The Sapphic Gardens of Elsa Gidlow
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THE SAPPHIC GARDENS OF ELSA GIDLOW:

Queer Nature in *On a Grey Thread*

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ABSTRACT: In 1923, Elsa Gidlow published what has been hailed as the first lesbian poetry collection in the US by an openly queer woman: *On a Grey Thread*. This understudied collection weaves together images of nature and queerness, and the garden becomes a site that fosters sapphic love. In this article I use a queer ecological framework to show how *On a Grey Thread* responds to the “nature paradox” of the modern era, which simultaneously constructed lesbians as wild predators (i.e., too natural) and as sinners who committed crimes against nature (i.e., too unnatural). Through close readings of her poems and an analysis of the collection’s structure, I argue that Gidlow’s poetry disrupts these paradoxical accusations and reclaims the role of nature in the lives of modern sapphic women. Her poetry anticipates the philosophy of Gidlow’s queer community Druid Heights, established three decades later: that poetry is a pathway to connection between the human and the more-than-human.

Keywords: Elsa Gidlow; *On a Grey Thread*; Druid Heights; queer ecology; sapphic modernities; queer gardens; LGBTQ+ communities; queer modernism

Introduction

Elsa Gidlow (1898–1986) was a lesbian poet who left a milestone mark on the map of queer literary history, but her voice has yet to be recovered.[1] She stands out from the modernist crowd as an author who unapologetically embraced her sapphic way of life through poetry, community, and gardening. Her philosophy of queerness was intrinsically tied to her relations with the more-than-human world, and she never regarded her sexuality as inferior or unnatural. Reflecting on her relationship with another woman in 1922, she said that "we took it for granted then that we were free to be our *natural* selves" (Gidlow, *Elsa* 144; my emphasis). In 1923, Gidlow published what has been hailed as the first lesbian poetry collection "for general circulation in the United States" by an openly queer woman: *On a Grey Thread* (Rexroth 20). Twenty-four-year-old Gidlow had at this point in her life never owned a garden. Surrounded by the roaring metropolis of New York City, she turned to nature motifs to express a desire for sapphic connections. In the modern free verse of *On a Grey Thread*, Gidlow celebrates gardening as symbolic of the sapphist's potential, anticipating her own future lifestyle. In the 1950s Gidlow planted the seeds of what would become a "countercultural mecca" among the redwood forests of the Bay Area (Youmans, "Elsa Gidlow's Garden" 106). Druid Heights, as she called the community, evolved into a queer haven for artistic expression and gay activism, all synced to the rhythm of the garden (Haiken; West). For Gidlow, the heart of life at Druid Heights was a deep connection with the land she lived on (and alongside) in partnership, and her pathway to this connection was poetry.

In this paper I use a queer ecological framework to show how Gidlow's poetry challenges antithetical stereotypes that were prominent in the early twentieth century: the image that lesbians were at once too wild *and* too unnatural. Through close readings of her poems "The Face in the Rain" and "Episode" from *On a Grey Thread* alongside an analysis of the collection's cyclical structure, I argue that her verse breaks down the dichotomy of wildness–unnaturalness to advocate for a more holistic understanding of sapphic modernities. Instead of reproducing a heteromasculine performance of "Nature" as a "world out there" (Morton 274; Pollini 26)—which would have dislocated the queer from the natural order—Gidlow reclaims the garden as a queer space founded on a partnership with nature. Her disruption of spatiotemporal dichotomies between cities and wilderness demonstrates how lesbian cultures of nature can, in and of themselves, articulate an avant-garde understanding of the sapphic identity as both inherent to the modern era and a counterpoint to heteropatriarchal demands.

Gidlow's philosophy that her queerness was deeply imbricated with nature in a manner that should be celebrated was a radical idea for her time. She wrote *On a Grey Thread* during an era when questions of nature and sexuality dominated the scientific scene and caused waves of anxiety in the US. While homosexual acts were still largely perceived as *unnatural* and immoral by religious and political institutions (Stein; Weinmeyer), the work of modern sexologists aimed to *naturalize* the "sexual invert" as a fact of biology (Black; Faderman; Smith-Rosenberg). As Michel Foucault and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick have documented, this marked a cultural shift: homosexuality changed from a set of actions between people of the same sex into a marker of identity.[2] This shift gives rise to what I call the "nature paradox": on the one hand, early twentieth-century sapphic women were seen as biologically abnormal and as wild predators (i.e., too natural), but on the other hand, they were treated as sinners who committed crimes against nature (i.e., too unnatural). In this context, I read wildness as associated with threatening nature and unnaturalness as departing from a nature treated as ideal, underlining the antithetical foundation of these images.

The first side of the nature paradox concerns stereotypes that tie the category of the modern lesbian to nature and wildness. During the early twentieth century, sexologists like Havelock Ellis, Edward Carpenter, and Magnus Hirschfeld disseminated their research on “sexual inverts,” and through this work the sexologists pleaded for sympathy on behalf of the inverts (see Black; Faderman; Smith-Rosenberg).[3] Ellis asserts that sexual inversion appears to be “natural” (v), and the argument that the invert was born that way became a “ready-made defense for homosexuality” grounded in nature and biology (Faderman 58). However, Allida M. Black contends that this led to further stigmatization of lesbians, who were pathologized as neurotic, pseudomasculine, and predatory (106). This cultural shift away from the nineteenth-century era of naïve “romantic friendships” (Faderman 11) led to a new perception of lesbians as vicious “wife-snatcher[s]” and as “pests to society” whose sexual powers could “wreck your home” (Oram 171–73). Lillian Faderman notes that turn-of-the-century American medical journals warned against “*wild* sexual practices between females” (51; my emphasis), and many women were influenced to internalize such behaviors as “diseased and dangerous” (Black 103). These social anxieties of degeneracy and wildness excluded sapphic women from the new order of modernity, which was defined by reproduction, the domestic sphere, and heterosexual marriage (Newton; Smith-Rosenberg).

