and so the violence against these bodies rests upon the natural/unnatural distinction that protects Pachamama and its purity.

Once we move away from dividing culture and nature into separate binaries, we are able to conceive nature as socially constructed, as fluid and shifting as the culture that interprets it. As I mentioned above, the current Andean understanding about nature is a result of the combination of various ideas that travel across time and space. Unpacking the contextual ideas, that support the oppressive constructions of nature, allows us to contest the essentializing value that has been assigned to dominant notions of gender and sexuality. In the next section, I seek to discuss the discourses that regulate how these bodies should “naturally” behave, desire and love; which is mostly influenced by constructions of femininities and masculinities.

3.2 (Un)natural femininities and masculinities at ‘home’

Figure 11
“Happy to be who s/he is”



Source: Néstor, SP, 2020.

I would like to ask the reader to take a minute to contemplate this portrait (See Figure 11). Pay attention to the sensations that invade your body while looking at it. The peace of mind that you might be experiencing in this moment is one state that Néstor seeks to transmit in his drawing, which for him is possible once the pressure of conforming with certain gender norms disappears: “you cannot see if it is a boy or a girl. S/he is enjoying the sun and is happy to be who s/he is”. Through this drawing we can understand the difficulties that some bodies experience regarding the expectations around what it is to be a boy or a girl. Our reflections within the SP always came back to the ways that our bodies are disciplined to perform certain notions of gender and sexuality. This includes practices, behaviors and garment that are assigned to men and women.¹⁰ For this reason, I take femininities and masculinities as the point of departure of this discussion.

Femininities and masculinities are contextual and vary across time and space, therefore need to be understood as historically and geographically specific (Massey 1994b: 189). Instead of replicating essentializing ideas of men and women, I aim to pay attention to the ways they are constructed in this particular context of Ecuador during Covid-19; how the (un)natural distinction is employed to support these ideas and the particular pressure they generate in *cuirs* bodies. In order to do this, I theorize the family as the first environment of socialization, where these ideas are reinforced and ascribed to bodies from birth.

See Figure 12. Family has a central role, very often “ahead of individual interests and development” (Ingoldsby 1991: 57). This degree of importance can be perceived in Nicole’s story through her various affirmations regarding its central role in producing who she has become and thus influencing her everyday identity negotiations with the world. In this context (SP), family has a broader connotation. Acts of care are addressed, and responsibilities are held, not only towards the immediate family members, but also towards other blood-relatives, such as: grandparents, uncles, aunts, and so on, and nonblood-relatives, such as: neighbors and closed family friends (ibid).¹¹ Besides, extended family often live in the same house or closed to each other, if not, closed communication is maintained among its members, and thus, news and ideas are in constant travel. Consequently, family approval becomes essential and is not limited to the nuclear family (ibid). This explains the concern of Nicole’s father “What are we going to say to the family!”, which is a common anxiety among *cuirs*’ parents. I will return to the importance of family approval later in this section.

In our conversations (SP), we understood family as one dimension of home. The expression “en mi casa” (in my house) usually preceded the stories of the participants in order to refer to the family and the material space it occupies. In fact, the word ‘home’ is one of the “most loaded words” that arises from the multiple combinations of the material reality and the symbolic

¹⁰ *‘indumentaria’* (garment) is the term used by Carlos to describe all items worn on the body.

¹¹ Heterosexual household made up of parents and children.

Figure 12
"My family is everything to me"

Nicole

Although she moved to Quito to pursue her studies in medicine, she is still in close contact with her family and often travels to San Pablo to see them. "My family is everything to me" she used to say very often in our sessions. When I asked about her life in San Pablo she shared: "My grandmother's house, in San Pablo, transports me to very good moments. There used to be a wood-burning stove [...] in which my great-grandmother made bread [...] so I specially remember the smells... the smell of the bread! The smell of wood when she was preparing fanesca!". She mentioned all these plates and smiled, it seemed that she was almost tasting them by only recalling. Her mother, in particular, was very often part of her stories. "Many things of my character and feelings are engrained on me because of my mother" she said with pride and love while her facial gestures softened, reaching very subtle smiles.

"I would say that my mother's reaction towards my sexuality was... perfect, also my sister's" commented Nicole, "with my father it was more difficult [...]. One day, he was in Quito for reasons of work. We were together on the car and I said: 'you know we have an outstanding conversation'. 'Yes', he admitted, and started the discussion by saying that this topic brought many problems between my parents. He also said: 'I am questioning myself, how I raised you and in what did I fail'. That broke my heart and filled me with rage". Nicole's tone of voice revealed that recalling this event was extremely painful for her, which I can understand considering the central role family has in her life. "I told him... I do not think I am a bad person. I am a good professional, I have never been disrespectful to them. I started to name all the qualities that define me as a human being". Nicole mentioned that this situation was difficult for him because he expected her to have a husband and children. "What are we going to say to the family!" he said to Nicole, to what she replied: "For me, my family is you, my mother and my sister". That conversation lasted around 15 minutes, amidst shouts he insisted "I did something wrong. Your mother and me did something wrong". "We were both very altered", she explained. "He said that my partner was not welcome at our home. I finally replied 'You put your rules in your house as I do in mine. If you do not accept that I am with her, you will never enter my home'".

¹ Fanesca is a traditional soup, with a religious background, prepared during Holy Week.

Source: Nicole, SP, 2020.

meanings, producing diverse understandings (McDowell 1999a: 71). In the SP, we conceptualized it as home particularly because of the sense of belonging that emerges from it (ibid) and also because it is locally understood as the place that brings security, pleasure and safety. For this reason, I refer as home to family and the interactions within the physical space it occupies.

Home can be conceived as a place (McDowell 1999a). Instead of being bounded and isolated, it is a permeable unit where ideas are constantly travelling in and out (Massey 1994a). In this sense, the unsupportive reaction that Nicole's father had regarding her sexuality was informed by broader notions. The permeability of home allows discourses and ideas to inform the interactions and expectations that need to be fulfilled. Among others, a set of discourses about masculinities and femininities inform home, promoting dominant ideas of what is the role of men and women, respectively. These ideas are absorbed and reproduced by the family and its reproduction reinforces its perpetuation, which can be understood as one of the "social effect" produced by this place (Massey 1994b: 169).

One of the most powerful set of ideas that informs home in Latin America is known as *machismo*, that according to Mosher is defined as a “system of beliefs” that “exalts male dominance by assuming masculinity, virility, and physicality to be the ideal essence of real men” (1991: 199-201). *Machismo* was regularly mentioned in our SP’s conversations when we discussed the form in which not only masculinities but also femininities are constructed in our context. “I grew up in a very *machista* environment”, “my parents come from a context with a strong presence of *machismo*”, were some of the expressions that repeatedly appeared in our exchanges. Through *machismo*, masculinity is defined as an antonym of “homosexuality [...], effeminacy, cowardice, illness, weakness, emotionalism and more” (ibid 200) and femininity is located at odds of the masculine as inferior, weak and delicate. *Machismo* employs ‘nature’ in order to produce essentializing ideas of how women and men should behave. In fact, these ideas are conceived as “the ‘true’ or ‘real’ natures of men and women” (ibid 200), the “ideal essence” (ibid 199).

For instance, Nicole shared how *machismo* shaped her experience in school: “My professors tried to make us perform certain roles, like man and woman must do certain kind of things. For example, in that time, it was weird that a girl plays football. One day the headmaster called my parents to indicate that ‘something wrong’ was happening to me, since I was not playing girl games”. This story as well as his father’s expectations of having “a husband and children” reflect some of the many gender roles to which she was subjected as well as the ‘naturalness’ that is assigned to these expectations. First, because she was expected to ‘naturally’ conform with them and second because her non-conformity was seen as “something wrong” happening.

Machismo, masculinities and femininities are not experienced in the same way. Although we share many markers of identify our experiences are very diverse, in part because our realities depend on our parents’ identities and histories which are also very complex, but also because our diverse subjectivities.

With this, I would like to bring religion—catholicism—to the discussion, particularly as the church is one of the most important institutions, in this context, that contributes in perpetuating the culture and nature divide, and reinforces discourses about machismo. Religious discourses about humanity promote an anthropocentric view, i.e. human’s control over creation and human’s likeness of God. These ideas, together with the belief of salvation as ascending—leaving the Earth to reach heaven—imply that nature is not a place for humans, that human “is set apart from and above nature” and thus positions nature as given, material, essential, a setting for humans to be in and to own it. This open the space for humans to ascribe unquestionable values and meanings to nature. At the same time, likeness of God implies that the ‘human’ placed as the core of these discourses is white, heterosexual and man. He owns all the creation, including woman and more-than-human (Grasse 2016). This reproduces binary formulations sustained by machismo: superiority of man over woman, masculinity over femininity, heterosexuality as natural and homosexuality as deviant.

Living in the urban setting is also a category that requires closer examination. The expression “*Pueblo chico, infierno grande*” (“Small town, big hell”) was employed several times in our conversations to describe that in smaller cities people easily know each other and thus appearances are highly important. As mentioned by Néstor, “how society sees you can determine you”. Living in a small city meant hearing “What would people say” almost every day at home. For instance, I heard it when I was wearing a ‘too’ small shirt, when I came home ‘late’, but especially when I decided to come out of the closet. In my case this experience is not only related with living in a small city but also with being a woman in that city, which continues revealing the complexity of how different layers of identity intersect in making up our subjectivities.

In this sense, masculinities and femininities as well as the ‘naturalness’ ascribed to them, are, in this context, greatly informed by *machismo* and religion; however, the pressure that *cuir*s experience to conform with them is also related with the contextual relevance of family and appearances. The anger that Nicole experienced and her attempt to enumerate her qualities as a person to her father in the story above, illustrate the relevance of family approval as well as the emotions that family disapproval can provoke for *cuir*s. The way that our body intimately interacts with other bodies is not only personal but is also an intensely family issue. This generates responsibilities and sometimes unreachable expectations for *cuir* bodies. In fact, the adequate performance of masculinity and femininity becomes part of what being a good daughter or a good son means. Living a good heterosexual family life requires individuals to conform with social norms and its ‘straightness’, along with the responsibility, as daughter and son, to appropriately negotiate the family’s identity with the social world (Stølen 1991: 92).

