“EVERYTHING IS NATURE”

PRACTITIONER PERSPECTIVES ON

NATURE-BASED THERAPIES:

A CRITICAL SOCIAL WORK AND POSTHUMAN ANALYSIS

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CAROLYN RALPH

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"The further we distance ourselves from the spell of the present, explored through our senses, the harder it will be to understand and protect nature's precarious balance, let alone our own human nature."

(Dianne Ackerman, 1990)

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has ushered in a heightened awareness of mental health challenges and the need for innovative therapeutic approaches. Nature-based therapies (NBT), which integrate the more-than-human world into the therapeutic process, have garnered interdisciplinary attention for their potential benefits. This study engages with practitioners who implement NBT into their practice, employing qualitative methods, including semi-structured interviews and reflexive thematic analysis, to gather their insights and experiences. Findings reveal that practitioners perceive NBT as a powerful modality for enhancing emotional resilience, fostering well-being, and facilitating a deeper connection with the natural world. However, they also identify challenges such as cultural relevance, accessibility, and the need for systemic support. Three broad themes emerged from the interview data: the importance of interconnectedness, healing reciprocity and liberatory wildness.

Agential realism, developed by Karen Barad (2007), provides the theoretical lens for this research. Under the ontological umbrella of feminist new materialisms, this critical posthuman framework emphasizes the entanglement of humans and the more-than-human world, challenging traditional separations and advocating for a view of reality as a dynamic process of intra-action. A neologism, Barad's (2007) concept of 'intra-action' challenges the conventional understanding of the idea of 'interaction', which assumes that entities or individuals exist as separate, independent beings that come together to interact. Instead, 'intra-action' posits that entities emerge through their relationships with one another. In other words, entities do not pre-exist their relations;

rather, they are co-constituted through these relations. This concept emphasizes the fluid and dynamic process of becoming, where boundaries between entities are not fixed but continuously enacted (Barad, 2007). Through this lens, NBT practices are considered experiences for connection co-constituted through intra-actions between practitioners, clients, and the natural environment.

This thesis contributes to the literature on innovative mental health interventions. It also argues for a move towards a critical posthuman social work model by providing a nuanced understanding of NBT through the lens of agential realism and critical social work theory. It offers recommendations for integrating this approach into broader mental health strategies advocating for a more holistic, and accessible, model of mental health care in the post-pandemic context.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to Moose, Luna and Duck.

I love you. That is ALL.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful for the land on which this thesis was based. The lands that I have had the privilege to access: to live, play, parent, work, do this research and author this thesis, are located within the traditional territories of the Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe nations, covered under the Between the Lakes Treaty No. 3 (1792) and protected by the Dish with One Spoon Wampum agreement. Because I live on the border of two cities, I also live on the ancestral, treaty and title lands of the Ojibwe and the Michizaagiig Nation, now known as the Mississaugas of the Credit. I also want to give recognition to the gift of Manitoulin Island which is the traditional territory of the Anishinaabek and Odawa peoples, within lands protected by the Manitoulin Island Treaty (45 and 94). I recognize and appreciate the original peoples' continued stewardship and advocacy for the protection of our more- than-human world. I am so grateful for the story keepers who have protected a worldview that recognizes the more-than-human world as kin.

I would like to express my gratitude to the research participants who so generously shared their perspectives of working with humans in connection with the more-than-human world. Their choice to be here with me on this journey has gifted me with insights and shared moments of wisdom that have helped to inspire this creation. Through our work together, we have forged new friendships and imagined new possibilities.

I am so very thankful for the faculty and staff in the school of social work at McMaster. Over the last (9!!) years being part of the McMaster School of Social Work community, I have been so lucky to meet so many folks who have seen me and heard me

in a way that allowed me to believe in myself. You met my need for belonging, connection and community care. You have helped me to feel safe and encouraged me to creatively challenge the status quo while exploring my curiosity. Having been in other faculties and departments of study since the 90's, I can say that this little school, and the people who have shared it with me, are connected by a shared ethic. You have modeled what it means to BE and DO critical social work. This ethic sets critical social work in a position of importance in a post-pandemic reality:

> *Do the least harm possible, recognizing that harm is inevitable. Imagine new possibilities and act together. Hold the hope for a reality where there is no need for 'social justice' and 'social work'—a better world for all.*

So many great teachers - Ann Fudge-Schormans, Ameil Joseph, Jennie Vengris, Christina Sinding, Saara Greene - you all encouraged my creative and academic needs and were willing to connect with me on levels that far surpassed and shifted the hierarchy of the institutional teacher-student dynamic. Tammy, Darlene, and Lorna, you have been my technical and emotional support system throughout this long journey. I would not even have applied if it were not for the encouragement of Lorna. I do not think I could have done this without all of your unconditional support and friendship.

Ann, thank you for being my supervisor. You have always held me, with so much patience, kindness and creative support. Throughout our time together you have helped to make school a place that is fun for me to explore my curiosity and express it artfully. You understand me in a way that feels so freeing. This year was so heavy and hard, and you always made space for me to talk through my worries and fears and push through all of

life's distractions so that I could complete this project even though it felt an impossible task to complete while I was distracted by family crisis.

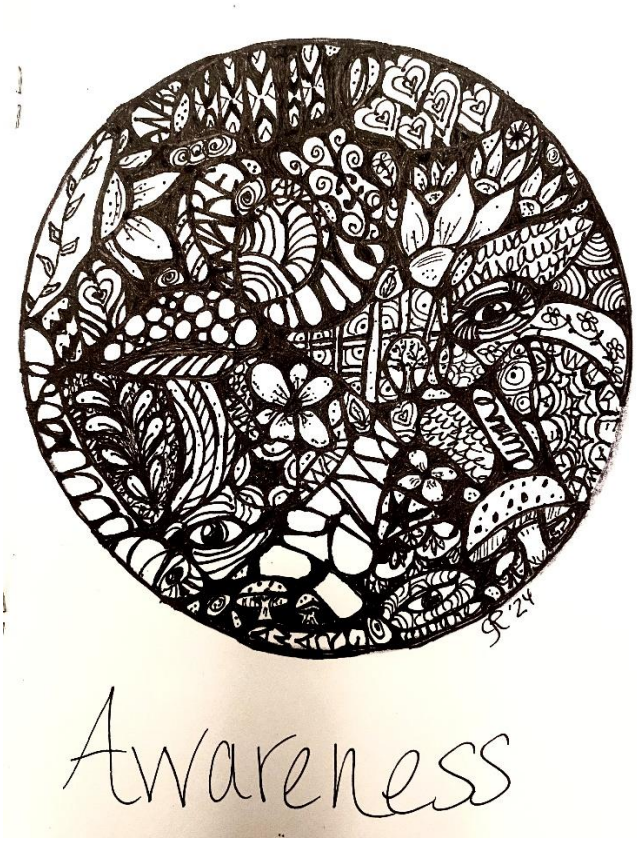
Many thanks to Jennifer Ma, my second reader, whose generosity, authenticity, and vulnerability was appreciated by all her students as we stumbled through our thesis completion. You saw us through it all and helped to create a connected cohort community. You may have been hired to be a teacher/researcher, but your therapist parts were ever present. When we were struggling you helped us to get grounded through a commitment to mindfulness that you did not just 'use' as an educational tool but emulated in your relationships with us.

I have so much gratitude for my husband and children who have had to live with all the parts of me that were activated through this process and whose patience and support were unparalleled. Mike, my best friend - my heart - your unwavering belief in me kept our world together and you held me afloat when I felt myself sinking. Your capacity to hold space for my relentless need to talk about everything, all the time, like *ALL* the time, is so appreciated. I am so unbelievably lucky that you continue to choose to partner with me after all these years. Hannah, my editor-in-chief, and my partner in inquiry, I feel so blessed that you always made space for me to discuss my ideas and thoughts and kept me well-nourished throughout the process with your love and food. You understand me like no one else. You scared the heck out of me this year and I am so thankful that you chose to come back, into your body and your life here, as my daughter. Declan, you have been my emotional support – always gently loving me and reassuring me that I was still a good mom through it all. Your love is such a powerful medicine.

Danny, my friend, we did it! So thankful for that fateful meeting on the social work floor. On the first day of grad school, we both showed up when classes hadn't even started yet. A couple of keeners. We were destined to be friends. Thanks for being here, in this boat, with me.

Thanks to all of you for believing I could do this and being with me throughout the process!

Thank you all for being here. Now. Together.



Preface

As I write this sentence, it will have been close to one year since my daughter, while driving, collided with a tree. Against the odds, she survived. This event, in the middle of this research process, was an immense challenge. For a long time after the accident, I struggled to access any part of my brain that would allow my body to stay focused on a process of knowledge creation using the constraints of this limited code of sharing information that we call language. When she hit that tree, my body, mind, and soul were sent into such an unfamiliar dance of being together that I felt lost for a while in the new relationship with myself, let alone with this inquiry. However, an inquiry about nature's healing properties became a process for me that truly engaged and connected my mind, body, and spirit in a way that I had never experienced before.

While my daughter was on life support for weeks, I sat for ten hours every day in a dark space (literally and figuratively). In the times when I had to share my spot so that someone else could love her, I went down to Rohan's Healing Garden. This small garden

was an oasis in the vast expanse of concrete, honking cars, incessant beeping machines, and hundreds of fast-moving humans (many experiencing their own traumas). Rohan's Healing Garden sits just outside of the parking area at Sunnybrook Hospital in Toronto (this is a world-class trauma center in Ontario, Canada)

where my daughter had been airlifted by helicopter the night of her accident. It was in Rohan's Healing Garden that I could take off my shoes, soak my feet in the cooling water of the small waterfall and breathe out the overwhelming feelings of grief and fear into the trees and breathe in possibilities for something better for all of us. I am infinitely grateful to have had that space to heal. Rohan and I are now friends, and we hope to collaborate in some way, one day. Rohan's story is a beautiful one and you can read more about his garden here: https://health.sunnybrook.ca/wellness/how-to-live-like-the-experts-nature-with-rohan-harrison/.

Throughout this inquiry, I have been so aware of the privilege I enjoy having access to natural spaces around my home where I can walk, both by myself and with clients. All these spaces, places, people, art, culture (in all forms), and technology became fodder for my inquiry. I had so many experiences of synchronicities that truly felt magical, and I am so unbelievably grateful for how this process helped heal me. Everywhere I went I brought my phone, my penny whistle, my books, and a journal. It was in these journals that I allowed all my emotional parts expression and in partnership with the more-than-human world, I created art and poetry, took photos, and recorded my experiences, in a fully embodied experiment.

These pieces of art are interspersed within this thesis to share with you, the reader, the embodied inquiry that this project became as I traversed the spaces between a mental health practitioner, an 'insider' researcher (I work as a 'therapist' who walks in 'nature' with clients), and a human experiencing one of the most emotionally difficult times of my life. My mom parts, my social worker parts, my researcher parts, all of me had to show up

here. As a reflexive/diffractive researcher (these terms will be addressed in the body of the thesis), I am keenly aware that I cannot separate myself from this inquiry about how the more-than-human world supports human mental health. I am fully entangled in the becoming of the material aspects of this inquiry that I share with you here and I invite you to consider that you, as the reader of this paper, are now also entangled in a becoming, with this inquiry, this thesis and me.

Welcome.

In my role as the author, I am aware that I am holding the space to co-constitute this experience with you. For whatever reason we are here, now, together, I am grateful for the opportunity to write, read, feel, imagine, and create new possibilities together. I promise to recognize and honour my response-ability to sit in the messiness of this intimate academic experiment with you and we will push on the stifling walls of what is considered 'knowledge' together, with an intent to emancipate each other from disconnect through the safety of nonjudgment, recognizing that there is no actual 'other' in an ontology of immanence and becoming.


there is a voice inside you that uses no words...
Listen to this voice... Listen...
¡Rumi!

Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction

According to a recent policy paper from the Center for Addictions and Mental Health (CAMH, 2020), Canadians were already in the midst of a mental health crisis, even before Covid-19. The pandemic has shone a light on how crucial it will be to our well-being to promote mental health and options for healing. The paper (CAMH, 2020) calls for a long-term, system-wide response which "must include a range of mental health resources, supports and care [as well as] support for new models of mental health service delivery" (p.1). A more recent report called *Understanding the Mental Health of Canadians Through Covid-19 and Beyond: Poll #18* (2023), showed that rates of anxiety and depression in Canadians have stabilized since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, yet rates of anxiety and depression are still significantly higher than pre-pandemic numbers and increased numbers of Canadians are seeking in-person mental health support. In response to the rising demand for in-person therapeutic intervention, there has been an increase in social workers entering private practice (CASW, 2023). Nature-based therapies (NBT), which integrate the (natural) more-than-human world into the therapeutic process, have garnered interdisciplinary attention for their potential benefits. Some examples of NBT include forest bathing, wilderness retreats, animal-assisted therapies, walk-and-talk therapy, horticultural therapy, and the use of animist-based models of talk therapy.