The other side of the nature paradox concerns the centuries-old ideology of homosexuality as unnatural, or as a crime against nature—an idea that circulated in the US at the time of Gidlow’s writing (and which conservatives continue to recycle today). The origins of this ideology can be traced back to Paul the Apostle’s condemnation of nonreproductive sex acts that “perverted” nature (Stein 286). Sodomy laws have their roots in Pauline doctrine, and throughout the twentieth century the US government abused these laws to persecute gay men (Weinmeyer 916). While women did not suffer the same legal persecution, the heterosexual majority still treated lesbianism as immoral and unnatural, which is clearly exemplified by the public trial surrounding Radclyffe Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness* (1928). Hall’s novel was charged with obscenity in the UK and accused of portraying “unnatural offences” according to one 1928 newspaper (“The Banned”). In the US, the book faced a similar trial but was acquitted partially “because the text lacked sexual explicitness” (Taylor 251).

The conception of homosexuality as a symptom of urbanity is connected to ideologies of unnaturalness. Cities like New York and San Francisco saw a boom of queer visibility during the interwar urbanization, and Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson comment that this fueled the belief that a loss of contact with nature led to degeneracy (12–13). Consequently white heterosexual men cultivated a Rooseveltian ideal of US wilderness as a masculine space safe from “the corrupting influences” of urban “degenerate homosexuals” (Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson 14).[4] These contradictory images leave modern lesbians in limbo: they were constructed as wild and vicious, yet they were excluded from the wilderness lest they threaten the domain of heteromasculinity; they were considered unnatural and associated with urban decay, yet they were exiled from the domestic sphere and the modern “city for men” (Massey 233). So where did sapphic women in modernity belong—if anywhere?

Gidlow wrote *On a Grey Thread* in the aftermath of World War I in the US, a period defined by industrialization, an accelerating pace of life, and a surge of avant-garde literature (Berman 16). While “modernity” has contested meanings, I apply the term to this interwar period to contextualize the shared experiences of what Marshall Berman calls a “unity of disunity” and “a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal” (15). Gidlow responds to this maelstrom through her countercultural “lived *experience* of becoming modern” that lies outside the binaries “of possibility and closure, dissolution and formation, excitement and terror,” as per Berman’s definition (Winning 18–19; italics in original). Joanne Winning’s explication of “sapphic modernities” underscores the “deeply imbricated relationship between the expression of dissident sexual identity and the embracing and creation of the modern” (19). Winning mobilizes the term “sapphic” to include female-coded and same-sex-oriented identities, experiences, relationships, communities, and positionalities that repudiate “dominant cultural traditions” and represented a “counterculture” in the early twentieth century (18–19). In this context, I understand sapphic modernism as the queer literature produced by early twentieth-century sapphic women who redrew and challenged the parameters of masculine modernism. Both “queer” and “sapphic” are vague and open-ended on purpose, allowing for greater historical inclusion and fluidity (Doan and Garrity 4). However, I will also refer to Gidlow and her experiences specifically as lesbian because she embraced this label.[5]

My research on Gidlow situates itself in the small but strong wave of twenty-first-century scholarship that aims to counter what Adrienne Rich has called the “Great Silence” of lesbian existence (640). *On a Grey Thread* has received almost no literary critical attention, and Gidlow remains an understudied figure in queer and modernist studies. Cary Nelson’s modernist recovery project from the 1980s only mentions Gidlow in passing (102), while contemporary studies of the queer poetry scene in the 1950s Bay Area acknowledge her name but gloss over her importance (Grundy 25). Nevertheless, historians such as Greg Youmans have begun to unearth Gidlow’s story from the archives, and I aim to add to this emerging project by addressing queer sensibilities of time and space in Gidlow’s life and poetry. *On a Grey Thread* represents a major contribution to the paradigm of sapphic modernism, and I argue that Gidlow belongs to a counter-canon of “bad” sapphic modernists who have been neglected and erased (Mao and Walkowitz). Unlike the work of canonical authors like Virginia Woolf, Gertrude Stein, and Djuna Barnes—whose sapphic modernism relies on satirical, convoluted language and codes—or the work of Radclyffe Hall—which embraces the language of sexology to plead for sympathy—Gidlow’s pioneering voice unabashedly celebrates sapphism. This article strives to show what we can learn by passing through the gates into Gidlow’s garden, absorbing her vision of cyclical growth, queer nature, and a prevailing hope in queer futures.

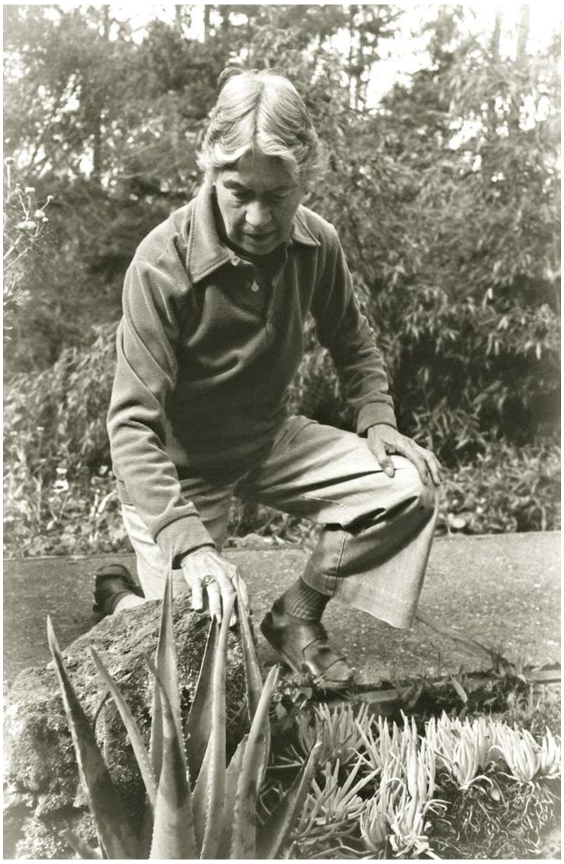

Figure 1. Elsa Gidlow in her garden at Druid Heights. Photo by Laura Wilensky.