3.3 Policing gender and sexuality as a parenting role

Figure 13
A body to fix

Néstor

I was six years old and my brother was just born. I was put in an airplane to travel to Loja and stay there for some time. I did not understand why my parents let me take a flight alone as a kid. Although I found it exciting, I did not know why they were separating me from my mother and my new born brother. I found out later the reason: my grandmother told my father that she could "fix me". In Loja, they registered me in football classes while my cousin, who lived in Loja and with whom I had a very close relationship, was registered for ballet. They did not want us to be together, and also, they did not allow me to call my mother. All of this because they thought that the feminine influences of my life were "femininizing" me.

Source: Néstor, SP, 2020.

See Figure 13. Apart from generating responsibilities for sons and daughters, the essentializing discourses of femininity and masculinity that are informed by heteronormative conceptions of nature, also reflected in notions of “proper”

parenting. These symbolic ideas about the (un)natural are translated into embodied interactions and practices, they become material “and thus socio-natural” Nightingale (2010: 154). The socionatural responsibility to regulate/control/police gender and sexuality at home becomes part of what raising children in a ‘good’ way means. Through Néstor’s story, and also through Nicole’s story, we can see how the regulation of gender and sexuality is conceived as part of parenting. In Nicole’s case, his father insisted several times that her cuirness was a result of a failure in their parenting. Similarly, in Nestor’s case, his parents felt a responsibility to ‘fix’ his ‘femininity’, which they addressed in his early age by imposing practices and activities that are ‘naturally’ performed by men, such as football, and restricting his contact with ‘feminine’ models.

These attempts to ‘fix’ the way that bodies perform gender and sexuality are engrained in everyday practices. They can have the form of comments or corrections like: “do not move your hands when you speak, do not sit with your legs crossed...”, “women cannot play football”. They can also be violently expressed “are you stupid?”, “what is wrong with you”, “people like you should not exist”.¹² And very often they are also translated into physical violence in order to “discipline” the body. The latter is usually accompanied by expressions like: “esto me duele más a mí que a ti” (This hurts me more than it does you), “hago esto por tu bien” (I am doing this for your own sake).

With this I do not imply that parenting actions are malicious. On the contrary, by understanding the discourses and ideologies that justify “control” over bodies’ gender and sexuality as socially constructed, I rather seek to shed lights on the love and care that motivate their actions. As Néstor’s family said to him: “those people [*cuir*s] are never going to be happy, and we do not want that for you”. There is not an aggressor/victim relation. Parents are not aggressors and *cuir* children are not victims. They are both subjects navigating the existing socionatures of gender and sexuality.

3.4 ‘Lacerated’ bodies

I feel the violence and the hate the world directs at us. I feel it in my bones.
It infects our lives and shapes our deaths. But we persist in our loving
(Kelly, 1994: 44).

Kelly’s quote accurately depicts the power of these constructions over the body. The hate, the exclusion, the rejection, the disgust, all these can be felt “in our bones”. Here bodies can be seen as material, but also as socionatural because this is the site where discourses of the (un)natural are ascribed and where the implications of the above-described understandings of nature have effects. Body is where wounds and lacerations are engraved.

During our second session of the SP, we discussed our own understandings of the (un)natural, as *cuir*s. Carlos shared that for him the ‘natural’ involves “body movement, expression and communication through

¹² Quotes retrieved from the SP.

the body” and therefore he conceives as ‘unnatural’ “anything that restricts our body”. Finally, he illustrated his opinion through a metaphor about wearing a “corset”, and with much conviction he explained: “it restricts my breathing, lacerates and distorts my body. It is an instrument that disciplines our bodies by restricting our mobility”.

Following Carlos’ reflection, the ‘straight’ understanding of what is (un)natural -and the above-mentioned contextual pressure it produces-, as well as the material practices that derive from it -such as parenting acts of policing gender and sexuality-, can be understood as ‘corsets’ for *cuir* bodies. They restrict our mobility. They lacerate and distort our bodies, marking us through violence and exclusion. In this context, mobility speaks for the alternative gender norms that bodies unintendedly perform, for the material interactions of intimate love and desire, but also for broader interactions with the world. Having a *cuir* body automatically reduce our identity to ‘deviated’ and ‘unnatural’. In this sense, by “wearing the corset”, or embodying these discourses, bodies are shaped by constrains and restrictions.

One of the most common ways to cope with the corset’s pressure is to forcibly mold our bodies in shapes that are not ours. As Alejo mentioned “I tried to adapt. They wanted me to be a girl so I tried to be a... girl. But I was not happy”, or as Alex shared “I had to pretend that everything was fine but deep down, that was killing my soul”. By confining ourselves and taking distance from the world we fill our bodies of emotions that derive from the impossibility to conform with the expectations. Frustration, anger, loneliness, fear and shame are some of the emotions that inhabit our beings and circulate in our veins in every stage of life. Sometimes living in such torture becomes too heavy that ending with our lives might seem easier. Inhabiting a body that is labelled as ‘unnatural’ makes us feel ‘out’ of place in our own body. It creates a profound disconnection. “I could not recognize myself”, “I felt incomplete”, “my soul, my body, my energy and my mind were disconnected”. These expressions show the discomfort and distance that living in a *cuir* body implies and how self-rejection might emerge.

These attempts to re-shape our bodies lacerate us in ways that stay engrained even when we decide to live our sexuality in non-normative forms. These wounds become part of who we are. They restrict certain interactions and shape our forms to relate to and with the world. After doing a body movement exercise in the SP, Néstor shared that despite of being actively involved in activism, particularly by promoting visibility and celebrating the existence of *cuir* bodies, he still feels uncomfortable in his body. “I walk in front of a mirror and I see myself walking like a woman, very pronounced... and it feels uncomfortable. I feel blocked, even if I am fine with being visible about my homosexuality, I cannot represent that confidence in my body. I can wear a *poncho* and a flowers crown but I cannot walk with confidence”.¹³ *Cuir* bodies are scandalous for ‘straight’ eyes. For this reason, *cuir* identities try to go

¹³ Andean outer garment often worn by indigenous communities or mestizo women. Néstor uses it as a reference of wearing non-normative garments and feeling comfortable about it.

unnoticed by hiding an intimate part of themselves. This becomes embodied practices that inform our broader interactions with the world. We learn to live in a constant state of restriction and that often becomes our permanent standpoint. But we also embody a profound sense of empathy, especially towards human and non-human-others that face oppressions and injustices. In chapter four, I discuss further about the political potential of these embodiments.

3.5 Inhabiting an ‘unnatural’ body during Covid-19 times

As a result of the Covid-19 global outbreak and the measures implemented to reduce the risks of infection, new socionatures emerged for *cuir* bodies, particularly at home. Although considering body as material implies to recognize that it has “shape and size” and thus “inevitably takes up space” (McDowell 1999b: 34), the current socionatures reveal that occupying a material space does not necessarily imply feeling part of it (ibid). In many cases, being confined at home imposed permanent inhabitation in “straight” places that reject their existence, making *cuir* bodies feel “out of place” (ibid 62).

In the SP, we could identify diverse experiences of confinement, certainly shaped by our different subjectivities, the existing dynamics with whom we share ‘home’, the strictness of confinement that our occupations demanded, the material place that we inhabited (i.e. available space, privacy, access to open spaces) and so on. For instance, for Nicole and Carlos, who are currently living with their partners, quarantine was rather a pleasurable opportunity to spend time together. Having the possibility to live in an independent place allow them to enjoy from each other’s company. As Nicole mentioned: “quarantine for me was the opportunity to be with Salome [her partner] and Gea [her dog]. I was working so much before that I felt happy to be here with them. I needed this”.

My experience was shaped by various privileges. Living by myself abroad, studying a master degree and reading about sexuality sparked for me various outstanding questions on which I started to reflect amidst the solitude of my confinement. As Néstor puts it: “confinement [...] made us confront our inner conversations. You are trapped in your house, confronting yourself all the time”. My main confrontation was related to my own body, a strange and unknown terrain for me. The dominant discourses that locate my body as ‘deviated’, or a result of ‘poor parenting’, have restricted my personal exploration for years. I had preferred to constraint my ‘unnatural’ love, hide my relationships and feel ashamed of my own body. I learned to silence my *cuirness* and to live in ‘straight’ spaces without even problematizing why *cuir* bodies need to disappear. These questions became unavoidable when I was in completely solitude. Feelings of depression and anxiety accompanied these reflections. Finally, the conditions under which I experienced the outbreak, gave me the opportunity to think about my own body and create the possibility to reflect together, as *cuirs* -SP-. Undoubtedly my situation was shaped by privileges, the privilege of being abroad, the privilege of being financially stable, the privilege of privacy, the privilege of having the time and the access

to explore my sexuality through the *cuir* scholars' reflections, the literature that I only got to know because of my master degree.

However, confinement was a completely different experience for those who had to share their physical space with unsupportive families, with whom the topic of sexuality remains unspoken, often for the sake of maintaining peace in the family. For example, Alex commented that "being gay has always disrupted peace and created discomfort at home". In his case, mobility restrictions and confinement restricted him to be physically closed to people with whom he can freely express his sexuality: his friends and work colleagues.¹⁴ As a dancer, Alex was almost all the time out of his house, in which he lives with his parents and brother. With the outbreak he had to adapt all his daily activities—trainings, dance classes and presentations—to the online setting. The limited number of computers in his house created tensions among the family, that many times ended in hurtful confrontations. His sexuality complicated this reality: "with my family I know I cannot speak about certain things. All this time, I could not feel calm because I know that if a 'little detail' comes up, I will receive angry faces in response, and I will feel responsible for causing discomfort at home. So, I need to limit myself. There are some moments at home that I feel back in the closet".