In this thesis, I argue that NBT can meet the urgent need to provide new and innovative support models in addition to the evidence-based, cognitive-centric models currently dominating mental health treatment options. Many empirical studies are using

quantitative research that acknowledges the importance and benefits of humans' connection with the more-than-human world in terms of improving mental health (Arrenstedt &Wahrborg, 2011; Berman et al,2012; Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989; Ulrich et al, 1991; Watkins-Martin et al.,2022). However, fewer studies have taken a qualitative approach to exploring the experiences and perspectives of mental health practitioners (especially social workers) practicing within the context of NBT. This study aimed to engage with mental health practitioners, who identify as nature-based therapists, to learn how they perceived their experiences of offering NBT, in private practice. For this qualitative study, semi-structured interviews were held with four mental health practitioners. They were asked questions such as what drew them to work in mental health and what factors contributed to their choice to incorporate nature into their practice. Employing Braun & Clarke's (2022) Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) to gather their insights and experiences, the study found that practitioners perceive NBT as a powerful modality for enhancing emotional resilience, fostering well-being, and facilitating a deeper connection with the natural world. However, they also identify challenges such as cultural relevance, accessibility, and the need for systemic support. Three broad themes emerged: the importance of interconnectedness, healing reciprocity and liberatory wildness. These themes will be further explored in the Discussion section of this thesis.

Employing critical social work and posthuman perspectives, this study intended to garner deeper understandings of mental health practitioners' experiences of offering

NBT. In addition, this thesis offers possibilities for alternative, holistic and posthuman approaches to critical social work practice.

I also explore the ethical tensions that arose for me, as a critical social worker, while adjusting from a mainstream indoor practice, where I worked as a contract therapist, to moving outside, and incorporating nature into the therapeutic experience. Deeply and inextricably implicated in the research, I reflexively consider these tensions as they relate to the research process itself regarding the development of my ontological, epistemological, and theoretical positioning (which started with a consideration of ethics), and my subsequent discomfort with human-centered qualitative methodology, after being introduced to post qualitative inquiry.

Throughout this paper, I will use the term 'nature' where it makes sense colloquially. However, I am more aligned with the terms 'other-than-human world', or ‘more-than-human world,’ which were popularized by David Abram (1996) and are predominantly used in literature that adopts a post humanist framework (such as agential realism). I will use these terms interchangeably throughout.

1.2: Setting the Context for This Research – the Global COVID 19 Pandemic

It is not within this paper's scope to fully examine the effects of the global Covid-19 pandemic on mental health. It is however necessary to locate this study within this context because it was a key factor for understanding why and how this inquiry came to be.

During the shutdown of services that was mandated by the federal government, mental health care was considered essential and many practitioners who were working in the field of mental health had an increased workload as well as heightened safety requirements for meeting with clients (Ashcroft, R. et al., 2021; Ashcroft, R., et al., 2022). In 2021, amid the global COVID-19 pandemic, I decided to start seeing clients outdoors in local forests, gardens, parks, and lakeside areas and incorporate the more-than-human world into my counselling practice. This came about for many reasons. The restrictions placed on human interactions were intended to mitigate the spread of the Covid-19 virus. However, many of the restrictions and mandates made seeing clients indoors increasingly difficult. The use of face masks created difficulties for myself and my clients to relate well. My hearing was supported by seeing people's lips move and many of my clients felt the same. Not being able to share and receive facial cues was difficult in terms of mental health care as facial cues can relate to many unspoken emotions. Virtual sessions were not ideal for myself and many of my clients as we all felt exhausted from this almost exclusive mode of communication at the time. Also, some clients found difficulty in finding personal space within their homes, where they could safely share their feelings and discuss their challenges freely. Most importantly, my role as a social worker, working as a psychotherapist during the pandemic, had its own set of challenges for which I found being in nature a source of personal healing. I recognized that the pandemic brought about a particular shift in how I related to myself while listening to others' fears, worries and grief. Prior to the pandemic, when listening to clients' stories, I was able to hold space for them. I could attend to any parts of me that

felt triggered by some similarity in their stories to those I might have also experienced. This is known as counter transference in counselling work (Gabbard, 2020). The difference during the pandemic was that I found myself challenged to hold space for others because I was also experiencing the same fears, worries and interpersonal challenges. This was a global experience. We all had our own context and individual experiences, but we were ALL experiencing the same threats at the same time. We were all experiencing fear, worry, loss, grief, disruption, and dissolution within our communities. We were all feeling the effects of isolation and restrictions on our usual ways of life. This was a time in history where a global crisis could be seen and shared across the planet through the internet. There was little reprieve from the intensity of what was happening in our world as a global collective.

I worked in the afternoons and evenings, and I started to spend the entire morning before work, walking and meditating in the natural spaces around my house to prepare myself for sitting with others. I dreaded going inside. I dreaded hearing the pain and fears of my clients. When I invited clients to meet with me outdoors, it met many of my clients and my needs for feeling less restricted and offered a reprieve from being on our electronic devices. As I continued to spend more time in local forests, parks, and gardens with clients, I started to recognize that there was more going on than just a change in where we met. I noticed that the birds interacted with us in such interesting ways. I noticed that I felt the seasons like never before. I often arrived at our meeting locations unprepared for the weather and I learned that the accompanying external discomfort had implications for accessing my internal discomforts. I felt the discomfort of not being able

to control the space. I felt the discomfort of the displacement of power that an office provided for me as the therapist. I felt more vulnerable, less in control, more authentic. I felt more aligned with my critical feminist social work parts than ever before.

I realized that I needed to be outside more. I felt a tremendous shift in the transference that had been happening and I was able to hold space for others in ways that I can only explain being attributed to the partnership of the more-than-human world in the process. I started to pay attention to the ways that this manifested. Having the opportunity to explore this journey through this thesis has opened me up to so many aspects of the relationships, both with my clients and myself, and has anchored the value I place in my relationship with the more-than-human world, especially while connecting with humans on an intimate and emotional level. This thesis has allowed me the opportunity to immerse myself in inquiry that supports my practice, and my practice has become more fulfilling as I connect it to my research. Every time I shared with my colleagues and peers that I had shifted my practice outdoors, and that I was doing an inquiry about the change in my practice, they expressed a curiosity and a desire to participate in the creation of this analysis. While I originally thought this might be approached as autoethnography, I became curious about how and why other practitioners were doing what I called at the time 'nature-based therapy' and perhaps my need for community drove the choice to interview other practitioners. The primary research question created itself – What are practitioner's perspectives on nature-based therapy? As a critical social worker, an analysis of what we were doing started through a critical social work lens but eventually developed into an ontological shift towards feminist new materialisms and the

importance of approaching this subject from a posthuman perspective. This aspect of the inquiry will be discussed more in future chapters.

1.3: The Research Question(s): An Emergent Process

> *"As important as it is to have a clear starting place, finding the question is seldom simple. Research questions are always political. Often, questions have to be extracted from our positivist and preconceived ideas about what a good research question "should" be. Sometimes questions are more like hunches, experienced tensions or disjuncture's sensed in our own lives. But even when we get some initial clarity around the research question, this seldom lasts long. Questions usually change as the inquiry moves. Sometimes we never do find the question; instead, it finds us—at the end of the day, when the new knowledge from the analysis tells us what question we just answered. Keeping ourselves open to an emergent research process allows us to deepen our understanding about what it was we really wanted to know in the first place. But we have to be open to the art of the question through re-searching—the willingness to look again "(Potts & Brown, 2015, p.25)*

I started this section with a (very) long quote by Potts & Brown (2015) because when it popped up in a class reading, I felt validated by their words. The fact that my research project didn't initially start with a problem to be solved and wasn't hypothesis-driven made the process of choosing a single research question difficult. As I moved

through this inquiry, allowing the process and questions to emerge through various modes of expression, the 'question' shifted many times. Potts and Brown encouraged me to stay in a non-judgmental stance of allowing myself to "re-search", to "look again". True to this quote, I agonized over finding the 'right' question that would make my research matter, that would contribute to solving an important social problem, and that would honor the social justice mandate that drove my critical analysis. The flow of questions, as I moved through this process went something like this:

1)"How does NBT contest the clinical space?"

2)"How does NBT contest and resist the dominant neoliberal, biomedical and positivist discourses on mental health and mental health treatment?"

3)"What's my positioning as a critical social worker in clinical practice, seeing clients outside in nature, amid a potential shifting paradigm around mental health, during a post-pandemic mental health crisis?"

4)"How am I a product of, a survivor of, in resistance of...and an accomplice to these same ideologies and systems that are keeping us separated from our "inner nature"?"

5)"How is the environmental crisis connected to the mental health crisis?"

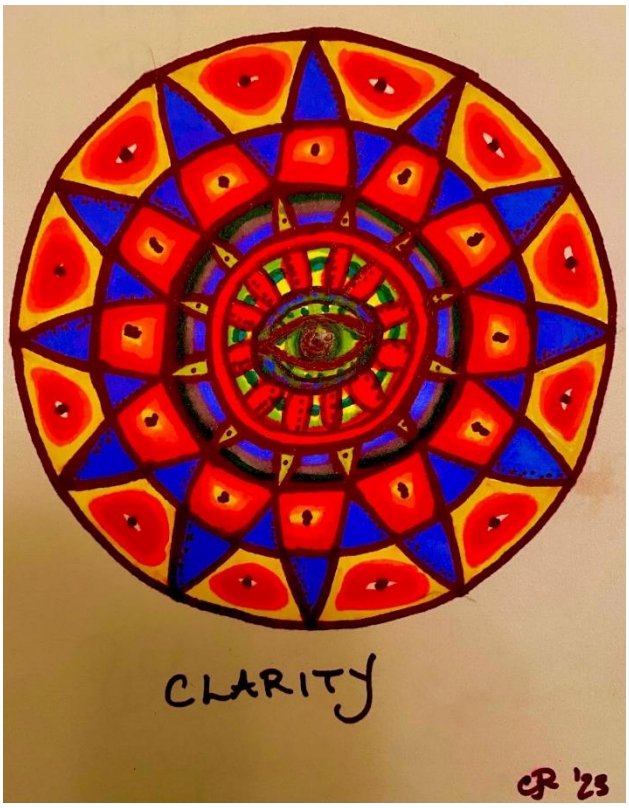
6)"How do we use our position as practitioners to facilitate the connection between humans and the more-than-human world for both human and planetary healing?"

I probably could have continued coming up with questions endlessly if there wasn't a deadline for this project, but as I started to read theory and question the ways that knowledge is (re) produced in the academy, I settled with an acceptance that this process was more about learning how to do research as inquiry, than identifying problems and

thinking that my research would be able to produce the knowledge necessary to solve them. So, the questions are both simple, and complex, and have kept me on track and pulled me out of many research rabbit holes. Learning how to 'parking lot' ideas and future questions was a necessary part of this process.

What are mental health practitioners' perspectives of nature-based therapy?

What are the implications of this analysis for critical social work clinical practice, especially from a posthuman perspective?



1.4: Why Agential Realism?

This experiment with inquiry has no fixed beginning. My interest in the nexus of physics and spirituality has been lifelong, but during my first degree in Anthropology, I had the opportunity to take a course on physics and religion, where I was introduced to Bohr, Bohm and Whitehead (theoretical physicists). Some years later, in 2017, through an interest in critical pedagogy and adultism, I found Murris' (2016) work, *The Posthuman Child, Educational Transformation Through Philosophy with Picturebooks,* and Barad's (2007) *Meeting the Universe Halfway*. As I read and re-read these densely philosophical books, I highlighted sections and made multiple notes in the margins as I struggled with the complex theories. Fast forward to a conversation in the summer of 2024 with my supervisor about feminist embodiment theory, and these two theorists reappeared in the readings. The work of Murris (2016) (whose focus is on post qualitative research and posthuman approaches to education) and Barad (2007) (whose theory draws from both the work of feminist theorist Judith Butler and the physics of Neils Bohr) had already had an influence on me but as an undergraduate, their contributions to the development of my ontological and epistemological position was beyond my academic abilities at the time. When I pulled these texts off the shelf in 2024, the sections I had highlighted and the notes I had made in 2017 were highly relevant to this present inquiry (this is an example of the synchronicities I speak about in the Preface). As a frame for critically exploring practitioner perspectives on NBT, agential realism offers a context in which practitioners can facilitate a more ethical and holistic framework for practice because practitioners are not merely 'applying' techniques to passive subjects or 'using' environments as a

backdrop for therapy, but are co-creating therapeutic encounters with nature, clients, and material conditions. Barad's agential realism contests dualistic notions of nature/human and client/therapist and offers concepts that if adopted, connect us to the materiality and agency of the more-than-human world - its landscapes, seasons and weather patterns, animals, and plants, and all the ecosystems that are actively participating in the therapeutic process, and that have the potential to shape relationships in unpredictable ways. Adopting this frame is essential to social work's commitment to social justice as it demands an ethic of response-ability to sit with the tensions that exist in the violence of client/therapist subjectivities where the therapist holds specialized knowledge to 'fix' a client's issues. An agential realist frame shifts the traditional therapeutic power dynamic to a relational process where client, therapist and the more-than-human world co-constitute the therapeutic experience.