Poet Warrior and Gardener: Situating Elsa Gidlow

Before I enter the poetic garden that is *On a Grey Thread*, I consider it imperative to provide some contextual insight into Gidlow's life and her relationship with the natural environment because her poetry cannot be separated from her queer way of life, her gardens, and her community. Gidlow was a lesbian poet, activist, and gardener who was referred to as "the poet warrior" by her friends (West 614). She was born in England but grew up in a working-class family in rural Québec. Her family struggled financially, and she never received any formal education. From a young age, nature was essential to her creative mind, and she remembered how her imagination found solace in the natural world: a great elm by the brook became "a sheltering friend" she could talk to (Gidlow, *Elsa* 2). Despite this, Gidlow moved from city to city and never owned a garden until her forties, when she bought a plot of land in the Bay Area (Youmans, "Elsa Gidlow's Garden" 108). She called her new home Madrona and began to cultivate the "wild hillside" in a gentle manner that made room for native growth (Gidlow, *Elsa* 294). "Gardening," she recounts in her memoir, "is perhaps not the word for what was appropriate at Madrona" (*Elsa* 294). Instead of imposing her will on the land, Gidlow worked *with* the land and nurtured a "partnership between [herself] and nature" (*Elsa* 294). These gardening rituals allowed her to synch her life to the rhythms of the seasons (Youmans, "Elsa Gidlow's Garden" 108).

Fifteen years later, in 1954, Gidlow co-founded Druid Heights[6] amid the forests north of San Francisco, a community that turned into a "countercultural mecca where writers, artists, and musicians gathered for parties and events and sometimes stuck around for long residencies" (Youmans, "Elsa Gidlow's Garden" 106). Druid Heights attracted many bohemians in the 1960s and 70s, including Allen Ginsberg, Neil Young, Dizzy Gillespie, and members of Fleetwood Mac (Haiken). Travelling to Druid Heights was considered "a pilgrimage" (West 614), and the countercultural hub attracted so many sapphic women it was even referred to as a "Lesbian Avalon" (Youmans, "Elsa Gidlow's Garden" 107). Druid Heights was not a separatist community of the kind that was typical in the 1970s (see Sandilands). The focus was on communal living rather than strict separatism and essentialism. People of all genders, sexualities, ethnicities, and religions were welcome so long as they sought an alternative lifestyle. More than anything, gardening—a *partnership* that connected the human and the more-than-human—became the heart of this "unintentional community" (*Elsa* 349). "The gardens are the joy of all of us," Gidlow reflects, underscoring how they favored organic methods that preserved native growth and encouraged self-sufficiency (*Elsa* 353). "Spontaneous poetry reading[s]" would take place in the gardens (*Elsa* 355), celebrating the seasons and fostering what Catriona Sandilands refers to as a "lesbian culture of nature" (132).

Nature remained the guiding force of Gidlow's philosophy and activism throughout her life. During the 1970s, she was interviewed in her garden for a queer documentary called *Word Is Out: Stories of Some of Our Lives* (Adair et al.),[7] and she wrote essays advocating for lesbian liberation, including a pamphlet titled *Ask No Man Pardon: The Philosophical Significance of Being Lesbian* (1975). In this essay Gidlow appeals to "Nature" as "the Universal Mother" and contends that "Nature needs the Lesbian as she is. She needs me as I am" (*Ask No Man*). It is noteworthy that *On a Grey Thread*—Gidlow's first poetry collection from 1923—anticipates this queer nature philosophy decades before the establishment of Druid Heights.

The Sapphic *Flâneur* and "The Face in the Rain"

In *On a Grey Thread*, the garden motif is Gidlow's most radical tool of resistance. As a physical space, as an ideal, and as cyclical temporality, the garden leaves its mark on these pages. It is possible to read the collection itself as a garden, cultivated by Gidlow but not domesticated, free to bloom in unexpected places and take root on the most difficult of hillsides. *On a Grey Thread* is a collection of fifty-one poems in modern free verse split into six sections.[8] To cover the scope of the collection, I begin with analyses of the poems "The Face in the Rain" (*On a Grey Thread* 69) and "Episode" (47), before I turn my attention to the overarching structure, touching on several poems from each section. "The Face in the Rain" is a productive poem to open the conversation on nature in Gidlow's life because it builds a geographical bridge between the city and the garden. The poem is set in a buzzing metropolis—presumably New York City, where Gidlow lived in the 1920s—and the setting underscores how Gidlow's writing is never dislocated from the modern world, nor does it disregard its influences. Through her use of floral imagery and the sapphic gaze, Gidlow reclaims the role of the modern *flâneur* (see Munt). The garden bleeds into Gidlow's experience of urbanity, symbolizing a deep longing for sapphic connections in and with nature. Gidlow expands on this theme in "Episode" and other poems, foreshadowing her experiences at Druid Heights later in life.

"The Face in the Rain" reveals that *On a Grey Thread* engages with its historical context of urbanization, presenting a speaker who grapples with sapphic (dis)location in the modern metropolis. The first two of the poem's four stanzas paint a picture of a situation that will be familiar to readers both then and today—no matter their sexuality—of spotting someone attractive in a crowd:

> O form! O face!
> Elfin face in the crowd!
> Form, face, white throat,
> Pale throat wound with a scarf
> Poppy red,
> Blood-like, red,
> Pale throat wound with a poppy scarf
> Gleaming out of the crowd.
> Background of grey,
> A rain-wet street;
> Shuffling; shambling
> Beating feet,
> Past the corner where four ways
> meet. (*On a Grey Thread* 69)[9]

The speaker struggles with the ambivalent experience of the city as "the spatial context of modernity," defined by "its speed, its energy, and its sheer size" (Winning 20). The cityscape is a "[b]ackground of grey," the streets are "rain-wet," and the alliteration and heavy rhythm of the "[s]huffling; shambling / Beating feet" conjure images of an anonymous crowd that moves in a fast-paced and mechanical motion (*On a Grey Thread* 69). The crowd and the enticing face that stands out from it have been subjects of modernist writing since Charles Baudelaire. Walter Benjamin remarks that no other subject than the crowd was "more worthy of attention" to modernist writers (321), and Ezra Pound's "In a Station of the Metro" (1913) is an infamous example. But modern life amid the New York City crowds was no bed of roses for a young sapphic poet, and in the interview for *Word Is Out* (1977), the older Gidlow reflects: "I have felt probably less alone in nature and with nature than at any other time. I tend to feel alone and separate in crowds" (Adair et al.). When Gidlow deploys this familiar modernist motif in her poetry, she deliberately plays with the image made iconic by Pound, but to very different effects. While Pound and Gidlow both use natural imagery to describe the apparition of the faces in the crowd, Gidlow's sapphic rewriting of the motif posits the poppy as an antidote to the loneliness and anonymity of the crowd.

