Planning for change

Lessons of survival from queer and trans lives

CAL LEE GARRETT

ABSTRACT

Drawing on the case of parks and marginal spaces in Chicago, considered as novel ecosystems, this essay works to unpack some of the costs and limitations of how conservation value has been defined by conservationists. Namely, conservation value tends to center pristine, historical ecosystems like tallgrass prairie over the small pockets where many native species continue to survive and form new ecological relationships. By engaging queer and trans theories and thinkers who argue that fixation on the past can limit evaluations of the present, I argue for a wider vision of conservation value that is more open to creative possibilities for survival into the future.

Tallgrass prairie is one of the main reasons I have chosen to be a Midwesterner. I am a sociologist by profession and first moved to Chicago for graduate school, but the dunes and the prairies have kept me happy here. In addition to being a sociologist, I am also a queer and genderfluid person with a background in hiking and backpacking. In my experience, being outdoors has often been an important confirmation that life takes many forms, something that my experience of gender and sexuality also attest to.

Prairies are home to a diversity of forms, colors, and textures due to the density of vegetation that they foster. I was charmed when I first encountered a small, reconstructed prairie area in my local park. In fact, restored or recreated areas are some of my favorite prairies. I treasure the natural areas peppered throughout the Chicago Park District because they are often relatively small, unique, and dynamic. These are ecological communities that were, in recent memory, something else. And with care, these spaces are becoming something new: unique ecological communities specific to the place where they are situated. The small, restored prairie and dune area in Loyola Park, a park in my neighborhood, is among my favorites. Clusters of purple prairie clover (*Dalea purpurea*), white wild indigo (*Baptisia alba*), little bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*), sideoats grama (*Bouteloua curtipendula*), and sand reed (*Calamovilfa longifolia*) dot this part of the park. Nestled between these perennials, where they can get sufficient moisture, are common introduced plants like plantain (*Plantago major*).

Despite my enthusiasm, these kinds of small, recreated ecological communities are not highly valued by many in the conservation field. At best, these spaces might be considered opportunities to engage the public or mitigate flooding, but they are not considered to have much conservation value. Conservation value is sometimes based on the rarity or sensitivity of the native species represented in one place. This kind of value leads conservationists to prioritize sites that most closely approximate pure, unadulterated versions of ecological communities. The few remnant expanses of tallgrass prairie composed of native grasses, wildflowers, and the occasional oak tree have immense conservation value but now exist only in widely separated fragments that have been altered over time. In other words, native tallgrass prairie of the highest conservation value is an historical artifact as much as it is a living ecosystem. By contrast, novel ecosystems that clearly have been shaped by infrastructure and urban life, like Loyola Park, are common but often overlooked as conservation opportunities. What if, instead, these novel ecosystems were the center of a conservation ethic?

Despite my enthusiasm, these kinds of small, recreated ecological communities are not highly valued by many in the conservation field.

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Reorienting conservation work away from ecosystems that symbolize some lost historical moment is important because focusing on the past tends to dismiss and devalue how many ecological communities are surviving in the present. I am deeply troubled by the effects of settler colonialism and climate change, like many conservationists, but I do not hold this against the plants, animals, and ecological communities that are making a life under present-day conditions.

There is an apparent impasse between a focus on maximizing conservation value, represented by rare native plants or animals, and pursuing conservation outcomes that cut across a variety of different social or environmental values. My purpose in this essay is to make an argument for working through this impasse. I engage the expertise of queer and trans[1] thinkers to flag some of the pitfalls of focusing on the ecological past, and to show how paths forward are made possible by focusing on diversity and survival in the present.

THE PROBLEM OF THE PAST

Queer and trans thinkers and theorists have long worked to assert the value of queer and trans lives despite their classification as unnatural or immoral for diverging from social norms of gender and sexuality. These theories can be a resource for conservationists interested in reflecting on and navigating the consequences of the value judgments that underpin land management decisions. After all, conservation value is also a normative value that should be critically evaluated from time to time.

Many conservationists believe that their work should be kept separate from human interests.

Of course, conservationists do not necessarily subscribe to the view that queer and trans people are unnatural and immoral, but they might pass such judgments on ecological communities that have been visibly shaped by human disturbance. This dismissal of some ecologies as more unnatural or less valuable than others, I think, does inform a fair amount of land management work, and it is this judgment that I am trying to push back against here. This is not a frivolous intellectual exercise. While I can understand the values the motivate conservationists to attempt to restore and preserve pristine prairies, I think that this reflects a prioritization of the past over concrete plans for ensuring the survival of native plants and wildlife in the future.