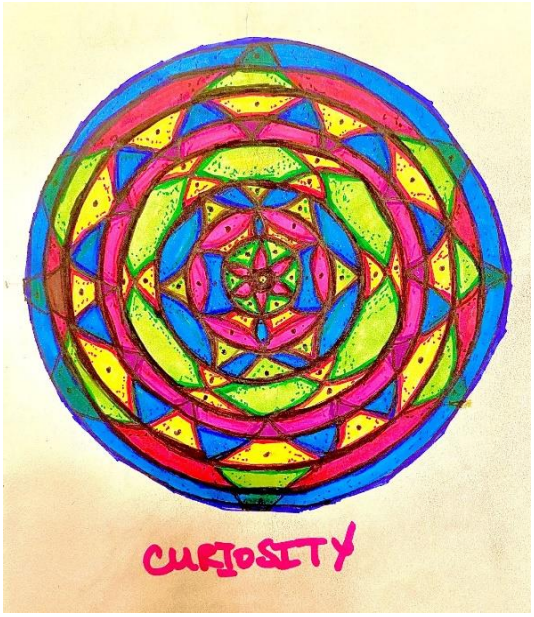
1.5: What did I do?

I started this research project by employing qualitative methods, including semi-structured interviews and reflexive thematic analysis. Well after the research design, ethics application and interviews with participants, and during the analysis stage of the research, I had a meeting with my supervisor where she suggested that I explore feminist embodiment theory, and it was this suggestion that led me to find *post* theorists. When I started reading about post-qualitative inquiry, I attempted to integrate practitioners' insights and experiences into an inquiry that included a posthuman perspective. I recognized that as a researcher, my entanglement with the topic was complex, and challenging, and provided opportunities for discovery. I engaged in a process of

diffractive reading, connection with community, immersion in nature and technology, art exploration and audio, visual and written journaling. An understanding of diffractive reading, as popularized by Barad (2007), is supported by Murris and Bozoleks' (2019) interpretation:

> *"The idea is to read theory with practice diffractively guided by, for example, key questions that move the experiment forward. As a researcher one is part of the world, hence a diffractive reading is unlike a literature review as the latter assumes that you are at a distance of the literature, having a bird's eye point of view – creating an overview by comparing, contrasting, juxtaposing, or looking for similarities and themes. A diffractive reading, on the other hand, does not foreground any texts as foundational, but through reading texts through one another, comes to new insights." (p. 1505)*

Murris and Bozolek, (2019), suggest that diffraction as a methodology supports an experience of "living without bodily boundaries" (p.1506). In this way, I was encouraged to critically engage in the role of producing knowledge by paying attention to affect (emotions, reactions to the more-than-human actors), resist humanist discourses and cognitive-centric ways of knowing (embrace the ineffable and explore other ways of sharing) and most importantly be willing to attend to the risky business of allowing my curiosity to "lead [my] thinking and doing 'otherwise'" (p.1507).



1.6: What did I find?

Inquiry is a messy endeavor. I struggled to attend to this process by checking off boxes typically attributed to qualitative research projects. I acknowledged and honored that my relationships with the interview participants became an opportunity for community building and co-creation in many ways. I also wanted to honor and find ways to share the influence and co-creative capacities of the other-than-human actors in this inquiry. In terms of findings from the virtual interviews with human participants, practitioners perceived NBT as a powerful modality for enhancing emotional resilience, fostering well-being, and facilitating a deeper connection with clients and with the more-than-human world. However, they also identified challenges such as accessibility, cultural relevance, and the need for systemic support. Three themes emerged from the study: 1) the importance of interconnection and access to the more-than-human world for

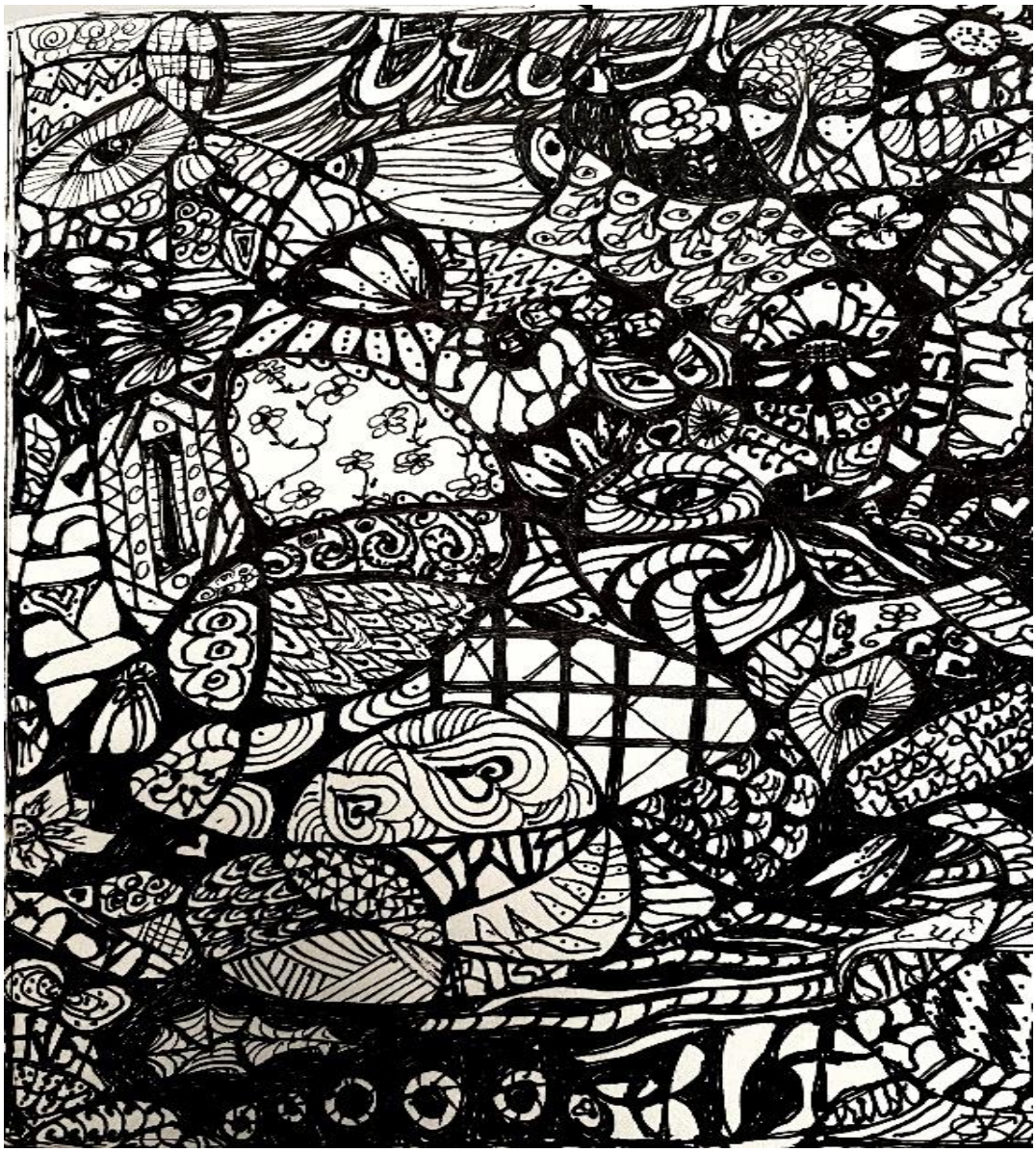
supporting mental health 2) the importance of reciprocity, and 3) the move towards a liberatory wildness.

1.7: What else? So now what?

Included in this thesis is a review of the literature on NBT, followed by an in-depth discussion of how I developed my theoretical, ontological, and epistemological foundation for analysis, including definitions of some of the post theories that influenced the process of my inquiry. I follow with an explanation of how ethics served as the impetus for my theoretical development, and I discuss some of the limitations of these theories for this study. I then discuss the method of data collection, including a description of reflexive thematic analysis and share the tensions I experienced trying to apply post-humanist lens to humanist methodology. I share the findings from the interviews and discuss the themes that were identified, including ethical implications for critical practice both with humans and the more-than-human world. I then problematize some of the concepts that made up the research question: mental health, nature, and therapy. I end the thesis with a discussion around future considerations for dissemination of the research findings and plans for future projects. Throughout the thesis, I add pieces of art and poetry. As stated in the preface, my artist parts did most of the heavy lifting in terms of the emotional experiences involved with this inquiry and they were essential to my ability to continue to move through this process while experiencing a family crisis. When I found the scholarship of St. Pierre (2019,2021), I felt emboldened and excited to use art in this thesis as a method for intentionally disrupting the hegemonic academic presentation style that dominates social science research. Like other post-qualitative

researchers, I wanted to use this space to contest the idea that what I offer here is knowledge or truth. The seed of this radical shift in my positioning toward research, once planted in my head, made following the standard format and processes feel agonizingly constraining and I weave a narrative of this research discomfort as (what *I* think is) an important part of learning how to research in a way that resists 'sameness' and encourages the possibilities

of thinking, doing and being otherwise.



*After the accident, I started a process of therapeutic doodling called Neurographic Art combined with Zentangle. I would focus my thoughts on a particular emotion which was challenging me, and then incorporate the word everywhere in the image. Hidden in plain sight is the word **TRUST**. When I did this doodle, the grief I was experiencing felt terrifying and I felt overwhelmed with fear and desperately wanted to shift into trust – trust that my daughter would be ok, trust that I would complete this thesis, trust that the world would be ok.*

***See if you can find the word embedded in the graphic**.*

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

This critical review of both the academic research and popular literature on NBT locates the topic in the context of our current cultural paradigm while also uncovering the tensions, complexities, and power dynamics that shape therapeutic encounters with nature from a critical social work and agential realist perspective. The latter perspective invites a reframing of NBT as a practice that concerns human wellbeing and the ethical and relational entanglements between humans and the other-than-human world. I will offer and briefly discuss some of the foundational literature upon which the empirical literature (which maintains the dominant biomedical discourse) bases its theoretical positioning, critiquing from both critical and agential realist perspectives. I then offer some examples of the literature which has influenced popular culture's conception of the benefits of NBT and the importance of human connection to nature in general, including literature that is based on eco social and eco spiritual interpretations. I will finish by offering an Indigenous perspective popularized by Robin Wall-Kimmerer. Throughout this review, I position my research and practice within the context of the presented literature. A comprehensive review of the literature on NBT is a formidable task. Only a small selection of literature will be included in this review due to the limited scope of this research project.

2.1: Foundational Euro western Theories on NBT

The euro-western concept of NBT is grounded in the belief that humans have an innate connection to nature, a concept popularized by the biophilia hypothesis (Wilson, 1984). According to this theory, this connection is essential for mental health, with

natural settings providing restorative experiences that reduce stress and improve mood (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989). Kaplan and Kaplan's (1989) Attention Restoration Theory (ART) further elaborate this claim by suggesting that nature provides restorative experiences that replenish cognitive resources, thus improving mental health. Ulrich et al. (1991) expanded on these ideas by demonstrating through empirical research that natural scenes can reduce stress and promote recovery. The literature reveals a diversity of interdisciplinary approaches within this field, including for example, medicine, psychiatry, geography, public health, and environmental studies. However, regardless of its application to a particular field of study, most empirical research on NBT is based on these two popular theories, the biophilia hypothesis and attention restoration theory. While these theories have significantly influenced the study of NBT and provided empirical evidence to support the benefits of time spent in nature for physical and mental health, I am critical of the individualistic focus of these studies which often overlooks how socioeconomic and cultural contexts mediate/restrict access to nature and its benefits. Furthermore, from an agential realist perspective, these theories can be understood to reify nature as a passive backdrop for human healing rather than recognizing the dynamic intra-actions between humans and nonhuman entities that co-constitute therapeutic experiences (Barad, 2007).