The poppy is the most powerful motif in "The Face in the Rain," and it underscores how nature is Gidlow's key to resistance and her key to modernity. As I outline through my elucidation of the nature paradox above, interwar urbanization in the US saw a rise in stereotypes of lesbians as wild degenerates who were threats to (heterosexual) households in modern cities and suburbs (Oram 171; Faderman 46–47). This occurred alongside prevalent ideologies of unnaturalness that aimed to exclude queerness from natural environments (Stein 286). Gidlow's first-person speaker wrestles with these assumptions when she uses nature imagery to carve out sapphic belonging in the city. The speaker's gaze lingers on the "[e]lfin"-faced woman who wears a bright-red "poppy scarf / Gleaming out of the crowd" (*On a Grey Thread* 69). The red poppy, which stands out from the grey background, symbolizes female-to-female desire. The speaker is drawn to the vision of the woman in red through repetitions of words like "poppy," "red," and "throat" (*On a Grey Thread* 69), emphasizing the subtle eroticism of the encounter, or love "at last sight," as Benjamin phrases it (324). Framed through a sapphic gaze, the floral motif maps her desire onto the cityscape. It represents an antidote to urban loneliness, emphasizing a search for queer connections through nature. In other words, the poppy queers the typically masculine motif of the crowd associated with Pound and underscores that nature shapes what "sapphic modernity" means to Gidlow (Winning 19).

The speaker who observes and desires this "face in the crowd" (*On a Grey Thread* 69), while remaining unobserved herself, reclaims the role of the modernist *flâneur*. In the final two stanzas, the speaker underlines the impact of the encounter:

> O face, O throat!
> Crimson and white
> Splashed on grey:
> I have thought of nothing else all day.
>
> Misted streets,
> A scarf-wound throat,
> Fay-like face
> That seemed to float
> Through the crowd
> Like a wisp of song:
> I have thought of them all day long.
> (*On a Grey Thread* 69)

The *flâneur* is traditionally a masculine figure, a "stroller in the crowd" who "creates art out of the very stuff on the street" (Massey 234; Winning 20). This positionality embodies what Baudelaire has designated as "the transient, the fleeting, the contingent" (403). In Gidlow's poem, however, the positionality is that of a woman admiring another "[f]ay-like" woman "float[ing] / Through the crowd" (*On a Grey Thread* 69). Doreen Massey argues that the modern city was "a city for men" (233), and that the role of the female *flâneur* was impossible due to the gendered structure of the city (234). Sally Munt, on the other hand, challenges the "supremacy of the heterosexual male gaze" by providing direct examples of lesbian *flâneurs*, including Renée Vivien and Djuna Barnes (117). "The Face in the Rain" exemplifies how Gidlow contributes to lesbian disruptions of the male gaze in the city, building on her own experiences of living in New York City (*Elsa* 130–35). Gidlow's friend Kenneth Rexroth notes that unlike in the work of Renée Vivien, "there is no hint of the lurid stage settings of 'the love that dare not speak its name'" in Gidlow's poetry (20). Gidlow's disruption does not rely on "hostility," but comes from the complete confidence that she is "at home in the world" wherever she goes (Rexroth 20).

This disruption extends to masculine modernist forms. While "The Face in the Rain" bears a strong resemblance to Pound's "In a Station of the Metro," Gidlow rejects the conservative content of the male modernists and Pound's specific Imagist call to keep the verse short, concise, and objective (Beach 26). Pound's style depends upon his authority as an unobserved male "stroller in the crowd" (Massey 234). His speaker removes the first-person "I" from the image, yet the heteromasculine claim to the cityscape and the natural world is evident. Gidlow's poem, on the other hand, is as a cheeky response to Pound's "[p]etals on a wet, black bough" (Pound 12). She intentionally adopts Pound's infamous motif but rewrites it into a subjective and sapphic experience of desire in the city. Unlike Pound's brevity, Gidlow's form floats on the page like a watercolor and demands space. More significantly, her speaker demands sexual autonomy. This feminine first-person voice upends Poundian expectations of masculine objectivity and presents an alternative encounter between the writer and her modernist subject, one which is fueled by queer passion. The reclamation of the female *flâneur* alongside rejections of masculine styles frames Gidlow's poem as an experiment in rewriting the parameters of modernism. Her gaze calls for sapphic belonging, and to Gidlow, the key to queer belonging in modernity is nature.

The Lesbian in the Garden

While "The Face in the Rain" has an urban setting, most of the poems in *On a Grey Thread* are set in or engage with natural environments. "Episode" (47)[10] centers on an instance of sapphic lovemaking in the garden and stands out as one of the collection's most erotic poems. In "Episode," the garden functions as a "middle ground" between the city and the wilderness that guides Gidlow's philosophy of the sapphic woman as both natural and modern (Marx 23). Leo Marx reminds us that the garden in the American imagination embodies what he designates as the "pastoral ideal," meaning a utopian landscape of abundance and freedom (3, 43). The garden, according to Marx, is "as attractive for what it excludes as for what it contains" (Marx 138). It must exclude both the filth and anxieties of the cities and the dangers of the "hideous wilderness" (Marx 43). The idealization of this "miniature middle landscape" (Marx 138), I contend, must be read in light of heteronormative power structures. If the construction of the modern lesbian labeled her both wild and unnatural, then the pastoral ideal of the garden must by necessity banish all forms of homosexuality from its perimeters. "Episode," however, disrupts heterosexual claims to the garden and rewrites the space as a safe haven for lesbian existence. The counterforce of the lesbian in the garden challenges the foundations of the nature paradox and provokes the reader to face how dominant notions of the "natural" and the "unnatural" have been used to exclude queerness from both natural landscapes and modern cities.

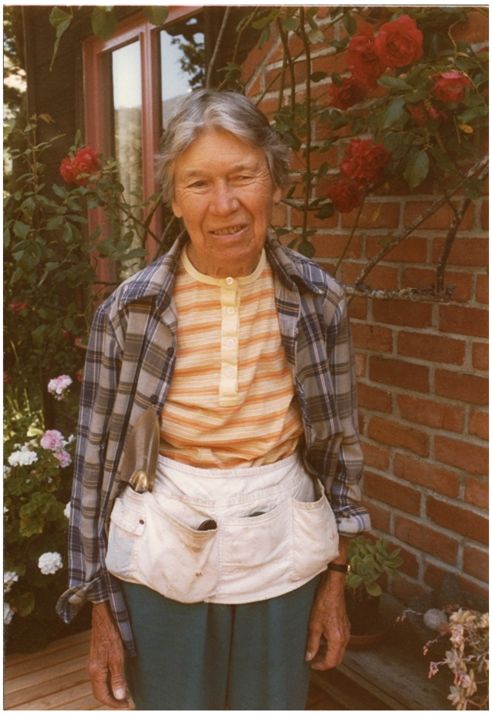

Figure 2. Elsa gardening at Druid Heights. Photo by Laura Wilensky.