Social scientists who study conservation work have coined a term to describe the intense concern for ecological purity among conservationists: "ecological anxiety disorder" (Robbins and Moore 2012). This condition describes a fearful response to the perceived effects of humans on nature and of politics on science. While I'm not convinced of the corollary to a mental health condition, this terminology does highlight some foundational value judgments in the conservation field; namely, many conservationists believe that their work should be kept separate from human interests, directed toward the interests of native plants and wildlife, and based exclusively on science rather than politics. In turn, these investments in some version of nature, and specifically prairies, that is separate from humans or politics causes many conservationists to fixate on stories from the past.

For example, Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie is a premier, 20,000-acre prairie restoration project at the edge of the Chicago metropolitan area managed by the United States Forest Service. Interpretive signs at this site reflect the connection between conservation work and imagined historical ecosystems that predate human disturbances. One such sign quotes the diary of a 19th-century traveler from New York, Eliza Steele, under the banner "First Impressions" and reads:

> I started with surprise and delight. I was in the midst of a prairie!… We passed whole acres of blossoms all bearing one hue, as purple perhaps, or masses of yellow or rose; and then again a carpet of every color intermixed in narrow bands, as if a rainbow had fallen upon the verdant slopes. When the sun flooded this mosaic floor with light, and the summer breeze stirred among their leaves, the iridescent glow was beautiful and wondrous beyond anything I had ever conceived.…

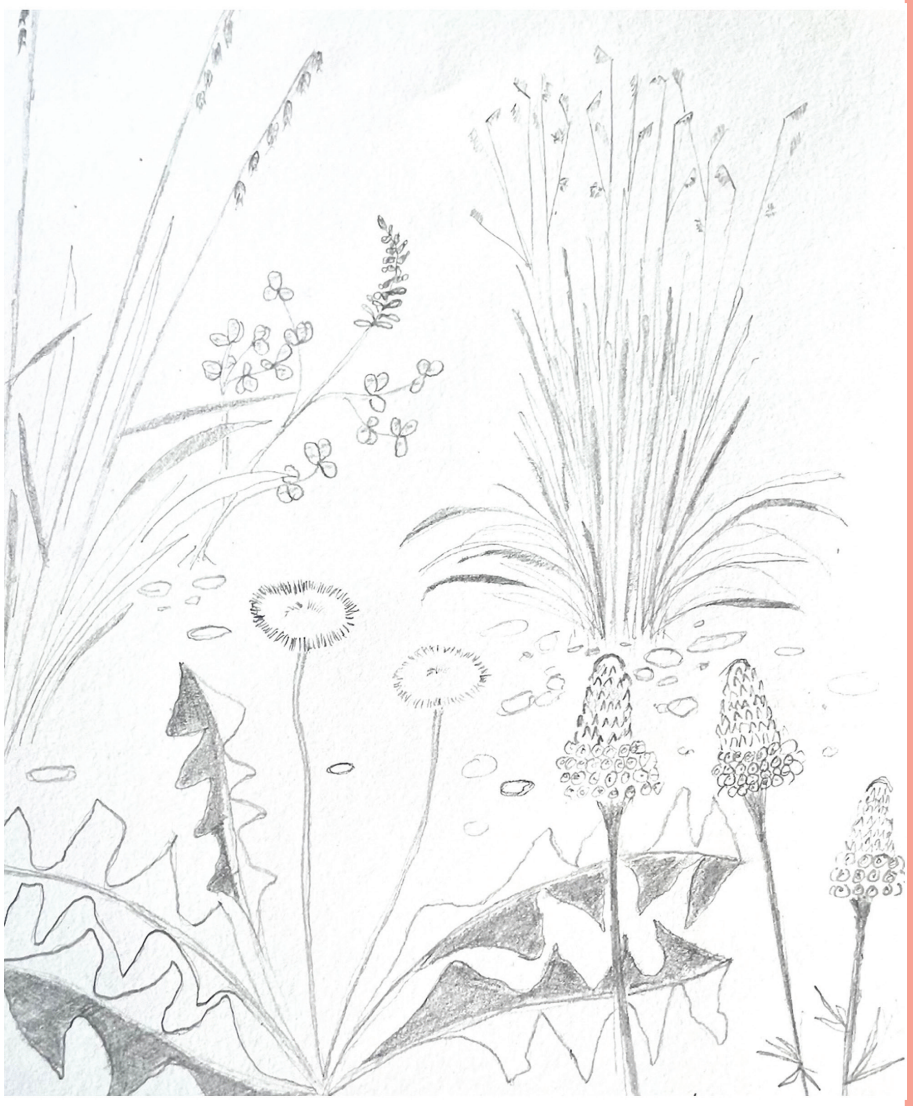
Steele's account is compelling, without a doubt, but taking it as inspiration for conservation work presents at least two problems. First, this account omits the presence of Indigenous communities and their stewardship of the landscape. Far from being undisturbed or empty, the ecologies of the Chicago region have long included the lives and activities of Indigenous Peoples (Low 2016).[2] Second, accounts like this are situated in a specific historical moment that cannot be recreated. Climate conditions, soil conditions, and the population dynamics of many native plant species have changed in the nearly 200 years since Steele wrote these words. Reproducing the conditions that she observed is simply not possible. This is not cause for despair but, in my view, an argument for reorienting conservation to think with these changes into the future.