2.2: NBT in the Context of Empirical Studies

The therapeutic potential for addressing mental health concerns within the context of NBT is uncontested in the empirical literature. While the physiological and emotional benefits of NBT are well-documented, notable to the literature is that these studies

highlight the human experience, reinforcing individual responsibilization, and using a pathological lens to diagnose and fix human problems using nature as a cure-all commodity for human use.

The prevailing discourse on NBT is situated within psychological and biomedical frameworks that prioritize individual healing and measurable outcomes, often favouring quantitative and positivist research methods. A search in Semantic Scholar (an online research database) using the keyword 'nature-based therapy' revealed that there are about 1,140,000 papers written on this topic in the last five years. One million one hundred ten thousand of these papers are from medicine (including biology, chemistry, and psychology). Each time I added another keyword, for example, “social work”, “critical social work”, or “posthuman”, the number of publications decreased dramatically. The final keyword search, “Nature-based therapy, critical social work, feminist new materialisms, agential realism” revealed zero publications. The discourse on clinical interventions continues to accumulate.

In my practice, I incorporate the more-than-human world by walking in local forests, trails, parks, gardens, and waterfronts, as much as possible, rather than sitting in an office. This is often referred to as walk and talk therapy. Both Berman et al.'s (2012) and Watkins-Martin et al.’s (2022) research look at how walking in natural environments might potentially mitigate symptoms of major depressive disorder (MDD). Both studies were grounded in the Attention Restoration Theory (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989), which posits that exposure to natural environments can replenish depleted cognitive resources, especially attention. This theory suggests that natural environments are inherently

fascinating, allowing individuals to recover from mental fatigue by engaging in effortless attention (also known as "soft fascination"). This restorative effect is particularly relevant for individuals experiencing cognitive deficits, such as those with depression.

Berman et al.'s (2012) study sought to assess if walking alone in nature might have a negative effect, hypothesizing that walking alone might produce a state of rumination. The study recruited 20 people diagnosed with major depressive disorder (MDD) who were randomly assigned to either an urban or natural setting. Participants were asked to think about a negative event in their lives before the walk and were given a task that required attention and memory challenges along with a self-rated measure of mood pre and post walking. Participants repeated the same task the following week but alternated the location of the walk. The studies showed that participants had significant improvements in mood and memory following the natural walk versus the urban walk.

Watkins-Martin et al (2022) more recently performed a similar study also recruiting participants who had diagnoses of MDD, tasking them with a walk either in a natural or urban setting. Similarly, the study found that based on results from questionnaires, participants who walked in natural environments had less negative affect.

Neither study used any physical measurements, but instead used cognitive assessments. Both studies concluded that walking in natural environments was more efficacious for improving mood than walking in urban environments. I have often shared these studies with clients, finding that they offer validity for our choice to walk in nature rather than sit in an office. I also have used studies like these to encourage clients to spend more time walking in nature on their own.

I recently participated in a workshop for mental health practitioners and medical professionals that offered participants who attended the workshop a prescriber number and prescription pad so that they could provide ‘prescriptions’ for clients/patients to spend time in nature. The program, called ParX is a national program that started in British Columbia and is endorsed across the country. Their website offers many studies to show that “taking a nature pill” is good for us. Their website refers to Berman et al’s (2012) study and ones like it to encourage medical professionals to use nature as a pill to help their patients. While I agree with the idea that this program is endorsing and I completed the program as a provider, receiving my provider number to share with clients, I am critical of the commodification of nature where it is made into a pharmaceutical drug to be taken for human consumption. I worry that when the discourse is geared towards the medicalization of nature for human consumption, the ramifications for how we decide to collectively manage our natural spaces will lean towards turning our natural spaces into fee for use and that as urbanization continues, natural spaces, used as a drug, may become further commodified and inaccessible to those who need it most. I am also critical of the subjectification of natural spaces as a ‘pill’ (this term is used regularly in this program) rather than a living entity with agency.

Both Berman et al (2012) and Watkins-Martin et al (2022) are relevant as much of my clinical work involves supporting folks experiencing diagnoses of depression and/or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). In fact, since the pandemic, I have noticed a rise in these formal diagnoses. This study and ones like it speak to people suffering from depression and ADHD, and when I share the evidence for the benefits of

time spent in nature with clients, it bolsters confidence in the therapeutic process. However, it is my opinion that empirical studies need to address how factors such as socioeconomic status, cultural background, and access to natural spaces influence who benefits from NBT. Moreover, from an agential realist perspective, these studies' emphasis on nature as a backdrop for human healing overlooks nature's active role in these therapeutic encounters. In my thesis, I argue that while time spent in nature has been proven to show therapeutic potential, NBT should not merely be another way humans can resource nature as a commodity. This thesis encourages us to see the other-than-human world as a dynamic agent that co-produces wellbeing with human participants.

Among the key contributors to the studies on NBT is Arrenstedt & Wahrborg, whose 2011 article "*Nature-Assisted Therapy: Systematic Review of Controlled and Observational Studies"* represents a seminal piece of research in this area and has been highly cited. Arrenstedt and Wahrborg (2011) grounded their study on the biophilia hypothesis (Wilson, 1984). The study employed a systematic review methodology, synthesizing findings to assess the efficacy of nature-assisted therapy. The systematic review included 29 studies published between 1990 and 2010. Their review revealed that nature-assisted therapy has favorable effects on mental health, particularly in reducing symptoms of anxiety, depression, and stress. The findings also suggested improvements in physical health, such as enhanced cardiovascular functioning and reduced blood pressure. This study intended to inform the field of public health and concerns about the negative effects of increased urbanization on mental health. It is highly influential as it

has been highly cited. However, like the studies by Berman and colleagues (2012), and Watkin-Martin et al (2022) Arrenstedt & Wahrborg's (2011) study lacks attention to the social determinants of health and how access to nature is mediated by socioeconomic status, race, and other structural factors. The study thus implicitly assumes that nature is equally accessible and beneficial to all individuals, neglecting to address the fact that marginalized communities often have less access to green spaces and are more likely to live in environments detrimental to their health. From the perspective of agential realism, this study relies on a representationalist approach, where nature is a static, passive backdrop to human activity. In fact, Arrendstedt and Warborg's (2011) definition of Nature- Assisted Therapy (NAT) was very revealing in this regard,

> *"NAT is defined as an intervention with the aim to treat, hasten recovery, and/or rehabilitate patients with a disease or a condition of ill health, with the fundamental principle that the therapy involves plants, natural materials, and/or outdoor environment, without any therapeutic involvement of extrahuman mammals or other living creatures" (p.372)*.

In keeping with the humanist and positivist-oriented approach to NBT research, this study negates that the more-than-human world is even alive and reinforces the dichotomy between humans and nature rather than exploring how therapeutic processes might emerge from the entanglement of human and nonhuman agencies. My thesis proposes a gap in the research that moves beyond the traditional subject-object divide and considers how the materiality of the other-than-human world actively participates in the therapeutic process.

2.3: NBT in the Context of the Popular Literature

The intersection of NBT and mental health has garnered increasing attention in recent years. Popular literature (non-scholarly literature that is intended for a broad and diverse audience) on NBT has been highly influential in highlighting ecosocial and ecospiritual perspectives that contribute to a broader understanding of the relationship between nature and mental health and wellbeing. The influence of popular literature, such as Robin Wall Kimmerer's (2013) *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Richard Louv's (2005) *Last Child in the Woods* and (2011) *The Nature Principle* and Buzzell and Chalquist's (2009) *Ecotherapy: Healing with Nature in Mind* are shifting paradigms in the field. The popular literature on NBT for mental health, when viewed through eco-social and eco-spiritual perspectives, reveals a rich and complex field that challenges conventional approaches to mental health. Indigenous perspectives further enrich this discourse by emphasizing the importance of land-based practices and cultural continuity.

2.3a) Eco-Social Perspectives

Eco-social perspectives on NBT emphasize the interconnectedness of individual wellbeing with broader ecological and social systems. This view challenges the reductionist approach often seen in mainstream mental health treatments, which tend to focus on the individual in isolation from their environment. Highly cited works like Louv's (2005) *Last Child in the Woods* have been pivotal in popularizing that exposure to nature is essential for mental health, particularly for children. Louv's work argues that modern society's disconnection from nature—what he terms "nature-deficit disorder"—is

a significant contributor to the rise in mental health issues, including anxiety and depression.

Richard Louv's work, most notably *Last Child in the Woods* (2005), has significantly influenced contemporary discussions on the benefits of reconnecting with nature. Louv's concept of nature-deficit disorder implicitly acknowledges the agency of the natural world in human development and wellbeing. He argues that nature is not merely a backdrop for human activity but an active participant in forming human identity, health, and community.

Louv's work has been influential to some of the community work I was engaged in before working in direct practice. In 2005, I helped to create a community of educators called *We Learn Naturally.* This organization offered alternative educational programming including a forest school called Learning in the Woods. Louv was invited to speak by the Guelph Outdoor School, an established outdoor education program that supported the development of our forest school, in Dundas, Ontario. I had the opportunity to speak with him directly and his passion for encouraging humans to engage in relationships with the more-than-human world was infectious.

However, I am not without some criticism of Louv's work, which is both empowering and limiting. On the one hand, Louv's advocacy for reconnecting with nature aligns with social work's aim of promoting individual and community wellbeing by challenging the alienation often experienced in modern, urbanized societies. His emphasis on the psychological and physical benefits associated with connection to the other-than-human world can be viewed as advocating for environmental justice, encouraging

equitable access to natural spaces as a human right while also stressing the reciprocal nature of that relationship by promoting a right's-based approach to nature conservation.

However, like most literature, Louv's work does not address the socioeconomic and cultural barriers that can prevent marginalized communities from accessing nature. His discussions often assume a specific privilege level—access to safe and nearby natural spaces, leisure time, and the financial means to engage in nature-related activities. This oversight can lead to a romanticized view of nature as universally accessible, which overlooks the systemic inequalities that limit access for many populations.

Furthermore, while highlighting the disconnection between humans and nature, Louv's work tends to focus on individual and family-level solutions without adequately addressing the broader societal and structural factors contributing to what he calls 'nature-deficit disorder' and his use of a pathologizing term is problematic for me in the same way that the ParX program refers to "taking a nature pill". This approach can unintentionally reinforce the idea that the responsibility for reconnecting with nature lies primarily with individuals rather than acknowledging the need for systemic change to make nature more accessible and integral to daily life for all.

2.3b) Eco Spiritual Perspective

Eco-spirituality in therapy emphasizes the sacredness of the natural world, promoting practices that cultivate a deep reverence and connection to the earth. These practices can include ritualistic activities, meditation in nature, and using natural elements in therapy sessions. Eco-spiritual perspectives on NBT build on the understanding that mental health is deeply connected to spiritual wellbeing and a sense of place within the

natural world. This approach draws on spiritual traditions that view nature as a source of healing and wisdom. For example, Buzzell and Chalquist's (2009) *Ecotherapy: Healing with Nature in Mind* has been influential in promoting the integration of spiritual dimensions into therapeutic practices, proposing that ecological consciousness is central to human health.

Buzzell and Chalquist's (2009) *Ecotherapy: Healing with Nature in Mind* presents a collection of essays that explore the psychological and physical benefits of reconnecting with the natural world. The book argues for a therapeutic model that includes nature as a co-facilitator in healing processes, a concept that aligns with the principles of ecopsychology. While the book offers valuable insights into integrating nature within therapeutic practices, in my opinion there are several limitations, particularly regarding the socio-political dimensions of environmental engagement and the underlying assumptions of universal applicability.

Like Louv's writing and the empirical studies, this book overlooks the power dynamics and socioeconomic inequalities that shape individuals' access to nature. This perspective risks ignoring the reality that marginalized communities, including those facing poverty, racial discrimination, and environmental injustice, often have limited access to safe, green spaces (Dominelli, 2012).

2.3c) Indigenous Perspectives

Indigenous perspectives on NBT offer an important lens for understanding mental health within relationality, community, and land-based practices. Indigenous worldviews consider mental health as inseparable from the health of the land and community. This

perspective contrasts sharply with Western models that often prioritize individualism and compartmentalize mental health from other aspects of life. Moreover, NBT in Indigenous contexts often includes traditional knowledge and practices, such as sweat lodges, drumming, and storytelling, deeply rooted in the relationship between people and the land.

Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass* (2013), has been profoundly influential for sharing an Indigenous perspective of human relationships with the more-than-human world within the larger community of Indigenous and non-Indigenous readers and I have been told that her book has become required reading for some local schools. Kimmerer, a scientist, and member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, intertwines Indigenous wisdom with scientific knowledge, offering a spiritually and environmentally holistic ecological healing model. Her work has resonated with a broad audience, bringing eco-spiritual ideas into the mainstream, and encouraging a more integrated approach to mental health that honors the interconnectedness of all life. The success of *Braiding Sweetgrass* reflects a growing public interest in eco-spirituality and Indigenous knowledge. The book's popularity underscores a shift away from anthropocentric models of health towards more holistic, ecocentric approaches that acknowledge the interdependence of humans and the natural world. Kimmerer's work challenges readers to reconsider how they engage with the natural world, advocating for a reciprocal relationship that honours the gifts of the earth.

Kimmerer’s work notwithstanding, there are significant gaps in the literature, particularly concerning the ethical implications of NBT from a posthuman perspective.

Empirical studies provide substantial evidence supporting the therapeutic benefits of NBT, including the potential to improve mental health outcomes, and enhance wellbeing. However, these studies must address deeper ethical and theoretical considerations when integrating nature into therapeutic practice. A critical consideration of the literature through the frame of agential realism raises some concerns about the ethical dimensions of NBT. For instance, if we acknowledge that natural entities have agency, how does this affect our approach to using these environments for therapeutic purposes? How can we ensure that the natural world is treated not merely as a resource for human healing but as an equal partner in the therapeutic process? These questions, while not yet fully explored in the literature, point to the need for a more ethically attuned practice of NBT, one that respects the agency of all participants in the therapeutic relationship.

My thesis seeks to fill this gap by contributing a nuanced analysis of the ethics of NBT and how it might be reimagined to align with a more ethical, just, and relational approach. Social work is well positioned to advocate for approaching NBT as more than a mere therapeutic intervention and instead to become a form of resistance against the ongoing colonization of the natural world and the people who inhabit it. In doing so, I hope this thesis will contribute to the literature by offering a critical perspective that is currently underrepresented, thereby advancing the discourse on NBT in theoretically robust and ethically grounded ways.

Chapter 3: Theoretical Foundations for Inquiry

Like most graduate students in a master's level program of study, the process for this inquiry started with a research question, followed by choosing a qualitative methodological design to explore my topic. As a critical social worker, I knew I would look at my topic from a critical social work perspective. However, once I was introduced to the *post* theories and feminist new materialisms, the tension between the posts and the humanist nature of qualitative research methodology challenged how I felt about my original research design and how the design was expanded as a result. I was uncertain how to continue with analyzing my findings in a manner ethically responsible to a posthuman perspective, when they presented an exclusively humanist perspective. The next chapter on Methodology will explore this process in more depth. Still, for clarity and to set the stage for understanding how these tensions arose, this chapter intends to orient the reader to some of the theoretical and conceptual terms that could be critiqued as jargony but are crucial to understanding both my original decision to use a critical social work perspective, as well as the ethico-onto-epistemological foundation that I was introduced to through this inquiry process.

In this section on theory, I start by clarifying what a critical social work perspective offers to this inquiry. I then define what *post* theories and feminist new materialisms are and what I feel they bring to exploring the practice of NBT for mental health especially as the relate to critical clinical social work. I will discuss Barad's (2007) neologism "ethico-onto-epistem-ology" (p.185), and concepts of diffraction and response-ability will be considered as they apply to my research topic. I then share the theoretical,

ontological, and epistemological inquiry that led me to adopt agential realism and the *posts* as my theoretical foundations. I continue with discussing how Rossiter's (2011) ethics was the starting point for developing my theoretical positioning within the agential realist framework. Finally, I address the limitations of adopting a critical social work perspective and agential realism as my theoretical foundation for inquiry about NBT and mental health.

3.1 Critical Social Work Perspective

Critical social work theory is a framework that seeks to address the structural inequalities and power imbalances that influence individuals and communities, particularly within the context of social work practice. This framework asserts that social work must be inherently political (Brown & McDonald, 2020, Fook, 2012, Shaikh et al., 2022) and argues that critical reflection is essential for practitioners to recognize their own positions of power and to engage in practices that resist oppression (Fook, 2012). Critical social work theory interrogates the assumptions underlying practice, particularly those reinforcing dominant ideologies (Rossiter, 2005).

Critical social work theory has been used to critique the dominant paradigms in mental health that often pathologize individuals without considering the broader social, cultural, and environmental contexts that contribute to mental health issues (LeFrancois et al, 2016, Rossiter, 2005, Shaikh et al, 2022). Questioning these paradigms opens space for alternative approaches, such as NBT, which recognize the natural environment's therapeutic potential. NBT's emphasis on holistic and contextualized understandings of

human well-being offers an alternative to reductionist biomedical models (Jordan & Hinds, 2016).

Critical social work theory provides a compelling framework for advocating the integration of NBT into mental health practices. This theoretical approach foregrounds the interconnectedness of individuals, communities, and their environments, challenging mainstream mental health practices' often anthropocentric and individualistic perspectives (Besthorn et al, 2010, Boetto, 2017).

3.2 Post Theories

Post theories, such as post-structuralism, post-qualitative inquiry, post-humanism and post-anthropocentrism, challenge traditional paradigms by rejecting fixed categories, linear narratives, and universal truths. Instead, they embrace complexity, fluidity, and the diversity of realities (Lather & St.Pierre, 2013; St. Pierre, 2021). In the context of a critical social work analysis of NBT and mental health, *post* theories encourage practitioners to move beyond rigid frameworks and consider how knowledge, power, and subjectivities are co-constructed in dynamic, non-linear ways (MacCormack,2012, McPhie, 2019).

3.2 (a)Post-Structural Theory

Post-structural theory, emerging in the late 20th century, provides a critical framework that deconstructs the idea of fixed meanings and stable structures in knowledge and social practices (St. Pierre, 2021). This theoretical approach challenges the foundational concepts of structuralism, which posit that underlying structures determine meaning and societal norms (Foucault, 1972). Instead, post-structuralism,

influenced by thinkers such as Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Gilles Deleuze, argues that meaning is fluid, contingent, and constructed through discursive practices (St. Pierre, 2021; Derrida, 1976; Foucault, 1977).

As articulated by Deleuze & Guattari, (1987) central to post-structural theory is the idea that language and discourse are not neutral. They are active in shaping and constructing reality. In this way, language can create and sustain power relations and social hierarchies. Post-structuralism also emphasizes the decentering of the subject, challenging the notion of a unified, coherent self and highlighting how identity and experience are constructed through intersecting discourses and power dynamics. This theoretical lens is particularly relevant for a critical social work analysis of NBT as it encourages a rethinking of how the concept of mental health can be understood as relational, dynamic, and inclusive of non-human elements.

3.2(b)Post Qualitative Inquiry

Post-qualitative inquiry represents a significant departure from traditional qualitative research by fundamentally questioning the assumptions that underpin conventional methodologies (St. Pierre, 2021). While qualitative research is often grounded in humanist frameworks that prioritize subjective human experiences and seek to categorize data, a post-qualitative inquiry challenges these notions by rejecting the idea of fixed meanings, stable subjects, and linear processes (Murris & Bozalek, 2018, St. Pierre, 2021). Traditional qualitative research, influenced by positivist and interpretivist paradigms, often seeks to uncover "truths" or patterns within human experience through interviews, thematic analysis, and coding, which requires a clear separation between the

researcher and the researched Lather & St. Pierre, 2013, (Murris & Bozalek, 2018, St. Pierre, 2021).

In contrast, post-qualitative inquiry draws from post-structuralism, post-humanism, and new materialist theories to embrace the fluidity and unpredictability of the research process. It resists the tendency to categorize and codify data, instead focusing on the entangled, emergent, and relational aspects of knowledge production (Lather, 2016). This approach does not adhere to predetermined methods but allows the inquiry to shape the process, recognizing the active role of more-than-human agents in co-constructing realities (St. Pierre, 2019). By decentering the human subject and embracing the messiness of the research encounter, post-qualitative inquiry opens new ways of thinking that are not constrained by the need to produce definitive answers or reproduce existing power relations. This makes it particularly suited for a critical social work analysis about NBT, where a focus on disrupting dominant narratives about what mental health and clinical social work look like opens up possibilities for exploring more inclusive, relational, and dynamic understandings of what supports healing in a post-pandemic world.

3.2(c) Post-Humanism and Post-Anthropocentrism

Posthumanism and post-anthropocentrism are philosophical frameworks that challenge human-centered perspectives but differ in focus and implications. Posthumanism questions the centrality of humans, emphasizing the interconnectedness of all entities, including technology, animals, and the environment, which makes less distinct the boundaries between humans and other-than-human (Mazzei & Jackson,

2023). Post-anthropocentrism puts more emphasis on the problems with human exceptionalism and advocates for the intrinsic value of non-human life and ecological sustainability (Haraway, 2016). Posthumanism thus encourages reconnecting with non-human entities, such as animals and forests, fostering an awareness of the importance of interdependence, which is crucial for mental well-being (McPhie, 2019, Webb, 2020). Whereas post-anthropocentrism shifts the focus from human-centered therapy to an ecological approach, advocating for protecting natural spaces as essential to mental health (McPhie, 2019)In the context of a critical social work analysis that considers NBT as an intervention for mental health, where the therapeutic process is deeply intertwined with the more-than-human world, these frameworks offer a more inclusive approach that recognizes the therapeutic agency of the natural world. From both post-human and post-anthropocentric worldviews, the notion of NBT as a purely human-centered activity is challenged (McPhie, 2019, Webb, 2020).

3.3 Feminist New Materialisms

Feminist new materialisms serve as an umbrella framework encompassing various theoretical approaches that emphasize the active role of matter in shaping reality. In recent years, the ontological turn towards feminist new materialisms and the integration of agential realism into social science research have emerged as significant theoretical advancements (Barad,2007, Le Grange, 2018, Webb, 2020). These philosophies challenge traditional human-centered ontologies by emphasizing the entanglement of the human and other-than-human world, where matter is experienced as active and agential rather than passive (Barad, 2007). In this context, adopting a new materialist perspective

recognizes the interconnectedness of all beings and forces, challenging the anthropocentric (and purely cognitive) approaches that have historically dominated mental health practices. By focusing on the dynamic relationships between humans, non-human beings, and the environment, new materialist perspectives can lead to holistic and responsive therapeutic approaches considering the agency inherent to the more-than-human world.

I am critical of using the descriptive term *new* when referring to new materialisms. From an Indigenous perspective, the term *new materialisms* can be critiqued for its Eurocentric framing. Indigenous knowledge systems have long recognized the relational and active qualities and agency of the natural world (Le Grange, 2020; Watts, 2013). As a critical social worker, I recognize that there is a need to move towards recognizing and integrating Indigenous ontologies rather than rebranding these ancient knowledges as *new* under Western academic frameworks. At the risk of promoting a Euro-western version of a framework already existing within Indigenous worldviews, this paper uses these non-indigenous frameworks to query the topic of NBT. This is because I have felt a tension from the outset of this project to speak to Indigenous ontologies, because as an uninvited settler, they are not mine to share.

3.4 Agential Realism and Karen Barad's Ethico-onto-epistemology

While this framework has not yet been rigorously adopted within the field of social work (Andrews, 2020; Fox & Aldred, 2019; Tudor & Barraclough, 2023; Webb,2020), agential realism offers a novel perspective which has the potential to shift social work education practice and research from its primarily humanist origins towards a

practice of possibilities. Karen Barad's agential realism, rooted in quantum physics and influenced by feminist theorist Judith Butler (1990), and poststructual philosopher Michel Foucault, offers a profound rethinking of the relationships between human and other-than-human, where neither pre-exist the encounter as distinct entities but rather emerge through entanglement and *intra-actions* (Barad, 2007). Unlike interactions, which imply the meeting of separate entities, intra-actions emphasize that objects and subjects *emerge* through their relational entanglements. This concept is crucial for a critical analysis of NBT as it challenges the anthropocentric view that humans are separate from nature. Instead, humans and the more-than-human world are co-constitutive, each shaping and being shaped by the other in therapeutic processes.