For Alex, being at home symbolizes being "back in the closet". By using the word 'back' he suggests that he already felt out of it although he was living in the same place and with the same people. Thus, what made Alex feel out of the closet was related with other places and spaces and the people with whom he shared them (friends and colleagues), and that during covid-19 he could not see or visit. As mentioned by McDowell (1999b: 39) the materiality of the body should not let us forget its "plasticity or malleability", and thus, its capacity to "take different forms and shapes" depending on particular intersections of time and space. This malleability allowed Alex to negotiate his cuirness at home by taking the specific 'shape' that would avoid confrontations with his family. If we reflect through the "corset" metaphor explained above, restricting himself and living in a constant state of alert to carefully express himself, meant for Alex to wear a corset. To adapt his 'shape' to this specific place and time: at home during Covid-19 times.

Besides, the existing interactions at home often did not allow him to have complete privacy when he needed it. In several SP sessions, he had to ask his family not to interrupt him because he was "busy with something" and "something" created a silence. Once, he also mentioned that he could not concentrate in one of our online activities due to the possibility of someone "abruptly entering to his room". Although the cyberspace allowed him to be 'out of this place' and to 'feel in place', his material body had to still navigate the limitations of a restrictive offline place.

In this sense, for Alex Covid-19 restrictions imposed a state of increased isolation in which he needed to confine his sexuality at home and his material

¹⁴ Alex mentioned that the dance community, his workplace, was a space in which sexuality was not an issue. This allowed him to openly live his cuirness.

body at the public space. A double confinement produced emotions of frustration, depression and anger that restricted him to embrace his full-self.

Like Alex, Néstor lives his cuirness only in certain spaces and places outside home. Covid-19 restrictions also limited him to fully expressed. For him, visibility had become a mechanism to embrace and celebrate his homosexuality. He actively participates on pride parades, demonstrations and strikes related to his sexuality (among other social justice causes) although his father did not support his involvement. His father openly mentioned the peace of mind that he felt due to the fact that Néstor did not participate in the pride parade this year, as he regularly does. “So, we are living now in peace, and that is nice, we talk and we love each other”, Néstor shared. And with nostalgia and some frustration he continued: “but at the expense of what? of giving something up? my visibility? [...] He adapted very well to my lack of visibility and he thinks this will continue like that”.

This lack of visibility and the reduction of his everyday political actions affected to the processes of identity negotiation that have taken years. Néstor has been confronting his father’s lack of support for already five years. Standing for his identity in the public sphere allowed Néstor to feel “empowered” in order to contest oppressive discourses at home. However, the lack of visibility and his permanent physical presence at the house, provoked on his father a ‘straight’ illusion over Néstor’s body through which he feels disciplined, as he puts it “this situation reaffirms his idea of control over me”.

Finally, confinement also implies questions about the physical space that *cuir* bodies inhabit. For instance, Alejo mentioned: “confinement did not affect me, what affected me was the people around. I just wanted to be in peace. It was a moment of reflection for me, about what I am doing with my life and how I am doing my transition”. In order to understand Alejo’s statement it is important to consider that because of covid-19, the house that was originally occupied by Alejo, his grandmother and brother, had to welcome more people: his mother, two sisters, nephews and aunt. Having more people at home, and the new arrangements that this generated, did not bring the necessary space (material and symbolic) for Alejo to dedicate attention to himself, since he needed to be present for, and share space with, a greater number of people.

I consider important to reflect on the restrictions and possibilities that the physical place, called house, offer for *cuir* bodies during covid times. Based on the interactions that we had in our online SP, I was able to notice the diverse ways that we navigated cuirness and/or straightness of house spaces. The conditions under which Nicole and Carlos experienced confinement, allowed them to attend our sessions from the ‘common’ spaces of the house, such as the office, the dining and living room. Their partners were usually with them and were aware of the topic of our meetings. Conversely, Alex, Néstor and Alejo were connected from their bedrooms, usually with a closed door that divided their physical space from the rest of the house. They *cuired* a portion of the material space that was sometimes disturbed or ‘straighted’ by other family members, depending on the arrangements and interactions with family, i.e. “abruptions” during SP. Here, I would like to highlight the importance of raising questions about physical house space, the codes and interactions that

organized these spaces, as well as their implications for *cuir* bodies. Which spaces of the house do allow these bodies to exist? Are there any? How are they possible? Why and how the straightness of spaces at home restrict these bodies? Which possibilities does the cyberspace bring for *cuir* bodies? And are they accessible for everyone? I will return to some of the questions regarding the cyberspace in the conclusion.

4 Cuiring art and rethinking queernaturecultures

In this chapter, I will discuss what did cuiring art mean for us in the SP and how did the process of cuiring allow us to explore the personal and the political dimensions of art, as well as its potential to depict emerging, or even create, cuirnaturecultures, which are informed by our subjectivities and *cuir* ecological sensibility.

4.1 Cuiring art

As I mentioned in the chapter on methodology, art played a central role in our conversations. Art helped us to articulate our sensations and feelings that were often impossible to put into words. But the role of art was not restricted to our SP. On the contrary, the *copensantes* employ art in their everyday life, as forms of refuge, healing and feeling home, and some even made it their form of subsistence. By arguing that art represented home, I refer to its role in generating comfort, protection and well-being, many of the states that often were not reached within their families.

I would like to clarify that what makes our art *cuir*, is not only who created it -we, as *cuir*s-, but is the intention that we gave to it. In the SP, we decided to allow it to be ‘untalented’, ‘inexpert’, ‘exploratory’ and ‘risky’. I enclose these words in inverted commas, because cuiring art also pushed us to reflect on their meanings. To rethink talent or expertise, and how these ideas could restrict our actions and expressions. We then gave ourselves permission to explore and take risks. We set out to express, through art, our desires, complaints, and wounded subjectivities that have been limiting us for a long time. In our exchanges, we gave ourselves permission to explore the nature of our bodies, we engaged in new activities, new physical movements and unrestricted emotions. From this, I seek to discuss the provocative and the rebellious of some of our creations. I point to new imaginaries that have emerged from our wounds and lacerations. I look for the strength in our vulnerabilities.

Copensantes are *cuir*s and artists. Our cuirness informs our art and our art informs our cuirness. The boundaries between the personal and the political blurs as we take up art as self-expression. However, and for the purposes of this paper, I will have divided my analysis of the personal and the political in separate sections. Please do not take this technical limitation, imposed by the written word that does not allow me to show their interconnection, as in any way an argument for their separation.

Personal dimension: “shout, move and express in myriad ways”

See Figure 14. I have always admired the connection that Alex has with his body. In the SP he always expressed how comfortable he feels through body movement and the way dancing allows him to digest and articulate his emotions. In one of the sessions, he facilitated an activity by using body movement, he suggested: “whenever you need to let off steam, create some

Figure 14
“Finally expressing myself”



Source: Alex, SP, picture retrieved from Alex's Instagram account, 2020.

movements, represent an emotion, play music and let yourselves go”. His ability to let his body speak was deeply inspiring.

You can hear in Alex’s stories all the possibilities of expression that art opens to him. When emotions and feelings are ambiguous, changing and complex, and thus impossible to transmit through the fixed and limited labels that oral expression offers, art allows infinite possibilities, shapes and ways to articulate them (Barwell 1986: 175). In fact, during the SP Alex mentioned that he feels much more comfortable communicating with his body than with words. But the fixity of oral expression was not the only thing that limited him. As an ‘effeminate’ body, his history was marked by several events of bullying, particularly during his childhood. As described in chapter three, the dominant ideas of masculinity and compulsory heterosexuality drove him to restrict his sexuality. As he said, “I was a scared kid. I felt very lonely. But I preferred to remain silent”. His body was always in tension, confining his emotions and desires. Living in a permanent restriction lacerated his body, affecting his

personal wellbeing but also his interaction with the world. This constructed him as introvert and inhibited. He was “scared” of raising his voice and standing for his desires (professionally but also personally speaking). However, dance enabled his body to articulate his thoughts and feelings through movement, in which the fluidity that characterizes art eliminated all boundaries (Lorenz 2012: 19).

Furthermore, dance made his body a livable place. All the fear, nervousness and insecurity that were trapped in his body, not only generated hurtful wounds, but also created an uncomfortable place for Alex to inhabit. Living in tension and in permanent restriction is simply unsustainable. Art allowed him to evacuate the emotions that were confined in his body and to start healing the wounds caused by the anxiety and frustration of not being able to sufficiently conform. If we bring back the ‘corset’ metaphor, we can say that dance alleviated the pressure of the ‘corset’ and let Alex breathe. Alex’s tone of voice, while narrating this story, revealed that dance was like a deep inhalation of fresh air after being in ‘lockdown’ for his whole life.

We are filled of prejudices, fears and ideas [...]. Dancing is about stopping our mind and letting our body shout, move, and express in myriad ways.
(Alex, SP, 2020).

As well as considering that art “facilitate[s] the possibility of abandoning the confinements of subjectivity” (Lorenz 2012: 19), dance enabled him to reconnect with his body. Embodying the “prejudices, fear and ideas” that subjected his *cuir* identity, made him feel ashamed of his body and thus, create a distance with the place that he permanently inhabits: his own body. However, dance permits him to “stop his mind”, with this also to stop the “prejudices, fear and ideas”, and so, to let his body express. Here, I would like to reflect further about the words he employs to describe the forms of expression that dance brings to him: “shout, move and express in myriad ways”. His history allows us to understand ‘shouting’ and ‘moving’ as words alluding to his discontent about his career but also to forms of loving, desiring and feeling pleasure; therefore, ‘myriad ways’ would also speak to those forms that are understood as ‘deviated’ from a ‘straight’ standpoint. In this sense, when he allows himself to “shout and move in myriad ways”, he allows his *cuir* body to exist and to embrace the many possibilities of love and desire.