"Episode" is a five-stanza poem that portrays the garden as an environment that fosters homoerotic desire. In the opening two stanzas the speaker emphasizes that a shift from the city landscape to the natural environment must take place in order to allow queer desire to blossom:

> I have robbed the garrulous streets,
> Thieved a fair girl from their blight,
> I have stolen her for a sacrifice
> That I shall make to this mysteried night.
>
> I have brought her, laughing,
> To my quietly sinister garden.
> For what will be done there
> I ask no man's pardon.
>
> (*On a Grey Thread* 47)

From the beginning Gidlow builds a tension between the settings of the busy streets and the quiet garden at night, the former being presented as spoiled with "blight." The speaker narrates that she has "robbed" this "fair girl" away from the deteriorating cityscape and into her garden, implying that the lush garden holds a potential for sexual freedom that the city cannot offer. Gidlow's word choices of robbing a fair girl from "*their* blight" (my emphasis) could be read as a parody of the urban lesbian "wife-snatcher," which was a stereotype that caused much anxiety at the time of Gidlow's writing (Oram 171). As she thieves an innocent girl from the heterosexual order and portrays the loss of her sexual innocence as a "sacrifice" that must be made, the speaker's tone implies a cheeky reclamation of this stereotype. This allows for the lesbian identity in the poem to be sexually coded—it is not merely naïve and innocent like the "romantic friendships" of the previous century (Smith-Rosenberg 270). Consequently, the poem embraces sapphic sexuality as "a symbol of female autonomy" (Newton 564).

In the second stanza, sexual anticipation builds as the women enter the "quietly sinister garden" (47). Unlike the unresolved potential for desire in "The Face in the Rain," Gidlow's feminine gaze in "Episode" turns desire into an explicit promise of pleasure, enabled by the shielding garden. While the hegemonic "pastoral ideal" would shut queer desires outside the garden gates (Marx 3)—as both too wild and too unnatural to belong to the ideal landscape—Gidlow unsettles this heterosexual idyll and claims the garden as a queer space. I want to highlight how the speaker introduces the setting: with a confident declaration that this is "my" garden (47). Moreover, the garden is described as "sinister" (47). The garden is perhaps not sinister to the women themselves, but to the outside world looking in, because Gidlow's queer subjects represent a threat to the heterosexual fantasy urged by "the rural myth" (Marx 229).

The lush garden in "Episode" acts as a safe counter-site where the women the poem presents can embrace their sexualities, shielded from any judgmental (male) gaze. In this way, I read the garden as a heterotopia: Foucault's place "outside of all places" ("Of Other Spaces" 24). Heterotopias are "real sites" within culture that are "represented, contested, and inverted," and often function as "enacted utopia[s]" (24). According to Foucault, the garden is perhaps "the oldest example" of heterotopias (25). Gidlow's garden holds within its bubble the inversion of societal norms, becoming a place where the (hetero)sexual order is upended and homosexuality is not only taken for granted but celebrated—an attribute that makes Gidlow's poetry a unique contribution to sapphic modernism. The garden exists as a real place—as the "smallest parcel of the world"—yet outside and aslant from the heterocentric society outside its gates (Foucault, "Of Other Spaces" 26). This is illustrated when Gidlow's speaker declares that she does not accept male judgment in the garden: "For what will be done there / I ask no *man's* pardon" (47; my emphasis). The speaker refuses to apologize for her identity and actions. The heterotopic site becomes a space that encourages sapphic desires and, in the words of Foucault, fosters a queer "way of life" ("Friendship" 138). "Episode" thus builds a bridge to Gidlow's lifestyle at Druid Heights—a countercultural site that also functioned as a heterotopia for this poet and her community.

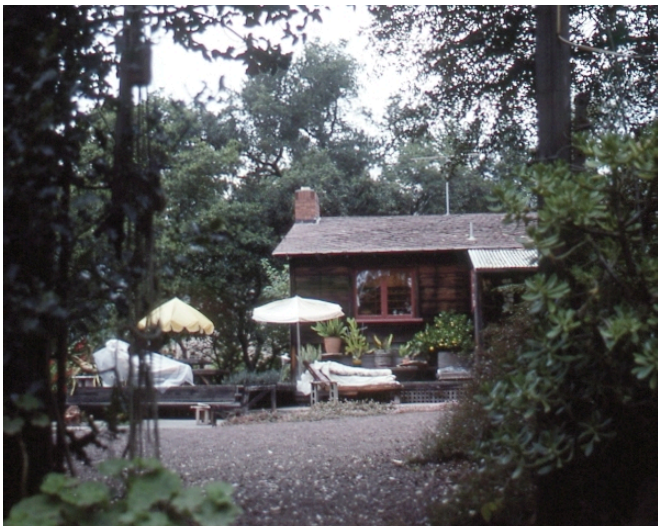

Figure 3. Elsa's house at Druid Heights. Photo by Laura Wilensky.