Central to this theory is that it challenges anthropocentric views that position humans as the primary actors in the world and challenges theories about the world based on Cartesian dualisms (Braidotti, 2013). Through Barad's (2007) framework, we explore how matter and meaning are co-constituted, challenging the dichotomies between human and non-human. This perspective allows for a reconceptualization of therapeutic spaces as landscapes of possibility, which have the potential to shift clinical interventions into transformative practices (Dawney, 2011). By embracing post-humanist and feminist new materialist frameworks, it becomes imperative to recognize the agency of all participants—human and non-human alike. This perspective is necessary for a critical social work's understanding of NBT, as it foregrounds the material agency of natural environments in the therapeutic process and interrogates and complicates the prevailing concepts of mental health, nature-based therapy, and clinical social work.

The implications for critical social work are, from my perspective, profound. This perspective encourages practitioners to move beyond individualistic approaches, fostering a deeper understanding of their work's ethical and political dimensions. I believe that this framework would provide a valuable educational shift towards curricula that embraces the value of interconnectedness, preparing future social workers to engage in more holistic, justice-oriented practices.

3.5 Why does this MATTER?

A Short Prologue

"I have to change my research topic. I'm really struggling with my topic and need to start with something new." (Carolyn) (*I was one year into a critical discourse analysis on Section 43 of the Criminal Code of Canada - the spanking law - and immersing myself in court cases on child abuse was shutting me down)*

"Well, what are you doing right now?" (Ann)

"I just decided to start walking in the forest and see if anyone wants to join me in walk and talk therapy?" (Carolyn)

"That's interesting." (Ann)

"So, I guess I'm doing nature-based therapy now?" (Carolyn)

"Well, why don't you do your thesis on that?" (Ann)

"Really? How do I start?" (Carolyn)

"Ask yourself, 'Why does this matter'? "(Ann)

"I don't know ***if*** or ***why*** it matters" *(this feeling kept me paralyzed for a while)* (Carolyn)

All I know is that I can't *not* be doing this. It's how I managed my own mental health while working, holding space for other's mental health during the pandemic. I think I need to get away from the 'clinical' aspect of 'clinical social work' because I can feel the dehumanization happening. Being outside of the 'boxes' feels so healing. Is that why it matters? Does it really matter?" (Carolyn)

"I don't know. I think that's what *you* have to find out." (Ann)

Aside:

I jumped reluctantly/excitedly (never really can tell) into the rabbit hole (s)! I looked around and wondered "why am I *here*?" "What am *I*?" "What *is* 'here'?" "Why does this *matter*?"

I went for a walk in the forest, sat down, played my penny whistle for the trees, stilled my thoughts, and stretched. And then I met June (not their real name) at the frog pond. (story to follow…see Future Considerations/Applications)

So started (hold on, really, is there a linear starting point where the mapping begins and ends?) this journey - a roller coaster ride as the

connections started to slowly meander and then rapidly spread out and seek more and more edges, an entanglement with an energy of its own that has now taken ‘me’ over, subsuming and transforming this assemblage known as ‘Carolyn’ into an ethico-onto-epistemological becoming rather than a ‘critical clinical social worker/psychotherapist’ who can claim to have a special knowledge, and a license to ‘’help’ . There is now an ethical awareness of a response-ability on the plane within which the possibilities of becoming are always already mattering in every moment.

In June of 2021, in the second year of the global COVID-19 pandemic, I left the agency/office where I worked as a contract social worker/psychotherapist and started walking in the forest with clients. My thesis supervisor suggested I use this shift in my practice as a source of inquiry for my research. I realized that I had two distinct feelings that arose immediately in response to the question of “why” this mattered as a source of inquiry for a thesis in a program grounded in social justice: excitement and fear.

I was excited to apply research to my practice and potentially discover new perspectives (or feel validation in the shared perspectives of other practitioners) to produce knowledge that would inform other practitioners or researchers who found an interest in what I originally called ‘nature-based therapy for mental health. As a feminist-based, critical clinical social worker my decision to move the therapeutic space from an office to the more-than-human-world was, in part an act of resistance to the biomedical model of therapy and the seduction of professionalism that occurs within the constraints

of the *clinical space* (Brown & McDonald, 2020). I define the clinical space as one in which the therapist controls the environment through specialized knowledge (epistemic power) and supports the process of pathologization (representation) using evidence-based therapeutic models (supported by humanist and positivist research). This clinical space is one of matter (like an office) and essence (a way of being). The move to walking with clients outside of an office was so much more revealing of my theoretical inclinations, most notably, I could not control the space at all and had to let nature do nature in providing the backdrop for much deeper therapeutic and personal connections.

Initially, my supervisor suggested I consider an autoethnographic approach to my inquiry. However, a sense of vulnerability arose. I reactively chose to avert my research gaze toward other practitioners who identified similarly to myself and with whom I shared a call toward NBT. The second and more pervasive response to beginning this inquiry was a feeling of self-doubt, based on a deep desire for my research to matter and believing that it did not. I had no idea that this simple question of "Why does this matter?" would initiate such a relentless experience of disturbance to my system. Over the last few years, while I have become entangled with the inquiry undertaken for my thesis, my curiosity has been given a free license to wreak havoc on all my previously unnoticed and unquestioned beliefs about what matters. Constantly engaged in the questioning, "What is real?" "Is it true?"' "How can I know that is true?" "What is truth?" "What is knowledge?" How do I act (practice, research, write, create) in a way that is for the highest good and causes the least harm?" "Why does this matter?" It always looped around to a matter of ethics. It is this looping and the entanglement with ethics as the core

of my inquiry that has led me to an engagement with critical theory and post-oriented theorists. I have created a neologism for this process – "an ontoepistemethical loop".

3.6 The Shift - Ethics as a Starting Point

In considering theory as a starting point, I questioned the theoretical frames I enacted in my practice with clients. However, I did not want to limit myself to a critical theory that 'matched' my practice orientation and identity as a critical social worker (Fook, 2002). Introduced to Dawney (2011), Johnstone (2021), Rossiter (2011), Wilton & Fudge-Schormans (2020), Wilson (2017), among many others, within the context of my graduate courses, I felt ethically compelled to engage with theories that question and resist the (re)production of specialized social work knowledge claims that insist on deductive and interpretive theoretical and methodological approaches to inquiry and that would encourage the subject/object orientation of social work representations. I aligned with theories that acknowledged the role of the researcher as imbricated and implicated in the inquiry process.

Rossiter's (2011) call to practice *"unsettled social work"* (p. 980) and Wilson's (2020) concept of '*social work that cuts'* contributed to my need for ethically positioning myself within theory. Rossiter (2011) defines unsettled social work practice as recognizing the complexity of social work's mandate to social justice. She asks us to consider the history of social work, derived from colonial settler sentiments about helping but enacted as social control and upholding "the normativity of the white, bourgeois, heterosexual subject" (p.981). Adopting the philosophical stance of Emmanuel Levinas, Rossiter (2011) argues that unsettled social work *is* a matter of ethics, which is "defined

by a conscious and deliberate commitment to working in full view of the tensions and contradictions derived from social work's professional status and knowledge claims" (p.981). She asks that we eschew the temptation to adopt new theories wholly but use them for inquiry and conversation around ethics of sociality and generosity (p.994). Wilson's (2020) concept of '*social work that cuts'* refers to making incisive, critical interventions that disrupt normative practices and reveal underlying power structures. Through this lens, I started to consider theories that recognized the inseparability of ethics from any ontological and epistemological foundation. This breadcrumb led me to (re)discover Karen Barad's book Meeting the Universe Halfway (2007), which I had read seven years earlier while conducting a photovoice research project about adultism. This book and the concepts within it theoretically and quite literally revealed the impossibility of anything (including my research) not mattering.

My initial question for the interview participants was, *"What is your definition of nature?"* The answer across the board was that "nature is everything." This became a philosophical starting point for an ethical, ontological, and epistemological inquiry to answer the question "What is everything?" Barad's (2007) concept of ethico-onto-epistemology provides a foundational shift from dichotomous subject/object orientation to an entanglement of agencies in the process of becoming and the impossibility of separating the ethics of how we *act* from the *knowledge* of what we *are.* From an agential realist perspective, there are infinite possibilities in becoming together at every moment, with a response-ability to show up with an ethic that honours that opportunity for connection. If everything has agency and participates in the constitution of this reality,

then the ethics of relationship, reciprocity, and right action are imperative. Haraway's (1992) concept of diffraction (vs. reflection) and response/ability (vs. responsibility) as ethical, feminist-based representation add complexity to this imperative. There is tension between these terms, *diffraction and response-ability,* and their critical social work counterpart's *reflection and responsibility.*

The term diffractive has gained significant traction within feminist new materialisms, post-qualitative inquiry, and post-humanist lenses as a methodological and epistemological approach that challenges traditional binary thinking and linear causality. Originating in part from the work of physicist and feminist theorist Karen Barad, the concept of diffraction is rooted in quantum physics, which describes the interference patterns produced when waves encounter an obstacle or opening. Barad (2007) extends this concept into feminist theory and epistemology, arguing that diffraction can serve as a metaphor for thinking about difference not as separation but as relationality and entanglement.

In contrast to reflection, which assumes a mirroring of the same and reinforces dichotomous thinking, diffraction emphasizes the complex and situated patterns of interaction and intra-action that produce differences. Barad (2007) proposes that diffraction is about "reading insights through one another" (p. 71), allowing for an engagement with multiple perspectives in a way that generates new, transformative knowledge rather than merely reproducing existing patterns.

Donna Haraway (2016), a leader in contemporary ecofeminism and another key figure in feminist new materialisms, also employs the concept of diffraction to critique

traditional scientific practices and to promote a more situated, embodied form of knowledge production. Like Rossiter's concept of unsettled social work (2011), Haraway (2016) uses diffraction to highlight the importance of "staying with the trouble" (p. 15) of complex, interwoven relationships rather than seeking to simplify or reduce them to binaries.

Diffractive methodologies in post-qualitative inquiry draw on these philosophical foundations to explore how knowledge is produced in entangled, non-linear ways. These methodologies resist the notion of objective observation and instead focus on the co-constitutive processes of becoming, where the researcher and the researched are mutually implicated. In this sense, diffractive analysis is not about seeking out differences as discrete entities but about understanding how differences emerge and are sustained through intra-actions (Barad, 2007).

The application of diffractive methodologies is also evident in post-humanist perspectives, which challenge the human-centric approach to knowledge production. This approach advocates for a post-humanist ethics that recognizes the entanglement of humans and non-humans in a shared material world (Braidotti, 2013).

In feminist new materialisms, post-qualitative inquiry, and post-humanist perspectives, the concept of "response-ability" offers a nuanced rethinking of traditional notions of "responsibility." While "responsibility" is often framed as an ethical obligation or duty that individuals must uphold, "response-ability" shifts the focus to the capacity and willingness to respond to the world and its entanglements in a relational and situated manner. This shift emphasizes interconnectedness, co-constitution, and the active

participation of all entities—human and more-than-human—in the ongoing processes of becoming.

Barad (2007) adopts the term "response-ability" to think about ethics beyond human-centric frameworks. Barad (2007) argues that matter and meaning are co-constituted through intra-actions, which she uses to describe the mutual constitution of entangled agencies. In this context, response-ability is not just a moral imperative but a recognition of our entanglement with the world and an acknowledgment of the agency of non-human entities. Barad (2012) emphasizes that response-ability involves being attuned to the specificities of these entanglements and responding to them in ways that acknowledge the agency and the potential for change within these relations.

Haraway (2016) similarly uses the term "response-ability"(p.28) to critique anthropocentric approaches to ethics and responsibility. Haraway (2016) argues for a relational ethics that recognizes the interconnectedness of all life forms and the need for humans to cultivate the ability to respond to the more-than-human world. In her concept of "staying with the trouble," Haraway (2016) suggests that response-ability requires engaging with the complexities and challenges of living in a multispecies world rather than seeking to control or dominate it. This involves a commitment to ongoing, situated practices of care and attention to the diverse forms of life with which we are entangled.

In post-qualitative inquiry, the concept of response-ability further disrupts traditional research paradigms by challenging the idea that researchers can remain detached observers. Instead, researchers are seen as co-participants in the research process, unable to become disentangled with the focus of their inquiry (St. Pierre, 2019).

This approach calls for an ethical orientation recognizing the researcher's role in shaping the research and its outcomes. Other philosophers and scholars who have engaged with the concept of response-ability include Rosi Braidotti (2013), who links it to her notion of "becoming" and the posthuman condition, and Maria Puig de la Bellacasa (2017), who explores response-ability in relation to care practices and the ethics of more-than-human worlds. Both thinkers emphasize that response-ability is not about fulfilling predetermined duties but about being open to the demands of the present moment and the particularities of each situation.