Finally, that art is personal and intimate does not mean that it stays innocent in who sees it (Lorenz 2012: 20). The power of art is in generating reconnection when oral expression has not allowed a proper communication and thus, distances emerged. The constraints that Alex experienced made him feel distanced from his family. Home was an unsafe place for him to open up about his sexuality, and also about his love for dance. He lived afraid of not having the support of his family and decided to “remain quiet”. Through dance, he was able to shatter the silence and to “shout” his more profound desires and disconformities, i.e. not ‘adequately’ conforming with norms and feeling discontent with family pressures. What we see in his story, is how, through dance Alex created a space for his mother to sense his experience, and to “participate vicariously” in it (Eisner 2008: 6). This allowed her to “walk in his

shoes” and, through an “empathetic experience” (ibid), to embody his emotions. Through dance, Alex was able to shorten the existing distance with his mother. Body movement represented a comfortable and safe way for him (feeling almost untouchable and protected by the scenario) to reconnect with her. In the story of Alex we can see how art is about creating or re-creating connections, especially when they get lost due to repressed subjectivities.

Political dimension: “generating noise”

The political dimension of Alex’s artistic expression is glaring. He was able to speak and express the unspeakable. He *cuir*ed art and communication; and he allowed his cuirness to exist and his body “to feel with no limits”. Let me explore the political dimension further through Carlos’ story. His story illustrates how the role of art disrupts the fixed understandings of the ‘natural’ and demonstrates the malleability of the body. Curing nature and recognizing the fluidity of the embodied self are at the center of this paper and its political dimension which this story illuminates.

See Figure 15. It caught my attention that Carlos referred to Lilith by using the third person, ‘Lilith is’, ‘Lilith thinks...’, this is indeed a usual practice in the drag scene. Yet, the boundaries between him and Lilith are blurry and uncertain. Lilith not only emerged from Carlos’ experiences, lacerations and imaginaries, but she also interacts with the world through the same material body as Carlos. Therefore, his body becomes a shared place, in which resistance and subjection cohabit and inform each other. This is how the art of drag becomes political. His personal history is not only personal, but it also speaks to the public, to those who live the same oppressions and to those who do not. His art “generates noise” and even if it might be unintelligible, it can become, what Lorenz (2012: 20) calls, “contagious”. When recognition is a denied possibility due to his cuirness, “contagion” plays a central role in the process of normalization, the process through which “norms and regulations [become] acceptable for subjects” (ibid 21). In this sense, “contagion instead of recognition then also allows for speaking when one is not authorized to speak” (ibid) and whose voice has thus been silenced. After being silent for many years, embodying Lilith let him “generate noise”. A political “noise” that, through “contagion”, contests the dominant discourses—unpacked in chapter three—that subject *cuir* bodies.

By proposing alternative, and sometimes ambiguous, bodily characteristics, through drag he “denounces that which dominant ideology presents as natural, normal, and inescapable” (Sieg 2002: 2). When Carlos speaks about “construction and re-construction” of the self, he illuminates the possibilities that art offers to disrupt the socially-constructed dichotomies of the masculine and the feminine, the natural and the unnatural, the normal and the deviant. In this context, self-exploration opens the space to question how the body has been constructed and the essentializing ideas upon which prejudices and stigma rely. Drag unveils the strangeness of items, behaviors and practices, and thus, locate them as mere “garment” that have been used to discipline the body and thus, that can also be altered and challenged. Following

Figure 15
“Drag is political!”



Source: Carlos/Lilith, SP, pictures retrieved from Carlos/Lilith's Instagram account, 2020.

Butler's words, we can say that social norms constitute Carlos' body and Lilith enables him to denounce "how this constitution takes place" (2004: 15).

In this sense, the concept of performativity (Butler 2009) helps us to understand that the so called 'natural' ideas of gender and sexuality are socially constructed and are not inherent to our bodies. You might want to go back to the images above and take a closer look of Lilith's clothes, accessories, attitude, body positions. Let your attention dive into the details. As you can see, Carlos' body becomes the place where "various embodiments and fantasies can be experimented". Lilith allows the 'true' and the 'false', the 'normal' and the 'deviated', to be present. Many of his performances remain attached to the normative understanding while others raise questions and generate contradictions. Drag allows his body to be fluid and ambiguous, while resisting to the fixed ideas that have been assigned by social norms. Through his art, Carlos demonstrates the malleability of the body.

Carlos' artistic expression contributes to problematize other categories beyond gender and sexuality, it also raises questions about class, race and religion. As we can read from his story, he is aware of the political value of art

and he not only encourage us to think about the content that we transmit through art expressions, but also to reflect from where are we resisting. By acknowledging his privileges, he speaks from his experiences and avoids obscuring other realities. He employs his position as a platform to raise his voice and promote the problematization of privileges with others who also hold power. Moreover, Carlos' drag expression is not restricted to the Caucasian-bourgeois Lilith, but he also explores his own *mestizaje* by performing indigeneity and afro-descendance. Here again, his individual exercise of exploration becomes political. The performance of race positions it as a “masquerade”, and this “simulacrum of ‘race’, challenges the perceptions and privileges of those who would mistake appearances for essence” (Sieg 2002: 3). This reinforces the ability of drag, as an artistic expression to dismantle essentializations.

Finally, Lilith also disrupts the heteronormative and anthropocentric discourses promoted by religion, discussed in chapter three. He chose this name since “Lilith is the first woman, before Eve, in the Judeo-Christian mythology [...] and is the character that renounces to the paradise. She renounces to the idea of the desired and decides to explore by her own”. Carlos adopts this name “to reclaim that self-exploration” and go beyond heteronormativity. Moreover, the picture on the right (Figure 15) represents a character created for a theater play, *Nuestra Señora de las Maricas* (Our Lady of the Maricas),¹⁵ through which he shows the power of humanity to interpret the ‘natural’ and the ‘deviant’, contesting the culture and nature divide. He also questions the contradictions that reside on religious discourses, such as: “The God of all” when some are not considered part of “all”.

To sum up, Lilith demonstrates the possibilities offered by art expressions, and that art is not about “doing” gender/sexuality/class/race/religion, but about “undoing” it (Lorenz 2012: 21).

4.2 Cuirnaturecultures through “cuir eyes”

See Figure 16. This drawing was made by Alex in one of our SP sessions. When he shared it with us, he explained: “Eyes are so important for me. Through them we see the world and we can also see into people’s soul”. When he speaks about “seeing the world”, Alex does not limit it to its literal connotation, he refers to the broad meaning of experiencing the world. He acknowledges the particular standpoint that living as *cuir* brings to us and how our previous experiences shape the way we see and interact with the world. This can be conceived as what Sandilands (2005: 3) calls “queer ecological sensibility”, a concept that allows us to recognize the relation that we have with the “natural environment”, as resulting from “emotional resonances” that

¹⁵ *Marica* is a term that holds a negative connotation, used to refer to men who do not identify as heterosexual or who do not perform the dominant ideal of masculinity. This term is in the current process of re-appropriation and can be understood as the closer translation of “queer”. Unlike *marica*, queer or rather *cuir* are used for female too.

Figure 16
“This is my queer eye”



Source: Alex, SP, 2020.

derived from our *cuir* experiences. Also referred as: “seeing nature through queer eyes” (ibid). As I mentioned in chapter three, the histories, lacerations and resistances that we embody, give us a particular standpoint, or “souls” as Alex calls it, that inform the way that we conceive the world.

As discussed in chapter three, understanding nature and culture as co-emerging allowed us to recognize that nature and the ‘natural’ as heterosexual constructions produce lacerating effects for *cuir* bodies. For this reason, I propose to pay attention to *cuir* understandings of nature, to contest dominant discourses of the (un)natural. I argue that seeing nature through *cuir* eyes can reveal new *cuir*naturecultures that emerge from the personal and are political. In the next sections, I explore more of the artistic expressions, most of them created within the SP, that contribute to see new “worlds” or “*cuir*naturecultures” (Bell 2010). I choose three specific reflections, because they convey possibilities to first, re-think the essentialized ideas of femininity and masculinity that, as I discussed in the last chapter, have a violent effect on these bodies; second, acknowledge that *cuirs* lives are part of nature; and third, reflect on what does freedom mean in this context and for these bodies.

Disrupting the masculinity/femininity binary

See Figure 17. Nestor’s family comes from Loja, a city located in the south of Ecuador, where keeping up appearance is very important. This is something that all *copensantes* shared even if we lived in different cities. Similarly, we all confronted the difficulties of engrained catholic beliefs. These two elements (the importance of appearances and religious values) affected Néstor in a particular way, due to his family social position. Last names are common social indicators, especially for the generation of Néstor’s parents. His last name is an old and established one in the community which presumes certain (conservative) family’s decisions and modes of living. Carrying this name adds

Figure 17
The strength in flowers



Source: Néstor, SP, pictures retrieved from Néstor's Instagram account, 2020.

pressure on how he 'must' perform the role of 'good son' in order to be part of what he described as "a family that must appear perfect": a catholic family that holds a socially respected last name.

The way Néstor conceives flowers, the proximity he developed to these living beings did not resonate in the same way with the other *copensantes*. It emerges from his specific history. Collecting flowers was conceived as the 'absence' of masculinity by his family because of the social constructions of good masculinity shaped by religious and social ideologies, which needed to be performed in ways that reflected his family's social position. Collecting flowers was 'not normal' for a boy in his context. It made him *'cuir'*. Expressing his

cuirness allowed him to find new naturecultures in his surroundings, disrupting the oppressive essentializations and binaries of what it was to enact femininity and masculinity.