The sexual union between the two women in "Episode" further rebuts stereotypical claims that lesbians are wild, degenerate creatures. Instead, Gidlow's feminine voice and wild flowers queer nature and the "nature of desire" (Stein 295). In the climactic moment of the final three stanzas, the speaker describes tender moves and delicate touches against the backdrop of the garden:

> I brush the rouge from her cheeks,
> Clean the black kohl from the rims
> Of her eyes; loose her hair;
> Uncover the glimmering, shy limbs.
>
> I break wild roses, scatter them over her.
> The thorns between us sting like love's pain.
> Her flesh, bitter and salt to my tongue,
> I taste with endless kisses and taste again.
>
> At dawn I leave her
> Asleep in my wakening garden.
> (For what was done there
> I ask no man's pardon.) (47)

I want to draw attention to the gentle yet direct word choices that describe the lover's body, with a repetition of the pronoun "her." The lover is portrayed as a feminine and soft presence. While the speaker previously reclaims the stereotype of the "wife-snatcher" in the opening stanzas (Oram 171), in these stanzas there is no trace of the "wild sexual practices," the degeneracy, or the violence that the American public was warned about (Faderman 51, 55). Gidlow's voice never succumbs to guilt or shame. Nevertheless, the adjective "wild" does appear, but in the context of the "wild roses" scattered upon the lover's limbs, which "sting like love's pain" between their bodies. The roses represent Gidlow's gentler take on what wildness means to sapphic modernities. Despite growing in a garden, on "man-made, cultivated pieces of ground" (Marx 85), the flowers are not domesticated. As in Gidlow's gardens at Druid Heights, there is room for wild blooms. Cultivating this kind of garden becomes more of a "partnership" with nature, rather than a domestication, to use Gidlow's words (*Elsa* 294). It relies on the notion of queer nature. The "wild roses" in "Episode" are sexually coded, merged with the women's flesh and the "sting" of their desire. In this way, imagery of wildness is not equated with predatory behavior or doomed love—as was stereotypical at the time—but rather with belonging and the potential for growth in harsh environments. In her autobiography, Gidlow continues this metaphor in response to what it was like to be queer in the 1920s: "it was a desert, a desert of men. A desert with some wild flowers, a few wild blooms" (*Elsa* 122). At the heart of this image lies both a resistance and a sense of loneliness—a lack of community. Despite this, Gidlow highlights the fact that deserts also "have their oases" (*Elsa* 122). In "Episode," these wild flowers have found their oasis: a middle ground between the wilderness and the city where queer love can flourish on its own terms, and, more importantly, find other wild roses. In Gidlow's life, Druid Heights became her oasis, and nature became her resistance.

When Gidlow draws parallels between the wakening garden and the lesbian lovers, she further subverts the doctrine that asserts homosexuality to be a crime against nature. This Judeo-Christian belief—based on Paul the Apostle's analogy of seeding—asserts that all nonreproductive sex acts "pervert" nature (Stein 286). The setting of "Episode," however, affirms the garden as a landscape of queer productivity that undermines the image of the "unnatural use of human bodies" (Stein 286). Rachel Stein observes in a similar case that, although this lesbian productivity is different from traditional heterosexual reproduction, a homoerotic union that takes place in a natural environment subverts expectations and reiterates its own version of productivity: one founded on lush growth and "lively pleasures" of the body (294). "Episode" portrays this elegantly with its focus on tender touches and the "wakening garden" that surrounds the women "at dawn" (47). The union taking place from night to dawn can be read as a form of cyclical productivity, with the "wakening garden" symbolizing the wakening sapphic identities. Depicting this coming-of-age moment as cyclical rather than linear defies traditional notions of (re)productivity. By portraying what the dominant culture would deem "unnatural acts in nature," the "double transgression" of lesbian sex in the garden invites critical reflection on the damaging effects of the crime-against-nature ideology (Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson 16). Stein contends that this ideology has long been used to "violently dislocate homosexuals from the natural order and from natural environments" (293), and that nature spaces often become the ground for "homophobic violence" as a result, even today (292). Gidlow does not write in a vacuum where this violence is not a real threat. On the contrary, her unapologetic tone in the face of such threats positions her as a trailblazing voice in the field of sapphic modernist verse whose reclamation of queer nature was ahead of her time.

Gay Beads on the Grey Thread: Queer Temporality

Gidlow names her poetry collection *On a Grey Thread*, which references the opening poem, titled "The Grey Thread" (13). The emphasis on the grey thread as a metaphor for life speaks to the necessity of treating all of the poems as individual beads in a larger design. More than this, I suggest that we must see the collection itself as a cycle. In this section, I investigate the cyclicality of the overarching structure of the collection, looking at how the order in which Gidlow presents these poems symbolizes a journey between youth and old age, spring and autumn, life and death—and rebirth. Gidlow grounds her lesbian existence in the seasonal rhythms of nature and claims cyclicality to be integral to the queer coming-of-age process. This cyclicality marks queer time as an alternative narrative to straight, modern timelines. But even as her poetry continuously interrupts dominant "narratives of belonging and becoming" (Freeman xv), Gidlow's cyclical modern verse prompts us to ask: Can the sapphic be both at one with nature *and* articulate a modern identity?

The opening poem of the collection, "The Grey Thread" (13), sets the tone for her *vers libre* as a resistance to the grey linearity of heteronormativity and capitalism. The first of the five stanzas introduces the reader to the motif of life as a grey thread:

> My life is a grey thread,
> A thin grey stretched out thread,
> And when I trace its course, I moan:

How dull! How dead! (*On a Grey Thread* 13)

The image of the “grey thread” stretching before the speaker can be read as society’s heterosexual temporal narrative for her: she is to marry a working man, give birth, raise children, and stay in the domestic sphere. The speaker expresses detestation at these prospects and resists in a queer manner. “But I have gay beads” (13), the second stanza begins, before she describes the colorful beads: “A blue one for my painted dreams,” and “For love an odd bead / With a deep purple glow,” and “A red bead for my strength,” and many more (13). The poem’s fifth and final stanza concludes with a quiet yet powerful declaration:

My life is a grey thread
Stretching through Time’s day;
But I have slipped gay beads on it
To hide the grey. (13)

Wrapped in a 1920s double meaning of the word “gay,” Gidlow’s “gay beads” form a queer resistance that anticipates the colorful pride flag with all its significance at least fifty-five years before it appeared as a symbol of gay liberation. The “gay beads” on the “grey thread” of linear time open the door to an analysis of the tension between queer and modern temporalities. When read in light of Gidlow’s life, her refusal to fit heteronormative timelines exemplifies the speaker’s detestation of life as a “grey thread.” Gidlow knew from an early age she would never “marry a man for support,” nor give birth (*Elsa* 145, 41). On top of this rejection of society’s “paradigmatic markers” of progress (Halberstam 2), Gidlow detested the very symbol for modern times: the time clock in the office (*Elsa* 133). Reading Gidlow’s verse in light of her life adds nuanced layers of meaning to “The Grey Thread” that underscore her poetry’s status as lived queer resistance. Gidlow lives up to her nickname: the poet warrior.