3.7: Research Dilemma: Implications for Data Collection and Analysis

As I grounded myself more in theory and recognized response-ability ethics as essential, I found Braidotti's (2013) scholarship. Braidotti argues that the concept of *human* is constructed and typically looks like a white male. She argues that human exceptionalism has allowed for the commodification and destruction of the more than human world. I felt a tension in performing qualitative research that amplified human experiences and reproduced humanist research, especially as I was researching the more-than-human world. However, I started recognizing that using a *post-human* frame does not mean erasing the human. This becomes especially important when considering the domestication and commodification of humans ***and*** the more-than-human world, which seem inextricably connected (McPhie, 2019).

Like St. Pierre (2019, 2021), I discovered these *post* theories too late in my research process after submitting my research design, getting ethics approval, and completing a series of qualitative interviews with human participants. St. Pierre

(2019,2021) would suggest that we cannot shift to a post-qualitative stance once we begin our research, using data collection based on humanist and positivist-influenced qualitative methods. However, I would argue with St. Pierre (2016, 2021) that the continuation of my analysis within a post-qualitative, post-structural and post-humanist framework is possible now that I am rooted ontologically and theoretically in Barad's feminist new materialisms and agential realism and committed to a post-qualitative presentation of the process and 'findings' from my original inquiry. Blom (2022) would agree, and in her PhD dissertation, which explored childhood nature through posthumanism, she created an emergent research methodology she calls transqualititive ethnography. She describes transqualitative inquiry as extending "beyond traditional qualitative research that is human-centric to enable posthuman thinking and nontraditional diffractive ethnographic methods. The entanglement of data collection and analysis as diffractive data entanglements trouble the perceived distinctions between the two actions" (p. v).

Through this diffractive methodology, and because, like Blom (2022), I situate my research in theory, I argue that the relationships I had with the research participants, including the humans and the more-than-human parts, within which I became diffractively entangled, all matter, regardless of the data collection method.

3.8: Limitations

Several limitations arise when employing a critical social work perspective combined with posthuman and agential realist frameworks to examine NBT for mental health.

Firstly, while a critical social work perspective emphasizes the socio-political dimensions of practice and advocates for social justice, it often centers on human experiences and social structures in its analysis (Gray & Webb, 2013). This human-centric focus can limit the exploration of non-human agency and the entangled relationships between humans, non-humans, and the environment. NBT, which involves the natural world as a therapeutic agent, requires a framework that fully acknowledges the agency of the more-than-human world. However, critical social work may need help moving beyond anthropocentric concerns, potentially overlooking the dynamic and reciprocal interactions between individuals and the environment central to nature-based interventions.

Secondly, as conceptualized by Barad (2007), posthumanism and agential realism challenge traditional boundaries between humans and non-humans. Whereas nature is typically considered as a backdrop for therapeutic intervention, Barad (2007) argues that all matter has agency, human and non-human alike, which allows for a co-constitution of experience. While this perspective is valuable for deconstructing anthropocentrism, its abstract nature can pose practical challenges when applied to therapeutic contexts. The ontological complexity introduced by these frameworks may make it difficult to develop clear, actionable therapeutic strategies that practitioners can implement, particularly within mental health care systems predominantly structured around human-centered understandings of agency and healing.

Furthermore, the integration of these theoretical approaches requires a careful balancing act. Critical social work's focus on power, oppression, and social justice may not

seamlessly align with the post-humanist emphasis on decentering the human. This tension can complicate the development of coherent practice models that address both the socio-political determinants of mental health and the need to recognize and engage with the agency of the natural world in therapeutic practices (Besthorn, 2012; Coates, 2003). I will expand on these practice tensions in the Discussion section of this thesis.

Chapter 4: Methodology/Methods

In this section, I discuss the reasoning for my original choice to adopt qualitative methods and methodology. I describe some of the research dilemmas that arose when trying to reconcile a posthuman, and feminist new materialist approach to my analysis while using humanist research methods and methodology. Having already committed to a qualitative, human-centered model for data collection, I will discuss why I chose Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) as a framework for analysis. I then discuss sampling and recruitment processes, providing information about the interview participants. I review the data collection methods and the data analysis process for developing themes and complete this chapter by considering some of the limitations of this study.

4.1:Research Dilemma: Tensions with Methods

Incorporating Posthuman Perspectives and Qualitative Research Using Human Interviews

The course of this research had a life of its own. It started with a desire to use this opportunity to explore my NBT practice and have my practice inform and inspire my research inquiry about NBT. My supervisor suggested that I consider autoethnography as my methodology as I had already started audio and paper journaling about the challenges

and new awareness from changing my practice. However, when I started the research process, I felt a sense of vulnerability and uncertainty about researching my own experiences, especially as an insider researcher. As an insider researcher, I was immersed in the practice of offering mental health support while researching mental health and having my own lived experiences. The choice to interview other practitioners who shared a similar experience of being called to practice NBT met my need for community, curiosity, and expansion of understanding.

Within the curriculum offered to me when I developed my research design, qualitative research methodologies best aligned with the philosophy I held about knowledge creation, which was extremely limited as I had not yet investigated or developed my ontological and epistemological position. In fact, at the time of creating a research design, I was still struggling with those terms. The only alternative I was aware of then was quantitative research, which uses a process of metrics for data collection and analysis. This was not a fit for me because it is a reductionist and positivist approach to data collection and analysis (St Pierre, 2021). At the time, I believed that sharing human experiences through personal narratives was a superior mode of knowledge creation because it allowed for a richness of knowledge informed by lived experiences which could not be placed into metrics. Most of the literature on NBT falls into the quantitative camp, where data collection and analysis are based on reductionist and positivist approaches to answering the question, “What are the benefits of NBT for humans?” A biomedical perspective dominates the literature on NBT, which uses measures to prove that access and time spent in nature are beneficial for human wellness, both physical and

mental. These studies mostly look at physiological and chemical responses within the human body to 'prove' that nature is 'good for us' (Annerstedt & Wahrborg, 2011; Bergman et al, 2012; Buzzell & Chalquist, 2010; Kaplan, 1995; Ulrich et al. 1991). Already accepting as truth that time in nature is good for human bodies and minds, instead I sought a more nuanced and rich account of how practicing NBT was perceived through the lived experiences of mental health practitioners.

4.2: Discovering the Posts

At the time of designing my research process, qualitative methods and methodology made the most sense to me based on what I had learned through my program of study. However, as I started to analyze the data, and read texts that overlapped through various disciplines and theories, I encountered the posts – theories that are considered after or critical of humanist and positivist research (Lather & St. Pierre, 2013). These theories offered an ontological turn from deterministic theories, where an objective reality is 'out there' to analyze, towards ontologies of immanence and agency, where reality is co-constituted in a process of becoming (post structuralism, agential realism) Barad, 2007). The post theories problematized worldviews that upheld human exceptionalism (post humanism and post-anthropocentrism) and invited a profound questioning of the processes of knowledge production in the academy (post qualitative inquiry) (Lather & St. Pierre, 2013; St. Pierre, 2019). I have included a more robust discussion of these theories, and how they shifted my perspectives on NBT, in the Theory chapter of this thesis.

Even though I found the 'post' theories after data collection and during analysis, Braun & Clarke's (2022) Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) has the potential to align with posthuman and new materialist perspectives due to its emphasis on the embodiment and co-construction of meaning, fluidity of themes and rejection of fixed or universal truths. Braun & Clarke, 2022) make clear that RTA is flexible in that it allows for different theoretical orientations. Most importantly, a posthuman perspective does not erase the human, it seeks to dismantle human exceptionalism. Doing that in research is a dilemma for which I have neither the knowledge nor the skill to accomplish well.

The potential to include a more holistic analysis, one that considered the interconnectedness of human and more-than-human elements, felt limiting within a traditionally human-centric methodological approach such as I had started with (Haraway, 2016; Barad, 2007). I attempted to counter this contradiction by engaging intentionally with the more-than-human world and documenting the interactions in my journals through art (e.g., drawing, taking photos, audio journalling). This process started long before the interview process of the research but became more intentional as I developed an awareness of the agency of the more-than-human world as a co-constitutive partner and the importance of incorporating a non-human element into the analysis and findings. Our dominant way of communicating as humans is through language and so I sought to dismantle this method of knowledge translation periodically through artistic rendering of my communications with the more-than-human world. Within the context of critical social work research, Fudge-Schormans (2010) argues that the use of arts-related modes of data collection and analysis provides an opportunity for challenging academic

norms that perpetuate oppression by insisting on written and spoken word alone, which is limiting and exclusionary. I am inspired by the words of Sinding and Barnes (2015) where they drew from the literature on art and social work, sharing that "the use of art carries at least three key promises: it can overcome restraints on expression; enable empathy; and disrupt dominant ways of knowing" (p. 27). The word 'promise' is reassuring because it meets my need for an ethics-based approach to this creation. Adding my art here was my way of pushing on the edges of the rubric for this thesis creation because the "expected or required forms of expression are themselves implicated in oppression" (Sinding and Barnes, 2015, p. 28).

4.3: Braun & Clarke's Reflexive Thematic Analysis

I initially chose Braun and Clarke's (2022) Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) as a framework for data analysis because it met my need for a critical social work analysis that recognizes that the researcher is always implicated with all aspects of data collection and analysis and researcher reflexivity is a crucial aspect of all parts of the research process. RTA is also a method of thematic analysis that stresses the importance of theory as an essential component to qualitative methods of data collection and analysis while also allowing for the epistemological and ontological flexibility that I needed to incorporate an agential realist perspective, which focuses on the entanglement of the researcher with the research process (Barad, 2007). Most important for the integrity of the research was to find a methodology that would support the ethico-onto-epistemological underpinnings of this inquiry by honouring "researcher subjectivity as not just valid but a resource" (Braun et al., 2019, p. 848). As the feminist new materialist approach to this

thesis theorizes knowledge as contextual, subjective, and partial, reflexive participation was central to my desire to be present and aware of myself and my biases with integrity to the process. As such, RTA was the most appropriate process for developing themes from the data.

4.4: Recruitment and Sampling

Before starting my inquiry, I applied for and received approval from the McMaster Research Ethics Board (Appendix A). I recruited participants through purposive and snowball sampling. In terms of purposive sampling because I hoped to recruit other mental health practitioners who also incorporated the other-than-human world into their practice. I chose to broaden the qualification for participation to include anyone who identified as a qualified mental health practitioner rather than limit the study to include only social workers. It was my intention to incorporate diverse perspectives into the data. I had arrived at this decision after noting how, while sharing my research ideas with co-workers, friends and colleagues, the subject matter of this inquiry created interest within my communities. Before completing the ethics application, many community members offered enthusiastically to participate in the research. I sent an email script to three primary contacts, who forwarded this script to colleagues who might be interested (Appendix D). Confidentiality and consent were presented in the Letter of Information and consent (Appendix B). This consent process was ongoing and was reiterated before the interviews began and because we were meeting virtually, participants agreed to oral consent (Appendix C), and I again emphasized that participation was voluntary and that they could decline to participate at any time and for any reason. The

participants agreed to use pseudonyms, and I assured the participants that I would adapt any information shared to ensure that their stories would not indicate their identity. After contacting and emailing the participants back and forth, all the participants decided that individual Zoom interviews were preferred. As this thesis is looking at individual perspectives on NBT, personal interviews were intentional (rather than meeting together in a focus group) because they allowed for a more dedicated space for each participant to share their stories of lived experience and professional experiences. I offered a gift card for $25 to each participant to thank them for their time. Two participants requested that their gift be provided as a donation to a charity they felt aligned with. The sample size was limited to four participants. While Braun & Clarke (2022) suggest that my sample size is inadequate for validity, for the sake of feasibility and to fit within the scope of this thesis, I decided to stay with a smaller sample. I acknowledge that the homogeneity of participants and the small size of the sampling could be a weakness in the study's quality. While I had initially prepared a recruitment poster, I did not need to use it, so I have not included it in the appendices.

4.5: Participants

All participants identified as mental health practitioners who incorporated NBT into their practice and worked directly with clients. All participants identified as female and worked in the mental health field as a therapist/counsellor. One participant worked in an institutional setting, one in a community-based agency, and two in a private practice. Two participants were registered social workers, one of them also being an ordained

animist minister[1] One of the participants was a registered psychotherapist who worked in spiritual care. One of the participants held a PhD in environmental sciences and diplomas in various therapeutic modalities. Three of the participants were also trained in energy-based modalities. One of the participants was practicing in England. Three of the participants were practicing in the Greater Hamilton Area. They all described integrating various techniques into their NBT practice, including forest bathing, walk-and-talk therapy, animal-assisted therapy, energy healing and mindfulness practices. All participants started their careers in institutional or community-based settings.