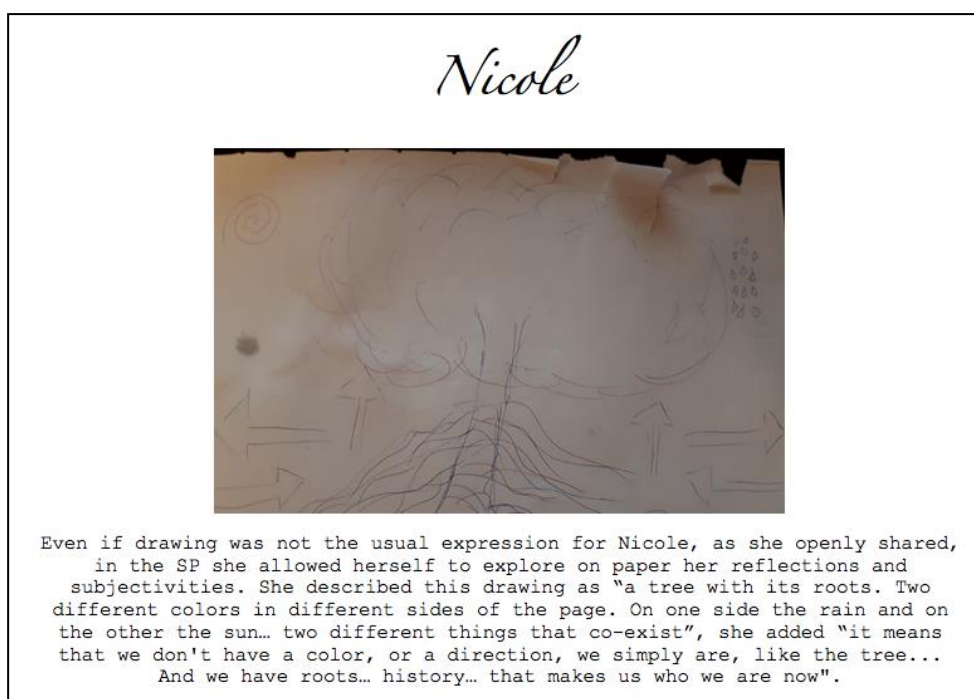
In Nestor's story, we can detect an understanding of nature as binary, in which the roles of the feminine and the masculine are distinguishable from each other, or what Fausto-Sterling (2007: 47) describes as being "locked into an oppositional framework". Following this framework, and mostly informed by *machismo*, in Ecuador flowers are commonly employed as an insult *-florequita-* for men who perform an alternate masculinity. In fact, flowers are socially seen as the 'pure' embodiment of 'femininity' with all what characterizes it, such as: 'sensitivity', 'vulnerability', 'fragility', 'softness'. Thus, the term *florequita* not only represents an insult for being 'less' masculine, but it also assumes that masculinity is absent because of the presence of femininity. This binary thinking, that assumes that the presence of one cancels the existence of the other, has not only generated violence against those bodies that do not perform one of the two 'extremes', but has also restricted our understanding of femininity and masculinity as two separate expressions that cannot cohabit; although, as discussed in chapter three, flowers incorporate "male and female reproductive structures". However, acknowledging its cuirness threatens heteronormativity.

In his story, Néstor recognizes this cuirness and challenges the assumed separability between femininity and masculinity, as well as the biological determinism through which Ecuadorian culture has interpreted it. He is able to appreciate the strength of flowers: "they are so strong they can even break cement". With this I am not saying that through flowers he finds the usually-denied strength of femininity, but that through flowers, he recognizes the 'naturalness' of the two 'extremes', strength and fragility, the 'masculine' and the 'feminine', cohabiting in a single being. Flowers empower him to embrace a part of his identity that has been criticized since his early age: "his feminine side", as he puts it. Flowers inspired him to integrate femininity into his nature and allow it to coexist with his masculinity.

Demanding the right of "being"

See Figure 18. As depicted in Nicole's drawing, our history, which she represents as the roots of the tree, is always defining the way we experience our surroundings. To understand this better, we need to look at Nicole's history a little more. "My mother never said she was a feminist. But her actions make her one. She was clear about the gender struggles [...] she insisted to me that just because I am a woman, I would have to work more than a man and to confront injustices. I was raised to fight for my rights". These statements founded Nicole's roots. The strength and confidence with which Nicole was 'watered' informed her understanding of having the right of "being". Resistance was engrained in her body and informed her struggle as a *cuir*. Her mother always encouraged her to fight for what she feels. This allowed her to develop a high level of trust with her own body, and to trust feelings and sensations. This was sufficiently powerful to make her problematize the

Figure 18
“We simply are, like the tree”



Source: Nicole, SP, 2020.

external discourses rather than her own body. “I never felt that what was happening to me was not normal. Yes... I was recognizing it was different from what I was told as a kid, but I never felt it was bad, incorrect or unnatural”. When she shared stories, the confidence in herself and her ways to love, was contagious and even encouraging for those of us who did not feel as proud and confident.

Consequently, *cuir* ecological sensibility must be understood as a standpoint that is informed by our cuirness but not exclusively by it. Her personal history, not only her cuirness but also her struggles as a woman, her identity as a daughter whose mother also struggled, along with others subjectivities, informs Nicole’s understanding of what is natural and her contestations to ideas of who has the right to exist and “be”.

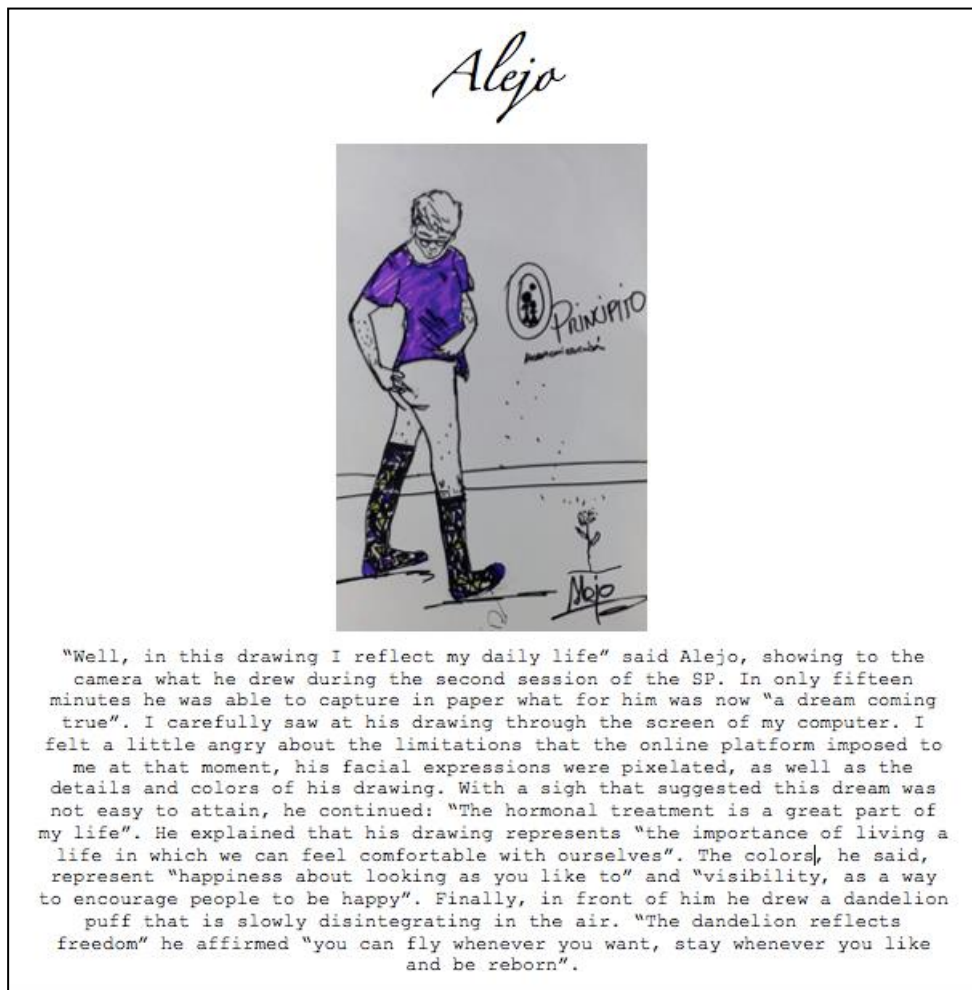
In this drawing, she recognizes the possibility of harmoniously sharing space with other beings, like the sun and the rain, despite the different “directions” that these beings can take. I want to stress here on the natureculture that Nicole proposes of having “different colours or directions”, but still having the right to just “be” there. If we delve deeper, “directions” refer to ways of seeing life and interacting, and also ways of loving and desiring. By saying that “we don’t have a color or a direction” she opens the opportunity for *cuir* beings to just “be”, without labels, and without making any clear statement about our “direction”, how we love or how we desire.

She reflects about the right of “being”. To occupy a space in nature, “simply” being, “like the tree”. She reclaims what our Andean comovision constructed as part of our identity, that was taken away due to

heteronormativity: “that we come from nature and we are part of nature” (Macas 2010: 16). She understands that there is a space for *cuir* beings to exist, together with other beings, without assuming that all nature is *cuir*, but recognizing the diverse “directions” that inhabit on it.

Becoming a ‘free’ dandelion: reclaiming a ‘natural’ freedom

Figure 19
A free dandelion



Source: Alejo, SP, 2020.

See Figure 19. “I am not very good at speaking” Alejo said several times during our conversations. It appeared that he barely noticed that he spoke loud and clear through his art. This was not only a way to immortalize his story, but also to communicate what freedom means for him and the way his cuirness informed it. In one of our sessions he shared a story from his childhood, that can help us to understand better how his subjectivity informs his conception of freedom. “When I was only five or six years old. I was in kindergarten, and

they separated us into two lines, one for boys and the other one for girls. I remembered I was seated in the boys' line and I obviously took the seat of another boy. He just went to the girls' line. When the professor arrived, she said: 'what is going on here? Let's see... Cindel!'. My name was Cindel, he clarified to the rest of *copensantes*, with some resignation, and continued: Cindel please stand up, you are not a boy! The girls' line is over here" he said imitating his professor's firm tone of voice.

With this story and Alejo's drawing in mind, we can understand that for him freedom represents having the possibility to 'sit' whenever he decides. This was what the hormonal treatment enabled him to do. Having a material body, that reflects how he sees himself and allows him to be in the "boys' line". For him, disintegrating in the air, flying and being reborn, is a symbol of freedom inspired by the dandelion and transported to his body. Freedom meant to have the possibility to conceive his body as what Carlos calls 'garment', a malleable surface that can be altered and adjusted in order to please the way he wants to self-expose in the world.