These historical ecosystems have been cherished by conservationists at the expense of newly emerging, complex ecological relationships. For example, a prairie that includes the sunburst-yellow blossoms of dandelions (*Taraxacum officinale*) might be considered inherently of less conservation value by many. Yet, if a site is managed, plants like dandelions can persist without becoming a nuisance. With thoughtful stewardship, dandelions can become a part of the prairie, and these communities are no less interesting or valuable for including this species. While the prairie that Steele described above may not have survived to the present, many of the plants she witnessed still might. As I illustrate[3] with my creative depiction of a dandelion among native grasses and forbs in Loyola Park in Figure 1, ecosystems like prairies are characterized as much by variation as they are by purity, with stunning mixtures of textures and colors in many cases. Dandelions, in their own way, also add to this diversity.

Many proponents of native tallgrass prairie might argue against my representation of the dandelion, arguing that it is never *really* a part of a prairie ecosystem. It is this insistence that I find troubling. Insistence on a pure, historical ecological community is troubling because it reminds me of other arguments for purity that I have encountered. Namely, this sentiment reminds me of the sentiments that motivate legislation restricting gender-affirming health care and gender expression. Those sentiments are rooted in binary understandings of sex (male or female) and gender (man or woman) that trans people, drag performers, and others diverge from. Gender-affirming medical care and drag performances are sources of anxiety for groups who perceive these phenomena as a moral problem, not simply a form of diversity. These groups insist on neat sex and gender distinctions and consider departures from this model a moral and cultural threat. In other words, rigid norms around sex and gender are a barrier to gender diversity.

My goal with this essay is to suggest that it might be productive to transgress certain normative and moralizing tendencies of contemporary conservation work to more fully embrace diversity in this field. Just as trans people have been defined by their departure from rigid gender norms, a "trans" ecosystem might be one that departs from the categorical expectations about

FIGURE 1. A dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale*) among common native plants of prairies in the Chicago region.



the kinds of plants that belong together by including unusual combinations or non-native species—like prairies that include dandelions. These novel ecological communities are not problems or failures but a form of biodiversity that, I argue, should be valued.

A focus on lamenting the loss of pure imagined ecological communities can distract from opportunities where purity is not possible.

Toward this goal, I will be drawing on queer and trans theories that tackle these issues of purity, value, victimhood, remembrance, and the future with respect to gender and sexuality. Each of the following sections is structured around key theories and the lesson that they can provide to conservationists. First, I introduce theories of trans death to argue that a focus on lamenting the loss of pure imagined ecological communities can distract from opportunities where purity is not possible but environmental threats could be meaningfully addressed. Then, drawing on theories of queer futures that center the possibilities hinted at by the creative lives of queer and trans people, I make an argument for embracing change, novelty, and fluidity when they arise in ecological communities.

These sections pivot around two examples of novel ecosystems, the fence line of a community garden and the gravel embankment along a train line. Spaces like these deserve more attention for their real and potential ecological value. This is not an argument for ending concerted land management efforts for biodiversity but, instead, for introducing creativity and novelty as values that inform some of these efforts.