Gidlow’s resistance to linear narratives runs throughout the collection, and she crafts colorful threads of queer time as a counterforce to heteronormative expectations. Elizabeth Freeman argues that modern time emerged alongside the birth of the homosexual identity, and that queer temporality came both from “within” and as a “counterpoint to modern time” (xii). Her ideas build on Jack Halberstam’s, who argues that queer temporality produces alternative narratives *outside* of the heteronormative “paradigmatic markers of life experience—namely, birth, marriage, reproduction, and death” (Halberstam 2). From the perspective of straight progression in modernity, queer existence can be read as a disturbing outlier because queer sexualities, as “reproductively sterile,” do not contribute to socioeconomic progress (Stein 294). As the nature paradox suggests, early-twentieth-century lesbians were treated as unnatural due to their “sterile” sexualities (Stein 294). Simultaneously, the supposed threat they represented to heterosexual households (and along with it the destruction of straight timelines) contributed to the public anxiety that lesbians were too wild to belong to the new era (Faderman 50–51). Questions of nature and sexuality are thus inevitably tied up with questions of temporalities. Moreover, if modern temporality is defined by capitalist narratives of sequence (Freeman; Halberstam), the counterpoint to such temporalities can be found in cycles of nature, which focus on the flow of seasonal growth rather than on strict schedules. The opening poem “The Grey Thread” invites the reader into a collection of verse that embodies cycles of queer temporality as resistance toward the naturalization of straight timelines and the “clashing, thundering, polluting” side of modern life (Gidlow, *Elsa* 107).

This guides me into an investigation of the overarching structure of *On a Grey Thread*, where poems flow in a cyclical rhythm and synch Gidlow’s lesbian existence to the turn of the seasons. Gidlow embraces queerness hand-in-hand with the processes of growth, death, and rebirth found in her garden. *On a Grey Thread* is split into six sections with separate headings that mark different phases in the cycle, and the early sections focus on coming-of-age processes. After the opening poem “The Grey Thread,” the collection moves into a section titled “Youth” (15), which contains five poems. The first poem in this section is also titled “Youth” (17–18), and thus the cycle begins with the young and inexperienced. The speaker of “Youth” brings the reader down below the crust of the earth in the first stanza: “I must go down / Down, down, / Below the crust of things,” and the second stanza brings us deeper “Into the caves of life / . . . / Where the calm roots of wisdom creep” (17). I read the speaker as an impatient seed in the earth, waiting for springtime. To grow, the speaker first has to find “the caverns of truth” deep within herself (17). The seed could be a metaphor for a queer coming-of-age moment. The speaker discovers that she is different from the majority and that this can cause pain, as she narrates, “I know pain is waiting there / Eager to break me” (17). But in the end she accepts this truth with the declaration, “But I am strong” (17), and in the final stanza, she proclaims:

> Living is crusted with lies.
> I want life naked,
> Laughing and young.
> Not fettered, not tamed,
> But life unashamed,
> With the cry of Desire on her tongue. (18)

From a contemporary perspective, this journey reads like a coming-out story, a narrative that causes many people to feel “out of synch” with normative timelines (Freeman xv). When temporalities are regulated according to heteronormative frameworks, figuring out that one’s sexuality or gender is different from that of the majority becomes a time-consuming process that puts “normal” adolescence on hold. This still rings true today, but in Gidlow’s time it was even more so, as the identity category of the homosexual was a new and stigmatized creation (Faderman; Smith-Rosenberg).

More than merely a coming-of-age moment, the seed embodies the sapphist’s birth and undermines accusations of unnaturalness. The second section of the collection is titled “Grain and Grapes” (25) and contains thirteen poems. The motif of the seed is particularly significant in two poems found in this section: “Roots” (32) and “Declaration” (40). In both poems the speaker is a voice from beneath the earth’s surface. In “Roots” she is “crawling like a worm with unclean things” and describes herself like “a yearning voiceless root” (32). In “Declaration” she is “a seed in the dust” and “a live root bedded in night” (40). The speaker in “Roots” dreams of the sun “mellow[ing] my ultimate fruit” (32), while the speaker in “Declaration” yearns for the moment when she will “be done with night” and finally “thrill into flower” (40). Both poems are thematically linked with “Youth” (17–18), and all three of them foreground the fact that the beginning of the cycle is marked by a birth. But this is not a traditional, heterosexual childbirth. Opposing the strict “biological clock” of reproduction (Halberstam 5), this coming-of-age birth is tied to seasonal temporalities. These poems embody dreams of being born into the light, of seeing the sun, and of blooming into flower, all of which rewrite Pauline doctrine’s seeding metaphor with queer defiance.

The contrast between queer temporalities and modern time, as exemplified by these sections, is never completely dichotomous. The collection moves from youth and innocence into sections that contain a more seasoned speaker. The majority of the collection’s poems are found in the following sections, titled “Inner Chamber” (43) and “In Passing” (67), which contain twenty-one and ten poems, respectively. These poems focus on emotional experience and growth, and this is where we find some of Gidlow’s most explicit love declarations for women. In the poem "Constancy" (62), we are again introduced to the motif of life as a thread. This time it is no longer grey, but "electric golden" (62). As the speaker tells a girl, "I keep faith with love, not lovers," and asks her not to be jealous "if I kiss this girl and that" (62), the thread takes on a new meaning: "Love's the thread, my sister, you a bead" (62). Gidlow's poetry demonstrates the intricate relationship between the queer rejection of straight timelines and the creation of an alternative modern "way of life" (Foucault, "Friendship" 138). According to Winning, "to be sapphist is *indelibly* to be modern" (19; italics in original), and the constancy "with love, not lovers" that Gidlow expresses is arguably a modern expression of sexuality that breaks with conventions of both heterosexuality and monogamy (*On a Grey Thread* 62). The circular beads and the linear thread bring out the tension between queer temporalities and modern time, emphasizing how living awry with respect to societal expectations in and of itself is an expression of modernity.