According to Alaimo (2010: 55), it is possible to challenge the notion of animals as representing "a moral model or embodiment of some static universal law" by finding new ways of existing and taking inspiration from fluidity, that "make nonsense of biological reductionism". I consider that this can be applied to all beings. In fact, Alejo is practicing this rebellion throughout his understanding of the dandelion. His *cuir* eyes allow him to explore a particular *cuir*natureculture of 'freedom' based on the right to fly, to change and to be reborn. His courage to become a dandelion crystalizes Alaimo's proposal of seeing animals "not as genetically driven machines but as creatures embedded within and creating other 'worlds' or naturecultures" (ibid 55-56), and he takes this further by opening this possibility to more-than-human, such as the dandelion.

Through the *cuir*natureculture that Alejo's drawing proposes bodies can be "reclaimed and refigured as home - the desired place of connectedness, family and wellbeing" (Claire in Di Chiro 2010: 200). In this sense, *cuir* bodies instead of being places of violence and abuse, grounded in heteronormative discourses, can become places of liberation and expression. We can then conceive freedom as living our gender and sexuality in the ways that we 'naturally' feel. This can be related to Nicole's understanding of the right of 'being'. To have the right to exist and to be considered as 'natural' as a flying dandelion puff and a rooted tree; and to embody the peace of mind that Néstor depicted in the drawing with which we opened the discussion (Figure 11).

5 Curing research is going beyond it

Throughout this paper, I focused my attention on the implications of a heteronormative conception of nature and the way society extracts norms from the nature culture divide. Using this framework from QE based my discussions with the SP, I explored how dominant ideas of femininity and masculinity are constructed as the ‘true’ nature of women and men in Ecuador and its implications for *cuir*s. I looked at how these moralities determine interactions at home, shaping it as a restrictive place. The confinement at home during Covid-19 times is therefore of particular concern as these *cuir* bodies had to cope not only with the many emotions related to it, such as: uncertainty, stress, anxiety but also with the ambiguity of their feelings of being confined to their home, where their cuirness was not always recognized or allowed.

This is why the creation of a SP was so important, even urgent. Indeed, although the creation of an online SP originally emerged as a ‘contingency’ plan, as I had originally planned to do research in Ecuador but could not due to Covid-19; during the research process my conception of the cyberspace changed. I therefore conclude this paper by returning to some of the questions I asked at the beginning and which I have continued to unravel while writing. What possibilities do the cyberspace bring for *cuir* bodies? Are they accessible for all *cuir*s? What does it mean to inhabit a *cuir* body in the digital environment? Is it possible to speak about embodiment when speaking about the cyberspace? How are digital interactions shaped by these new conditions of Covid-19? And how does this contribute to *cuir* research? After co-creating this SP, I still have no concrete answer, but I also acquired some learnings and takes away that I seek to bring in this ‘conclusion’.

Being online allowed us to ‘be together’ even if we were located, not only in different cities, but in different continents (Latin America and Europe), and thus, our material bodies were separated by the ocean and thousands of kilometers. Despite of the physical distance and the time zone differences, in the digital space we were able to share the same time and space. We were able to hear, see and ‘feel’ each other. By creating a place in the cyberspace, we shared stories, reflections, hope and art, we created bonds, and we generated, what Carlos calls “noise”. This place was intimate and personal, and it was also political, a site of mutual recognition in which we denounced our oppressions, proposed new imaginaries and generated contestations. All this would not have been possible otherwise now, when the cyberspace is the only completely ‘safe’ space to socially interact. Here, ‘safe’ speaks for both the risk of Covid-19 infection and the risk of speaking/performing/feeling what has been conceived the ‘unmentionable’ in some of our homes.

The possibility of participating in an online SP also speaks about our privileges, that I sought to show throughout this paper, and I bring them back to this conclusion. The most evident privilege was having access to Internet and a device from where to connect. But having access to such connections did not position our privileges as homogeneous. For instance, in our SP some of the *copensantes* had better internet connection than others and some had to deal with problems of sound, more pixelated interactions and sudden

disconnections. Sharing the screen and sound at the same time, being online for the entire session, having a high-quality camera to share art expressions, or having a high-quality microphone to be neatly heard, were some of the disparities in our SP that allowed/restricted some more than others, and which would need to be discussed further in terms of 'digital justice'.¹⁶

At the same time, this paper incentivized me to reflect further about what is it to 'feel' each other, to be 'closed' and to be 'together'. These are some of the interactions that acquired a different dimension in the online environment. When we are in the cyberspace, we inhabit a non-material body, we become digital, and our shape and size vary according to the software that we navigate. In Zoom, our bodies became one-dimensional pixelated squares just as flat as the screens on which they were viewed. Sometimes this shape produced a feeling of isolation, but it also might reduce the intimidating effect that offline bodies can generate and, in this way, can also facilitate the creation of a more inclusive environment.

In the SP, 'feeling' each other or being 'closed' to each other implied coming up with strategies that do not involve the physical interaction. Having a digital body required us to think creatively and to *cuir* our ways to bring contention and support. Our digital gestures of support were as diverse as our stories, sometimes adopting the form of a poem, a song, playing an instrument, singing, inhaling and exhaling together or exploring body movements synchronously; were some of the activities that allowed us to caress our souls, when caressing our material body was not possible. Most of these interactions included art, and thus art acquired another dimension that was not discussed in this paper but that surely needs further exploration: art as a form to transmit love and care, to create contention and to be 'closed' in the digital environment. In this sense, the digital that is often assumed as broad and even impersonal became for us in our SP embodied and intimate. Through this digital embodiment we were able to transmit and to feel, to interact and share. We *cuired* the digital and this brought us the opportunity to let our *cuirmaturecultures* travel, to re-inform our resistances and to be now here, written in this paper.

My aim is not to romanticize the creation of SP in the cyberspace and its *cuirmaturecultures*. For instance, I will never forget the emptiness and weird feelings I experienced in the third session after hanging up the videocall. This session mobilized many feelings that were difficult to digest. Being together, seeing and hearing each other, even across the screen, created a sense of contention and support. Yet, it took only one click to be alone in my room at 5am, so many emotions just below the surface. I could not help but wonder: how are the others feeling now? It was almost 10pm for them. Are they able to sleep? Should I call or text them to check? Are there limits of having an online SP that I am irresponsibly disregarding? For sure our collective support and contention played an important role in digesting all these uncertainties.

¹⁶ This justice also speaks for the need to recognize the silences of this paper: all those stories that were not told in our SP; those *cuirs* who were not part of the SP; and those who are still in the closet.

I do believe that creating a SP imposes a serious responsibility. That should not be a reason to stop exploring intimate ways of producing knowledge, but to reflect on alternatives that are raised from the excluded voices, co-constructed with them and that generate learnings to take for all those who participate on it; so that we can move away of extractive practices of knowledge production. I propose to *cuir* research. To experiment unstudied/unexplored methods that allow us to learn from each other, to create connections, to reinforce bonds with human and non-human others, who are part of our journey, and to generate ethical and honest ways to do research, that often emerge from our own vulnerabilities.

Curing research, becoming *copensantes* instead of reproducing a researcher/researched relation, also allowed me to contest the ideas that essentialize *cuirs* as victims. Co-reflecting in a co-constructed place was an opportunity to perceive the oppression but also to unpack the discourses that are ascribed in our bodies and that generate responsibilities for us, as daughters and sons, and for our parents. I mentioned this in chapter three, but as agreed with the *copensantes* in our last SP, I would like to highlight this again. Our parents are, in no way, oppressors, nor malicious. As Alex mentioned, “their histories were filled of struggles and restrictions too” that made up their subjectivities. They—our parents—, just as us—*cuir* children—are navigating a heteronormative and machista environment within which we were constructed. With this, I propose to move away from the victim/oppressor binary through which *cuirs* lives have largely been narrated, that far from raising silenced voices are rather obscuring the social constructions upon which violence against *cuirs* reside.

Curing research also contributed in the generation of situated knowledge. First, because by becoming a *copensante* I was able to show my vulnerabilities and embrace my subjectivities. I was not “a neutral researcher”. And second because as *copensante*, I could perceive nuances and particularities that reflected our diverse stories and thus, understand the need to situate them. This made me tackle the limitations of queer theory, as it does not come from the same cultures nor the same natures than us, the *copensantes*; and motivated me to explore mechanisms to situate the theoretical discussions, without disregarding the richness of foreign knowledges. With this I was able to experience the power of collaborative knowledge, not only in the sense of co-constructing the SP, but in getting inspiration from other knowledges, without aiming to generalize but rather to motivate creative resistances to navigate situated struggles.

Curing research also implied to explore art differently. In the SP, we not only experimented with art expressions that were new and strange for some of us, but we also allowed art to have a fluid and shifting purpose. In the SP, art was a language of expression, a political tool, a refuge, a medium of collective support and contention, a mechanism of self-exploration, sometimes all the above and at others random combinations. As *cuirs* we embrace the malleability

of art as much as we embrace the malleability of the body depicted in our art expressions. Undoubtedly, art *cuired* this research as much as we *cuired* art in the SP.

At the beginning of this section, I enclosed the word ‘conclusion’ in quotation mark, because I see this as a beginning of a longer path of exploring my *cuir* activism. To be political for *cuir* causes, to *cuir* my ways of being political and to generate, what Carlos calls, “noise”. A political noise.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: More about Néstor

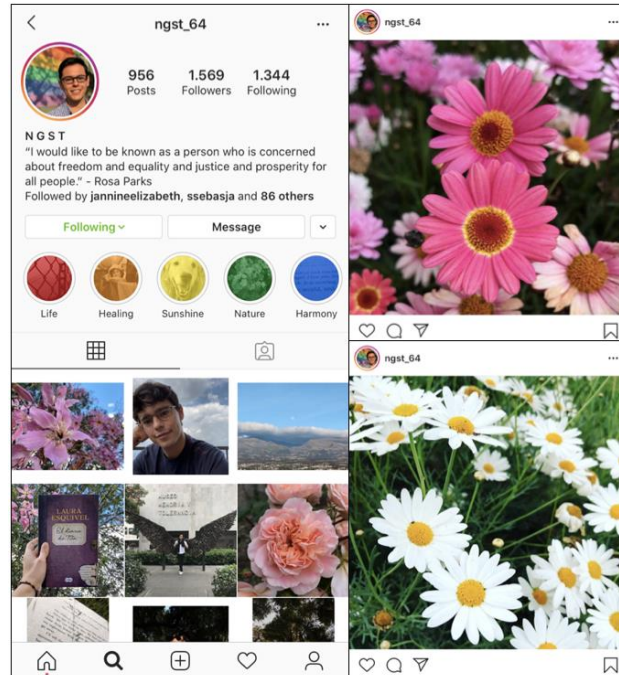
It is a complete pleasure to hear Néstor talking. His eloquence is impossible to ignore, and his thoughts were always provocative. Through his stories Néstor invited me to rethink many of my pre-conceptions, especially about religion. After experiencing religion as an oppressive set of ideologies Néstor's story was refreshing for me.