VALUING DEATH AND LOSS, A PITFALL

Trans people are routinely subject to discrimination, harassment, violence, and death due to the stigmatization and politicization of their gendered experiences. In the United States, at least 34 transgender and gender-nonconforming people were murdered in 2022, according to data compiled by the Human Rights Campaign (2022). Trans people experience discrimination, violence, and murder because they are systemically marginalized by the institutions that routinely support and protect the lives of non-trans people: workplaces, government agencies, schools, health care settings, and others.

This level of sustained violence has inspired political organizing to memorialize trans people and leverage their deaths for policy changes. It is these movements that C. Riley Snorton and Jin Haritaworn (2013) describe as leveraging trans death as a political resource:

> Whether through the commemorative, community-reinforcing rituals of Transgender Day of Remembrance (TDOR) or as an *ex post facto* justification for hate crime and anti-discrimination policies, trans deaths—and most frequently the deaths of trans women or trans-feminine people of color—act as a resource for the development and dissemination of many different agendas. (Snorton and Haritaworn 2013: 66)

What is ironic about this mobilization around trans deaths, in their view, is that trans people are often deemed undeserving of support while living but become famous in death. Imagined "good" or "deserving" lives that *could* have been protected and supported are contrasted with "bad" lives that *are* overwhelmingly discouraged or disavowed in policy (Hong 2015; Westbrook 2020). The memorialization of trans death often becomes an inflection point where lives that have been hassled by almost every social institution become deaths to be mourned.

Trans people are often deemed undeserving of support while living but become famous in death.

In life, trans people have complex and inconvenient perspectives that might question whether policy agendas,

like hate crime policies that rely on police enforcement, can actually protect them. After all, trans activists often point out that trans people of color are both disproportionately victims of violent crimes and victims of violence perpetrated by law enforcement officers (Lamble 2008; Snorton and Haritaworn 2013). Critical reflections on the politics of trans death highlight how a focus on loss can overshadow the complex systemic factors that led to this outcome, resulting in a failure to meaningfully support trans lives.

Tallgrass prairie restoration in the Chicago region and lamentations of its loss have frequently resonated with me as a way of leveraging death or loss as a political resource. The strength of theories of trans death is that they do not detract from the value of what has been lost. All trans people deserve to be valued, and the death of any trans person is a loss to be mourned. Similarly, the historical tallgrass prairie, in its original extent, was an extremely valuable ecological community, and its loss should be mourned. At the same time, solely focusing on what is lost can distract from opportunities to better support lives in the present.

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

Chicago, for example, has practically no native prairie remaining intact, but there is a substantial amount of post-industrial open space. Brownfields left by steel mills and other industrial facilities are a relatively common sight in much of the region. Yet, conservationists' interest in restoring and preserving pristine tallgrass prairie often directs resources away from these places where, despite a "high quality" prairie being impossible, the careful introduction of native vegetation could dramatically improve environmental conditions.

Community gardens, for example, are one common way that contaminated former industrial or commercial lots are repurposed in Chicago. With raised beds and compost, food crops can be grown in these urban spaces with a significant amount of open space that remains uncultivated outside these beds. As illustrated in Figure 2, these liminal spaces are often home to a variety of native and non-native plants that make lives here and could support endangered species like monarch butterflies. Yet, because these potentially diverse spaces are not recognized as valued habitat, they are often weeded or mowed if they are managed at all.

In my own experience as a member of a pop-up community garden in a vacant lot in my neighborhood, I was struck by just how much time and energy members were expected to give to weeding. Volunteer hours were devoted almost entirely to clearing away vegetation from between the beds, in unplanned corners of the lot, and along the fence lines of the lot. On more than one occasion I witnessed other garden members unknowingly pulling common milkweed (*Asclepius syriaca*) and wild carrot (*Daucus carota*) from the ground, plants that might have provided some crucial habitat for animals like monarch butterflies (*Danaus plexippus*) that must traverse urban space. These spaces are often passed over as opportunities for conservation management because they have been assigned low value from this perspective—they are *just* weeds.

Many agencies and organizations in the Chicago region define conservation value in relatively narrow terms when making land management or land acquisition decisions. Conservation value remains tied to an imagined set of native ecosystems that, it is hoped, can be preserved or reproduced. Conservation value could, alternatively, be tied to making key concrete improvements to local environmental conditions by restoring ecological processes where they have been disrupted. Brownfields, where a great many ecological processes have been disrupted, thus represent some of the best opportunities for restoration work. More narrowly, so do fence lines. Because imperiled or lost pristine prairies are often emphasized, however, these opportunities are largely passed over. In the next section, I expand on how this ethic might be generalized

FIGURE 2. A monarch butterfly (*Danaus plexippus*) encounters a small crop of milkweed (*Asclepius syriaca*) and plantain (*Plantago major*) growing up through a chain-link fence that borders a community garden plot. A small pocket of vegetation like this may be a rare opportunity for a butterfly in Chicago to lay its eggs.

with theories of queer futurity to consider specific novel ecosystems that I have encountered as a resident of Chicago.