The collection's focus on cyclical rebirth makes a strong case for the self-created modern lesbian. The poem "The Artist" (52–53) merges imagery of artistic production with sapphic love and the motif of time, underscored by these lines from the third stanza:

> Madonna . . . loose me and rise.
> We are brief as apple-blossom
> And I am heart-weary with thought of the end.
> Creation is all. (52; ellipsis in original)

Throughout the poem, the speaker aches to paint her lover—a religious reclamation of the Madonna—to capture her "eternality" and save her from the passage of time. The poem evokes queer love and cyclicality through the image of the apple blossoms, which are short-lived but bound to return next spring. The speaker is "heart-weary with thought of the end"—the end of the relationship, or life itself. But the underlying message can be summed up by the line, "Creation is all." Painting (or indeed writing poetry about) the lover will ensure her "immortality," her return with the spring blossoms. "The Artist" echoes Gidlow's philosophy of rebirth, and she opens her autobiography with a reiteration of this thought: "If we are alive and growing, we are continuously giving birth to ourselves" (*Elsa* 1). I thus understand modern sapphic creation as not limited to art and poetry, but encompassing a broader understanding of self-creation through community. Gidlow's queer identity rejects the stereotypes and ideologies that aimed to control her image of what a lesbian was or should be, in favor of a constant (re)birth of the self in line with the apple blossoms. Gidlow's idea of sapphic modernities relies on her initial acceptance of queerness as a modern identity (as something she was born as),[11] but more so on her belief in continuously giving birth to the queer self through relationships with the human and the more-than-human environment.

Finally, I want to highlight how the cyclical nature of Gidlow's writing centers on the idea that the end of her collection, as indeed the end of her life, is the beginning of something new. The last poem before the epilogue, "A Thought," ends on this promise of rebirth, emphasizing how the "songs in the far corners of my soul / . . . / will wait for another life, for more suffering, / To give them birth" (78). "A Thought" complicates the notion of queer rebirth as merely a form of liberation and self-creation; it also embodies queer history as a "living, open-ended present" rather than a "fixed and frozen past," to borrow Youmans's phrase ("Elsa Gidlow's Garden" 103). *On a Grey Thread*'s cyclicality invites us to see Gidlow's poetry and plants as a legacy that keeps finding new hillsides to grow on. The queer garden at the heart of *On a Grey Thread* echoes Gidlow's Druid Heights philosophy: "Poetry is the poet's way into the world, a path to connection"

(Gidlow, “Footprints” 47). This connection is not limited to the flesh and the earth, but encourages us to forge “new, queer forms of generational connection and remembrance” (Youmans, “Elsa Gidlow’s Garden” 103). Gidlow’s life and poetry inspire nonlinear bridges across the decades between the queer past and the queer future.

Conclusion

Elsa Gidlow stands out as one of few modernist writers who dared to openly and unapologetically embrace nature as queer and queerness as natural. *On a Grey Thread* invites us into a garden that celebrates sapphic desire alongside the turning of the seasons. My research has suggested that the “gay beads” from her 1923 collection lay the foundation for her community activism three decades later at Druid Heights (*On a Grey Thread* 13). Despite efforts to preserve Druid Heights as an LGBTQ+ historic district,[12] the National Park Service has left the site to decay, and the innovative architecture is composting back to nature (Haiken; Rocha). While I would be thrilled to see the site restored in accordance with Gidlow’s final wish that Druid Heights should become an artists’ retreat (*Elsa* 412), I have shown that this poet warrior’s impact transcends time and place. Gidlow left a lasting impression on the people she met, and her story has the power to change queer lives across the globe today—as she has changed mine. To young and old sapphic women alike, her poetry is an antidote to loneliness and represents courage. Gidlow prepares the soil for queer communities to come together in the spirit of poetry and activism, and she teaches us to cultivate our gardens in line with her philosophy of queer rebirth. My own research is guided by this philosophy, and as I plant this seed I know the garden dedicated to Gidlow scholarship will germinate and prosper.

Today’s polarized political climate makes it even more important that *On a Grey Thread* rejects stereotypes of wildness and ideologies of unnaturalness in favor of queer nature. One of the goals of the interdisciplinary field of queer ecology is to rewrite the way we view the (queer) past to destabilize the biopolitical power relations that link homosexuality with the unnatural. This could not be more urgent. With conservative forces on the rise in Europe and the US, the twentieth-century rhetoric that I have analyzed in this paper is constantly recycled to justify the persecution of queer people. During these uncertain times, both for queer rights and for the environment, I see Gidlow as a wild bloom in the desert, a gay bead on the grey thread. It is my hope that her story can continue to inspire us to forge connections through communities, nature, and poetry.

Notes

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2. See Foucault, *A History of Sexuality* 43–44; and Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* 2–3.

3. A female "sexual invert" is generally understood as a masculine soul in a feminine body (gender identity), which is different from homosexuality (sexual orientation). Nevertheless, sexual inversion became the most common explanation for same-sex desires during the early twentieth century, which is why it is useful to historicize the term (see Black; Faderman; Newton).

4. For more on how Roosevelt cultivated this image of masculine wilderness, see Slotkin.

5. Gidlow embraces the word "lesbian" in her autobiography *Elsa: I Come With My Songs* and in the *Word Is Out* interview from 1977 (Adair et al.).

6. Other co-founders of Druid Heights included Isabel Grenfell Quallo (Gidlow's partner) and the couple Roger and Mary Somers (Gidlow, *Elsa* 349–58).

7. Youmans has conducted research into this documentary's history and significance. See Youmans, *Word Is Out: A Queer Film Classic.*

8. The collection did not receive much critical attention in the 1920s, but Harriet Monroe wrote a short review in *Poetry* magazine in 1924. She states: "One finds evidence in this book that, in spite of sophomoric thinking, Miss Gidlow may prove herself a poet" (109). Monroe did not comment on the collection's lesbian themes.

9. In the 2021 Mint Editions reprint of *On a Grey Thread*, "The Face in the Rain" is printed without any line breaks, and the stanzas are only separated by indentation. The original text from 1923 included line breaks between the four stanzas in addition to the indentation of stanzas two and four.

10. In *Sapphic Songs: Eighteen to Eighty* (1982), this poem is reprinted under the title "For the Goddess Too Well Known" (4). I have decided to stick to the original title, "Episode," from *On a Grey Thread.*

11. The interviewer from *Word Is Out* asks her how long she has been a lesbian and Gidlow responds, "I never understand what that means, because as far as I'm concerned, I was born that way" (Adair et al.).

12. The NPS owns Druid Heights as part of the Muir Woods National Monument. In 2018, the site was deemed eligible to be listed on the National Register of Historic Places (Rocha), which would have ensured preservation, but as of 2026, nothing has happened. In 2017, Michael Toivonen founded a group called "Save Druid Heights," which is still active.

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