When he was 24 years old, he decided to attend an Ignatian spiritual retreat. After two days of vow of silence, he felt that God was speaking to him. "The spiritual guides repeated several times that God is the God of all, including homosexuals" he said.

In this retreat, Néstor recognized and embraced his sexual orientation: "I always knew I was different. And this retreat made me realize what was happening to me [...] I was happy, I finally understood what was happening!". Although religion was, in large part, the set of beliefs that inform his father's lack of support, Néstor found on it a refuge. For him, religion was about justice. "I felt liberated, I had found the answer that I had searched for so long, so I could not wait to tell everybody!". His story definitely pushed me to think about nuances and the many binaries that are still guiding my thinking.

Although the news was not very well taken at home, Néstor felt relieved after speaking out. The social expectations had limited him for so long, that he repressed his sexuality without even been conscious of it. Finally embracing his way of loving felt like "dropping something very heavy" he carried for his entire life. This was also reflected on the way he experienced his body. "I started to love my legs for example, or how certain clothes look on me".

Since I met him, I was amazed by his ability to draw, paint and write. Undoubtedly, he always invested his heart on his art and coming out of the closet allowed him to explore other dimensions of art. "Photography was liberating" he said. Indeed, his Instagram account is filled of pride and activism. I must admit that entering to his account feels like 'home' to me.



Source: Nestor's Instagram account

“Many people have questioned my decision of making it public. My mother was one of them ‘what is the need of showing it so much? Why to paint yourself a rainbow? Why going out with flowers on your head? why do you want to shout it out loud?’ I feel this is an opportunity to celebrate my existence, the struggles and all I have lived and still live. That is why I like the pride parades, all the opportunity to be visible. This is not only a way of being myself but also of being proud of it... accept my history... I’ve been using digital spaces, especially Instagram, as one of the forms to express myself without fears or judgements. To stop thinking about how I dress, or if people will mock about me or not. I can post a picture wearing a shawl, and a crown of flowers and play with my image. I am not saying that it was easy to do. But it helps me to feel that I can actually do it, that I can accentuate my history in that way. It empowers me...”

Appendix 2: More about Alex

Being with Alex is always a pleasure. Just with a smile, he is able to transmit so much enthusiasm and passion. He was almost always the first one arriving to our safe place, so that we had the time to chat before the sessions. Many times, I felt hesitant, anxious or scared about this paper. And he was there... reassuring me with words of love and support.

His ways of telling stories was filled of body expressions. I did not even need to listen to his words to understand the emotions that he was trying to explain. And I do not even have enough words to explain how I felt when I saw him dancing.

He described that coming out of the closet with his family was not easy, nor was it to grow up in a society where his masculinity was not well seen due to what he often described as machismo. “People made me feel like something was wrong with me. It was incredible! I could not feel what they wanted me to feel. I developed a

condemnatory attitude against myself. I did not understand why I was not able to be like the rest". At school he also felt judged and lonely. "you know... there were two separate groups, men and women... I did not like recesses because I had no one to be with. Besides, walking was enough to be a subject of mockery".

Finally, he came out with his parents in an unexpected moment. When he narrated his story his voice broke and I could feel that there was still much pain on him despite of all the happiness and energy that characterize his personality. "I did not want to do it, but it was too heavy to continue hiding it. I was so desperate, I had no one to talk to, or to let off steam. I did not know another person that was living this. I felt lonely for a long time. So, I exploited without wanting that. I was drunk, nothing planned". He then described that his parents brought him to a psychologist, who "clarified that there was nothing wrong and that this was something to work as a family". However, after that session his family decided to forget this moment and to act as though nothing has happened. This profoundly hurt to Alex "I still feel resentment", he said. "It is assumed that your parents are who know you in depth, but that is not always true. They do not know the more important things about me. They were the first to judge me. They did not understand".

Despite how hard all this was for him, during all our encounters, Alex accentuated that he understands his parents' reactions. "They come from small cities where traditions and ideologies are very engrained. Any idea that is different from theirs is very difficult to digest. Besides, they are from another generation. It was not easy for them". He acknowledged their history and the way external ideologies were at the core of his parents' decisions. Also, once he had read the draft of this paper, he commented he felt happy to see the process through which his story was written but he also felt a little scared that one could think his parents are malicious, when that is not true. He pushed our reflections further and motivated us to think about our parents' history and move away from essentializations.

Although coming out of the closet was not easy for him, it allowed him to find some relief. With a voice filled of hope he shared: "your body feels different. That was taking so much space in my body... and when I came out it was gone. My body started to transmit in a different way, allowing my emotions to flow. I even walked differently, I moved more my hips, I felt more relaxed. My body felt lighter, with more rhythm". More rhythm!! That is what he said... How important must have been for him to find rhythm in his body since dance is a tremendous part of his identity.

All these stories, emotions and ways of seeing life were present in his art. When Alex dances there is no doubt that his body reaches an unimaginable freedom. He taught me that dance is not only about expressing, but also about having an intimate moment of reflection to recognize and digest our emotions. "I start moving and then I can realize that sadness is not really sadness, it is just a thought that infected my body. But I move, move, move, move, move... until my body releases those thoughts. The connection between our body and our emotions is the strongest thing that we have as human beings. We express through our body, and through movement we let it breath".



Source: Alex's Instagram account

Finally, I want to thank Alex, for teaching me so much but especially because, in our SP, when we felt emotional and moved, he made us see the beauty on our histories. "Those are the things and experiences that we need to live to have what we have today right? To be free today..." He had so much courage and strength in his soul, and through his stories, these two became inevitably contagious.

Appendix 3: More about Nicole

She was the first person I decided to reach out for the SP mostly because of her admirable sense of justice. Knowing her for a while allowed me to appreciate her strength of character as well as her compassion and inspiring way to care for humans and other-than-humans.

It was easy to notice that every word Nicole pronounces is motivated by a profound passion. When she believes in something, she is not afraid to defend her point of view whenever is needed. This was related with the way her mother raised her and was translated in the way she navigated her sexuality. "My mother raised me with

strong foundations on my character, feelings and decisions. So, I have never felt affected by people's opinions. Of course, I feel angry and frustrated about it, but I have never internalized the rejection or the lack of acceptance”.

When Nicole speaks about her, I could feel the gratitude and respect in her voice. She actually felt very happy when I proposed to include a picture of her mother in this paper. This is a way of honoring cuir children's parents. Those, who often break life-time and engrained ideologies to understand their children's sexuality. Those, who care and love their children so much that are willing to contradict a whole society. But also, to those who cannot understand but still keep loving unconditionally their children.



Source: Nicole's Instagram account

She also had many reflections to which we could relate. For instance, she described the process of coming out as a never-ending one. “We are constantly coming out of the closet... in different ways... but we do it all the time. When we know new people, being homosexual is always something to be said, and in any case, people will find out”. Her reflection made us all nod.

Nicole brought laughs and joy to our SP. Her sense of humor allowed us to create an environment of relaxation and conviviality through which we could digest better our emotions.

Appendix 4: More about Alejo

I feel very grateful for meeting Alejo in this SP. His sweetness was glaring and when he smiled it was inevitable to smile too.

His stories resonated much with me. Since we lived in the same city, many of his references were familiar to me. For instance, he describes very well the environment that we, as cuirs, confront before coming out of the closet. Before he even realized how he felt about his gender, many conversations about homosexuality were already taking place in his home. He heard his family speaking very violently about 'gays'. "That was very painful for me, they did not know they were speaking about me".

"I started expressing myself as a 'boy' since I was a kid, so my family -my parents and my uncles- started to see that there was something 'weird' on me". His family was trying to correct his behaviors by saying things like: "Why do you dress like a man? Dress as a woman!". All this put a lot of pressure on him. He still remembers anecdotes from his early ages that depict the discomfort that he felt having to perform in a way that he did not like. "I was only five or six years old. We had a party one day, and I didn't want to go because I knew I had to wear a dress and hair bows. That was a torture for me. So, to avoid going, I cut my hair [he showed in the camera that he almost shaved one side] but it was not enough. They put a headband to hide the haircut and they brought me to the party".

In music, Alejo found a refuge. During our SP he sang and played the guitar for us. Through his voice we could experience all the love he felt for music. When he started playing, it seemed like he was not the same person. In one of the breaks we had in the SP, he forgot to turn off his microphone and started playing the guitar without knowing he was being heard. He had the ability of transforming our environment. In seconds it was filled of nostalgia and sweetness like his song.

His father realized that Alejo enjoyed from music since he was a kid. "He used to put folklore music in the house: Los Kjarkas [a Bolivian group of Andean music] and I was in love with their music. So, my father started to buy musical instruments for me. I was very happy. I had so much fun!". Alejo spoke about music with much passion. At the same time, he shared with us that, as a kid, he dreamt with being a singer, but not any singer "I wanted to become famous, but with a masculine voice".

When he underwent hormonal treatment, he knew that his voice was going to change. I found his decision very courageous and hard to make. He decided to give his voice in exchange of feeling comfortable with his body. "I was singing all the time. I started to write my own songs and to have shows... but I was not happy enough, something was missing so I decided to start my transition". When I asked him about his voice and how was he feeling after two years of hormones, he explained: "I am a happy person even if I am full of demons [he called demons to his resentments]. Music helps me to confront those demons. It is true that it is not easy. You know before it felt so easy to sing. But now I am experimenting with my voice again and trying to find how to sing again. This voice is now my natural voice".