VALUING SURVIVORS, A PATH

Lives and experiences that have been marginalized or devalued also provide an important opportunity for planning futures that include greater biological diversity or gender diversity. To that end, theories of queer futurity are a crucial resource for identifying the possibilities for the future that already exist in the present.

Queer futurity is an idea in the work of José Esteban Muñoz that hinges on two important points. Muñoz (2009) argues (1) that there are normative projections of the future that value some lives but not others, and (2) the lives of queer people of color are crucial parts of imagining a future that is more just and diverse. He identifies a dominant conceptualization of the future that centers white, affluent, nuclear families, and argues that other ways of life will have to be centered for a politics that fosters diversity. In the words of Muñoz:

> It is important not to hand over futurity to normative white reproductive futurity. That dominant mode of futurity is indeed "winning," but that is all the more reason to call on a utopian political imagination that will enable us to glimpse another time and place: a "not-yet" where queer youths of color actually get to grow up. (Muñoz 2009: 95)

At a basic level, Muñoz's claim is that the seeds of just futures can be found in the creative strategies that stigmatized and devalued groups, like trans youth of color, use to organize their lives and survive.

This is an important set of ideas because, as Muñoz suggests, many political appeals to the future are precisely organized in ways to produce white, straight, gender-conforming citizens. After all, what are policies that restrict access to gender-affirming health care for young people other than an effort to ensure that there will be few or no trans adults? My parallel argument here is that centering specific, historical versions of ecosystems like prairies disallows all of the other ways that a diversity of organisms might be able to survive. By assuming that the best conditions for the survival of any species can be identified by researchers, conservationists tend to preempt the ability of plants to find their own ways to survive. In other words, conservationists tend to fixate on a scientifically defined prairie rather than taking interest in some of the ecological communities that are cropping up all around us.

Furthermore, theories of queer futurity argue that deviations from a conventional way of life offer opportunities for reframing what counts as a "good" life. Jack Halberstam (2011) builds on Muñoz to argue that experiences of failure—failure from the standpoint of dominant social norms—provides important clues for a more just and liberating future. In his view, individual failures to conform should be interpreted as a sign that social and cultural norms are limiting and narrow, not as a sign of individual inadequacy. With respect to gender, Halberstam explains that "gender failure often means being relieved of the pressure to measure up to patriarchal ideals" (2011: 4). Trans lives, by questioning normative assumptions about gender, thus represent possibilities for what social and cultural norms around gender could be like in the future. Trans lives provide clues for producing a better future.

Queer futurity offers a road map for thinking about ecological futures that include the full array of contemporary ecosystems. Divesting from narrow normative judgments about what living well means is an important path forward. Namely, theories of queer futures highlight the ways that places or sites that appear to be failures, lost causes, can provide ways for thinking outside the proverbial box to support more diverse ecological futures. These theories are reminders to think systematically about conservation and to value diversity rather than conformity. When transposed to a conservation setting, this means that no site is too small to be of no conservation value when it is part of a larger landscape and that no site is too degraded to not support an ecosystem.

All sites are worthy subjects of land management and care tailored to their size and existing ecological conditions. Indeed, as I attempt to illustrate in Figure 3, novel ecosystems like those that spring up along urban railroads have

FIGURE 3. An apple tree (*Malus domestica*) grows out of the gravel embankment between an elevated rail line and the street below, surrounded by goldenrod (*Solidago canadensis*).

potential ecological value. Rail lines may provide crucial corridors for animals to navigate urban areas between open spaces like parks and cemeteries. An apple tree (*Malus domestica*) sprouting from the gravel is, if nothing else, a testament to the animal that dropped the tree's seed there at one point or another. These rail lines provide small corridors of open space for other vegetation to take hold as well. In these ways, a variety of organisms, included humans, could benefit from our cultivating ecological processes and relationships in these spaces.