Appendix 5: More about Carlos/Lilith

Meeting Carlos was a genuine pleasure. After talking to him, I had several ideas that stayed in my mind for days. His reflections always sparked curiosity...

When he narrated his coming out story he started by apologizing "sorry if this sounds mechanical but this happened many years ago and I had already shared it several times". However, it did not sound mechanic at all. When he described the scene, I was able to feel every detail. To my surprise, his story was not about the way he confronted his parents. He shared instead one of the first, and most painful, moments in which he had to come out. As Nicole said. Coming out is a never-ending process.

Carlos moved from Ibarra to Quito to pursue his studies in architecture. After some time, he became very close to his best friend's family in Quito, that welcomed him as another son. He attended to family events and had lunch with them every Sunday. Carlos explained that a problem emerged when he started to have a special connection with his best friend's partner "I had a different relation with him, and even if we were only friends, she felt jealous". One Sunday everything changed. "I went to her house to have lunch, as we usually did, but that Sunday was different. It was like an inquisition against me. That was so intense and traumatic". In this point of the story, his feelings and emotions were on the surface. I could see them in his facial expression through the pixelated screen. With a mixed of anger and resentment he continued: "Her mother, father, big brother and her... they accused me of being homosexual, of being deviant, and many other words that they used that I did not understand back then". Still with some pain in his tone of voice, he stated: "The family that welcomed me said that I should not exist!". "My only reaction was to cry. I had depression after that, I did not eat for like two weeks, I wanted to die. It was a very violent process... I felt so lonely", he concluded.

All these tough experiences made Carlos an active rights defender. This was why he initiated to drag. Lilith was his mechanism, his platform to speak out for all those who were confronting "inquisitions", just like him.

Lilith was also a result of a process that was not always easy. "I felt bad at the beginning. The other drags were different. They wore different garment and even made different jokes that I didn't get. I wanted to imitate their image but I could not. Then with a friend, we reflected about my history and my feminine icons. After noticing the differences of my history and the one of the other drags, my friend said something that completely changed my mind: 'why do you want to imitate them if you haven't lived what they did, you haven't been in environments of violence, you haven't been in environments of poverty, even if you care about it, you have not experienced it in the same way. Your representation is different'. Now they call me bourgeois I agree with pride, and I understand what is my position of resistance".

He shared with me many stories about his everyday forms of resistance, particularly when he performs Lilith and contest power from his positionality. "There was a drag event in the Center for Contemporary Art in Quito, and at the same time another event was taking place in the same Center. The other one was organized by the government with... you know... from the elite. So, at the entrance they said to me and the rest of drags 'No girls, you need to use the back door'. And many went to the back door. But I did not. I said: 'sorry? are you prohibiting me to walk in a public space?' I was there with my very refined purse and asked for the person in charge. When he arrived, I said 'Are you denying me the entrance just because I am dressed like this?' I knew I could sue them for discriminating us. And of course, they left me pass".

He also shared another story with me: "One day we were invited as drags to the launching of the book of a very known scholar. But they did not allow the drags to sit next to the dean. So, I told them 'you objectify me, you only want the picture to seem progressive and say that drags were here, but you don't want any drag to sit next to the dean' So I sat down and called the other girls. We got our seats next to the dean. This is how I approach the privilege"

I could hear to his anecdotes for hours. I enjoyed the way Lilith and Carlos became one when he narrated his stories.

Covid-19 was a time to rethink Lilith. He explicitly said that he was reflecting about many things in his life and Lilith was also one. "I'm leaving Lilith in a pause, I'm not rejecting her but overhauling her. This pandemic has taught us to value what we

love, and I love drag, but I don't like the environment in which it takes place. It is toxic: too much envy and criticism. We are all heterogeneous, we are all diverse, we are all discriminated and violated, but we also discriminate among ourselves. For instance, I don't like RuPaul, there is so much toxicity: disloyalties, gossip and negative energy. Moreover, it promotes a very Hellenic ideal of beauty (Greek notion related to perfection, symmetry and 'harmony' of the body) and many stereotypes. But I perform Lilith in order to contest symbolic violence, not to replicate it”.

Appendix 6: More about Ximena

Some time ago, I wrote a story that I could not sign with my name. Anonymity was the only form through which I could express my cuirness. A couple of months ago, I decided to replace my pseudonym for my real name. And this is the story that now bears my name and travels with pride on the internet waves:

Al desnudo

No sé si alguna vez había sentido un deseo tan intenso de quitarle todo lo que traía puesto. De quitarle la ropa, el maquillaje, el cabello, las apariencias, pero sobre todo de quitarle los miedos. Creo que jamás había sentido una necesidad tan infinita y desesperada de desnudarla entera, a ella, quien me traía tan fuera de mí.

Debo decir que mi deseo nada de sexual tenía, aunque mentiría si diría que no había nada carnal. Pero esta vez, por este instante, quería que fuera el deseo más sano en mi vida llena de pecado.

Sí, quería tenerla desnuda frente a mí, desnuda de los pies a la cabeza. Sin ropa, sin mentiras, sin suspiros, sin prejuicios. Un instante de total sinceridad, un instante para mirar su alma. No quiero mentir, desde que la vi entrar por esa puerta he querido quitarle todo lo que traía encima, solo para comprender quién es y qué tiene que me ata y me desata a su puro capricho.

¡Pero qué locura la mía de querer descubrir lo que esos ojos podían esconder! Si de reojo el miedo recorre mi cuerpo tan solo al imaginar tu ser.

Pero sé que esto no puede llamarse amor sino hasta conocer todos esos demonios que llamas defectos, todos los pensamientos erróneos o sucios que alguna vez pudiste tener. Y por favor, no critiques mi crudeza ¡por favor! no pienses que estoy loca. Creo estarlo, no trato de negarlo. Pero tal vez solo intento que comprendas que también estoy llena de esas cosas que debes conocer de mí, antes de afirmar quererme. Creo que solo intento desnudarme como para hacer más equitativa esta situación.

Así que adelante amor mío, amor prohibido. Iniciemos por sacarte todo lo que has decidido poner como pretexto a esto que intentamos llamarle relación. ¿Qué tal si comenzamos por olvidar lo que nos enseñaron del amor? Comencemos por quitarte toda la importancia que les hemos otorgado tan comedidamente a esos y esas que no hacen más que criticarnos, sin siquiera entender lo bien que puede sentirse estar entre tus brazos. Y si ahora retiramos lentamente los prejuicios que te han estado pesando tanto, dime tú qué es lo que puede quedar, además de este loco amor que sentimos tú y yo.

Permíteme rozar lentamente tu cuerpo mientras voy entrando a tu alma, déjame alcanzar la profundidad más oscura de tu mente y comprender ¿qué es lo que en verdad te aterrera?

Déjame navegar por tu cuerpo, iniciar por tu cabello y recorrer tus pensamientos. Déjame conocer tu historia y hacer un pacto con tus anécdotas. No te pido nada complicado, solo te ruego que me permitas enamorarme de ti. No de quién dices ser, no de quien todos se atreven a pensar que eres, no de quien te convendría ser, y

mucho menos de quien has intentado ser, sino de ti... Simple y sencillamente de ti. Déjame amarte. ¿Y los demás?

Pues solo diré que ellos podrán ser felices teniendo algo para criticar, al fin y al cabo terminarán por hacerlo. Si no es por nuestro amor será por cualquier otra circunstancia. Así que al diablo con estos disfraces y ¡vamos! ¡Te invito a amarnos!, creo que esta propuesta hace una mejor armonía que un simple “vamos por un café”. Pero tú decides...

Undressing her

I don't know if I have ever felt such an intense desire to remove everything she was wearing. Her clothes, makeup, hair, appearances, but above all to remove her fears. I think I had never felt such an infinite and desperate need to completely undress her, she, who was driving me crazy.

I must say that my desire had no sexual intention, yet I would be lying if I said that nothing carnal was involved. But this time, for this moment, I wanted it to be the purest desire in my life full of sin.

Yes, I wanted to have her naked in front of me, naked from head to toe. Without clothes, without lies, without sighs, without prejudices. A moment of total sincerity, a moment to look at her soul. I don't want to lie, ever since I saw her entering through that door, I have wanted to remove everything she had on her, just to understand who she is and what she has that ties me and unleashes me at her whim.

Yet, what was this madness of mine that drove me to discover what those eyes hide! If just by glancing, fear runs through my body, when I imagine you.

But I know that this cannot be called love until I know all your demons, those that you call defects. All the wrong or dirty thoughts that you could ever have. And please don't criticize my rawness, please! don't think I'm crazy. I think I am; I'm won't deny it. But I'm just trying to let you know that I'm also full of those things that you should know, before claiming to love me. I think I'm just trying to get naked too, to make this situation fairer.

So, go ahead my love, my forbidden love. Let's start by exposing everything you have decided to use as a pretext for this that we try to call relationship. What if we start by forgetting what they taught us about love? Let's start by taking away all the importance that we have given so gently to those who do nothing but criticize us, without even understanding how good it feels to be in your arms. And if we slowly remove the prejudices that have been so heavy for you, tell me what is left, apart from this crazy love that you and I feel.

Allow me to slowly scan up and down your body as I enter your soul, let me reach the darkest depth of your mind and understand: what is it that really terrifies you? Let me explore up and down your body, starting with your hair and running through your thoughts. Let me know your story. Let's make a deal with your anecdotes. I'm not asking you for anything complicated, I'm just asking you to let me fall in love with you. Not who you say you are, not who everyone dares to think you are, not who it would be convenient for you to be, much less who you have tried to be, but with you... Simply and simply you. Let me love you. And what about the others?

Well, I'll just say that they will be glad of having something to criticize, they would do it anyway. If it is not because of our love, it will be because of any other circumstance. So, to hell with these costumes and let's do it! I invite you to fall in love! I believe this proposal sounds better than a simple “let's go for a coffee”.

But it's your call...