Rail lines are a compelling example because, if they are vacated or abandoned, they often do become conservation opportunities in the form of trails that link parks and preserves. Rail lines that are still in use for mass transportation rarely receive conservation attention, even though wildlife and vegetation often do populate these urban habitats.

The marginal edges of rail lines, crowded with woody vegetation, are perceived to be failures of planning, or failing ecologies, but could also provide important opportunities for imagining how ecological relationships and processes are sustained into the future. These kinds of spaces can be helpfully considered as signs that the norms around conservation value have a cost, much like gender norms. Rather than dismissing urban rail lines as anomalies or exceptional incidents, theories of queer futurity suggest that it is precisely these marginalized ways of living that can provide inspiration for living in the future.

And, as I have attempted to illustrate throughout this essay, rail lines are not a unique example of sites where marginalized ecological relationships and processes might be valued more. Indeed, there are numerous other small, less-than-ideal sites that, when considered as a whole, have immense potential for preserving a range of ecological relationships and processes—fence lines, sidewalk strips, lawns, and roof tops, among others. Some of these spaces are beginning to be leveraged for conservation purposes, but in a largely piecemeal way. If conservationists were to put forth meaningful effort to assert the value of such spaces and to manage them effectively, ambitious goals for preserving biodiversity might be attainable (Lepczyk et al. 2017).

Considering unusual forms of ecology and survival is important because it provides opportunities for imagining more diverse and varied ecological futures. As it is, a lot of conservation management is preoccupied with sites that can be best aligned with reference sites to recreate an idealized version of native ecosystems. Considering the possibilities represented by the ecologies of urban rail lines reveals how limiting such a framework can be. In the future, conservationists might do well to try and build a movement that values a wide variety of sites rather than simply those that best conform to beliefs about pure ecologies.

Just as trans people's lives can be understood as creative and diverse ways to be human, so too might novel ecological communities be understood through the framing of creativity and diversity.

Furthermore, from the standpoint of scientific inquiry, abandoning a narrow focus on restoring or preserving some approximation of pristine ecological communities would allow a much wider range of interesting ecological questions to be posed and studied. These questions will be extremely useful in planning for a future with the greatest degree of biodiversity possible. The growing field of urban ecology exemplifies this promise.

REFLECTIONS

Based on my own experiences living in Chicago, I have attempted to translate theories of trans death and queer futurity to make them available for thinking about conservation value. Hopefully, one or more of these insights borrowed from queer and trans thinkers will prove fruitful to conservation groups who are working through their own commitments to nature. Just as trans people's lives can be understood as nothing more or less than creative and diverse ways to be human, so too might novel ecological communities be understood through the framing of creativity and diversity. This framing supports learning about how life is taking shape in the present and envisioning the future, things that many conservationists are interested in.

In summary: conservationists have sometimes focused on mourning or restoring idealized versions of native ecosystems, like tallgrass prairie, at the expense of learning from the ways that new ecological communities are cropping up and surviving. Cities like Chicago are rich examples of these varied, novel ecological communities, as I have

attempted to illustrate with artwork. Just as trans people's non-normative experiences of gender tend to be bracketed as non-representative, these novel ecosystems tend to be dismissed or passed over. This essay is a challenge to take them seriously and to learn to unpack and perhaps set aside investments in a narrow view of what valuable ecological communities look like. There is a lot of wisdom in how trans people—or weedy fence lines—survive and thrive in hostile and uncertain conditions. Any intellectual conceits that prevent recognition of this kind of genius should be interrogated and, if not abandoned, at least tempered or re-evaluated.

ENDNOTES

1. Throughout this piece, I use the term "trans" to refer to a broad range of gendered practices, embodiments, and identities that diverge from a conventional alignment of medically assigned sex and gender identity.
2. The disavowal of Indigenous Peoples and their stewardship of the prairie is a perennial issue among conservationists. The land now called "Chicago" was stolen by settlers and the United States government from the Three Fires Confederacy, an alliance of Ojibwe, Potawatomi, and Odawa peoples. The Chicago region is part of the ancestral homelands of the Menominee, Ho-Chunk, Peoria, Miami, Sac, and Fox Nations as well. Chicago remains home to one of the largest urban Native populations in the United States.
3. This illustration, and the others that accompany this essay, are obviously not scientific botanical diagrams. They represent my effort to translate the specific qualities of ecosystems found in the Chicago region into a creative representation. I emphasize shape to show how plants have a way of fitting together in one shared space or ecosystem.

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