The connections made with the research participants were impactful from our original meetings, through emailing back and forth, to the interview process. From my perspective, the insights gained surpassed the information exchange held within the transcripts and recordings of our interviews. These connections have also extended beyond data analysis. New relationships formed with each of my participants individually. One project was a collaboration where I was invited to become a co-founder of a community organization for natural therapists to network and resource share. With another participant, I was invited to offer a story for an anthology that she was creating on birds. This story is added to the appendices at the end of this thesis (Appendix F). I also accepted a request to peer review an article she was producing for publication. This was truly collaborative endeavor where we were able to reciprocally support each other through our shared passion for incorporating the other-than-human world into our practice with humans.

4.6: Method: Data Collection

At the start of each interview, I reviewed the Letter of Information and Consent form (Appendix A), and participants were assured that they could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. I reviewed how confidentiality would be provided for, and participants shared their chosen pseudonyms. All participants agreed to the audio recording and transcribing of the interviews. I saved the recordings to OneDrive in a 2-factor password-protected file. Recordings were auto transcribed through Zoom transcription and then edited for accuracy as I reviewed the written transcripts while listening to the audio recordings of the interviews. I immersed myself in the data under my supervisor's advice and in line with Braun and Clarke's (2022) RTA process. I continued to go back to the data (both written and audio recordings) and kept a journal dedicated to taking notes and recording thoughts through words and art. I repeatedly used these journals while reading/listening to the interview recordings to reveal/identify codes (concepts that appeared throughout the various interviews relevant to the research question).

Using a list of questions as a guide (Appendix E), semi-structured interviews were held via Zoom, lasting between 60 and 90 minutes (about 1 and a half hours). I initially asked open-ended questions, such as asking participants for their definition of nature or inviting them to share how their personal story or prior work history led them to work with humans while incorporating the more-than-human world. I allowed space for the responses to digress, trusting that all the information mattered. I would periodically return to the interview question guide to make sure that I had addressed each of the questions on

the list so that I could stay connected to some of the critical issues that I wanted to explore, such as why they chose NBT as a practice model and the impact that choice has had on their clients and their wellness.

4.7: Data Analysis

Braun & Clarke (2022) offer a process that includes six steps for RTA. These include 1) familiarization with the data, 2) initial coding, 3) generating initial themes, 4) developing and reviewing themes, 5) refining, defining, and naming themes, and 6) writing up the report. While this process is suggested as a tool, as Braun, Clarke & Hayfield's (2019) article is entitled, this process is intended to be a "starting point for the journey, not a map." Following RTA as a starting place and continuing within feminist new materialist philosophy for research methodology, my process was an embodied one that included movement through the more-than-human and internet landscapes. The process was more organic and emergent than linear. However, in line with RTA, I often returned to the interview transcripts and identified codes from which I started generating initial themes that collated some of the concepts. I color-mapped codes and made notes in the transcripts. I kept many field journals with quotes from the transcripts as starting points for online research (discovery). I took hundreds of photos in the forest and linked them to the quotes. The quotes would instigate questions I would seek the answers to through my reading of articles, books, and grey literature. The amount of information on the internet made this process immersive. I listened to podcasts and watched YouTube lectures and webinars. I attended various webinars that were about the more-than-human world and approaches to NBT from a social justice and critical social work perspective.

Still, I felt most engaged in this research inquiry listening to the sounds of the more-than-human world while spending time in the forest, and I would stop to either audio record my thoughts or take short notes of ideas that would come to my awareness. I always brought a sketchpad that would allow me to express my thoughts and feelings through art while spending time in the forest and inviting communication with the more-than-human world. True to the nature of RTA, refining and redefining themes connected to the research question felt like percolation - a slow straining of the data through the filter of my curiosity and position in the research. This ongoing inquiry process involved sharing my thoughts about developing themes with my supervisor. I simultaneously engaged in a deep dive into theory, exploring and refining my ontological and epistemological framework. In line with a feminist new materialist approach, through entanglements with interdisciplinary sources and constant reflexivity about the importance of practicing and researching with integrity, the concept of ethics emerged as a meta-theme that wove itself through all aspects of the data set.

4.8: Methodological Considerations and Limitations

Applying RTA within a posthuman frame introduces complexities and challenges in upholding a posthuman ethic. The challenge of decentering the human subject and accounting for the agency of non-human entities was an interesting problem. As much as I learned from my human participants, the interaction with the more-than-human world, including technology as part of that relational entanglement, was equally revealing and difficult to articulate. The ineffability of my experiences with the natural world is one of the limitations of this study.

One of the main critiques I have of RTA is its subjectivity. Because the researcher plays a central role in theme development it could bias the information. The researcher bias might skew the findings if not carefully managed. In being reflexive, I considered how I might overemphasize the importance of NBT as different from mainstream, biomedical, evidence-based models based on my critical stance toward biomedical approaches, potentially overshadowing other vital themes. However, I also recognize that while most research about NBT focuses on providing valid and reliable evidence for how nature is good for humans, this study intends to fill the gap in the literature that connects NBT to a critical social work and a new materialist perspective.

The small sample size, purposive sampling, placing importance on depth rather than breadth, and researcher bias could all affect the validity and reliability of this inquiry.

A weakness of this study is its need for more generalizability. While RTA is valuable for understanding specific contexts and experiences, it might not provide easily transferable findings to other practitioners and settings. Being reflexive, as an example, I recognize that the nuanced insights into an ethical imperative to be reciprocal within our interactions with the more-than-human world might be deeply relevant to myself and the study participants but not necessarily applicable to all mental health practitioners. This study may also not offer the kind of evidence effective for policy change within a neo-liberal and biomedical system of healthcare.

Chapter 5: Findings

Participants in general found that NBT offers many benefits for their clients and themselves such as emotional resilience. This was considered important for managing the reality of living in a post-pandemic world where communities and interpersonal relationships have been strained, and social, economic and political change seems to happen at a rate faster than people can manage emotionally. Participants discussed how NBT fosters well-being by facilitating a deeper connection with the natural world.

This section will develop this premise, starting with the participants' tensions with defining the concept of 'nature' and then expand on each of the three broad themes that were developed from the interview coding:1) the importance of interconnectedness, 2) the healing nature of reciprocity and, 3) a move toward liberatory wildness.

5.1: What is Nature?

When asked to define the concept of *nature,* all the participants agreed that it was a difficult task to reduce nature to a single definition, but some of the words used were organic, relational/relationship ("co-existing and collaborating to create beautiful things"), unprocessed (for example in advertising "natural" products are considered less processed by humans and technology), authentic/not contrived, not just "out there but also our inner nature", wild-ness, energy, spirit, Life, God, one/all. The following are some of the participant's definitions:

> *"It's like trying to define love… it's such an interesting parallel: nature and love. And how difficult those two things are to define." (EB)*

"There are no obvious definitions. I would say nature is organic; it develops by virtue of different things coming together and co-existing and collaborating to create beautiful things…it's a relational process." (Sage)

"Trying to define nature is already reducing it to a word - nature.
This is scientific reductionism, isn't it? Where does the human belong in that? We don't; that's the disconnect… most humans, when they are disconnected, they're actually disconnected from the nature that's within them, so the microbiome, the microorganisms, everything that makes us- that is our nature." (Artemis)

"So, ultimately, everything is nature: the air we breathe, the people we interact with, the animals, the planet, the weather. I hold a belief or understanding that everything is nature. That we are also a part of nature is something that humans have forgotten. " (Suh-ny)

While not all the participants espoused an animist or monist framework specifically, all participants agreed that everything is nature. Combining the participants' definitions, for the sake of this analysis, it was agreed that *nature* (in the context of NBT) could be considered as the non-built world and the nested ecosystems within it, including earth, air, water, plants, and all sentient and living beings.

However, if we want to distinguish humans as a separate entity for the sake of this analysis, the terms 'more-than-human' or 'other-than-human' would allow for that demarcation between nature 'out there' and 'our human nature'.

5.2: Interconnectedness

Codes - Relationality, Coexistence, Spirituality, Lost Language

All the participants agreed that if nature is everything, everything is interconnected. There was a consensus that disconnect is a precondition for mental unwellness and that incorporating the more-than-human world into the therapeutic relationships facilitates an awareness of the healing power facilitated through connection with nature.

> *" So, it's like redirecting people to, like, help them feel that they have the ability to connect with nature in a variety of ways…even if we live in the middle of the city , which many of us do… it's about relationship-building, within yourself, with your environment because if you are paying attention, you make meaning, and everything begins to matter." (Suh-ny)*

Another participant shared that she considered herself a 'natural therapist' because her philosophy was more about nature being a relational process for connection that is necessary for healing,

> *"You can look at [therapeutic] relationships as being kind of organic in how they come about. If they are not forced, where there's not a lot of protocol, where there's just the ability for the individual to just kind of tell their story…that feels like a natural process, non-contrived, more organic, authentic making." (Artemis)*

When viewed through posthuman and critical social work lenses, NBT emphasizes relationality beyond human interactions, including more-than-human actors like animals, plants, and ecosystems. Participants shared that facilitating therapeutic relationships in collaboration with the more-than-human world fosters feelings of awe, wonder, and delight, which they believe is instrumental in creating opportunities for individuals to reconnect with a broader spirituality and oneness with the natural world. The connection between humans and nonhuman entities (e.g., birds, trees) becomes a co-created space of healing where nature is seen not as a backdrop but as an active participant in therapy. Two participants worked with birds of prey in their therapeutic practice and shared examples of how the birds are so powerfully healing.

> *"Part of the benefit with the birds of prey is because, in a way, they're shocking to the system, because you don't see them that often…it pulls you into a sense of focus. And if you're flying or walking with them, you can be in flow. Just everything else goes away, and you're focused on that one creature…and so I think it taps into a spiritual space that not many people tend to access." (EB)*

> *"So the barn owl has a lovely heart-shaped face. If someone is really anxious, I will give them the barn owls the first bird to hold and it brings them from their head into their heart space immediately. It actually grounds them, actually calms them down." (Artemis)*

Both participants shared that spirituality in this context transcends traditional religious practices, becoming a lived experience of interconnectedness, where both humans and nonhumans are essential to the therapeutic process.

> *"There's a calm; nature brings a calm and a peace through every sense, sight, smell, touch, sound." (EB)*

The cyclical nature of seasons and ecological rhythms mirrors clients' psychological and emotional experiences. Nature is understood by the participants to act as a mediator for remembering lost connections with the earth and returning to a more integrated state of being. Many of the participants talked about a lost language and emphasized that time with the more-than-human world can allow for the re-integration of our inner nature to the nature that is 'out there'.

> *"Nature speaks the lost language. I mean, it's speaking all the time, but people don't understand the language anymore… it's always speaking, like, even the wind says something. I feel like my role is to help people reconnect with that language so that they can reconnect with maybe a lost part of themselves that might be missing." (EB)*

In this way, NBT can be seen as a way of reconnecting to this lost language. Participants report that clients often report experiencing a sense of deepened connection to spirituality, and expansion of consciousness often occurs as individuals reconnect with

these lost languages, allowing for a deeper understanding of one's place in the world and fostering a sense of belonging and mattering.

5.3: Healing Reciprocity

Codes: Restoration, Responsibility, Ethical Care

This theme revolves around ethical responsibility toward both human and nonhuman actors, emphasizing restorative practices that promote personal healing and ecological reparation, guided by self-care and sustainability. A core theme from the interviews is the notion of reciprocity and restoration - with the client, the therapist and the natural world—as an ethical and spiritual responsibility. This is the central theme in Kimmerer's (2013) *Braiding Sweetgrass*, where she regards reciprocity as a gift of gratitude. Critical social work emphasizes ethical responsibility towards marginalized groups, including nature itself (Besthorn, 2012). The ethics of *response-ability* (Haraway, 2008) in nature-based therapy calls for respect toward nonhuman entities and acknowledgment of their contributions to healing. Practitioners recognize their obligation not only to human clients but also to the ecosystems they engage with. This involves a commitment to reparation, where healing practices are not extractive but restorative, seeking ethical relationships through more sustainable, respectful interactions.

> *"I'll ask my clients, all the heavy energy that has been left on the land, do you want to do something in return for the land actually holding that energy for you? It can be something as easy as picking up some litter; it could be, you know, be conscious of saying thank you and really be present because we don't do gratitude enough." (Artemis)*

This response-ability extends to ensuring that nature-based practices are respectful, non-exploitative, and restorative. One participant shared her strong feelings about asking permission to work with more-than-human actors in the therapeutic setting,

> *"There's a good example I share with my clients, it's like, would you go down to a neighbor's house, walk in, sit in their front room and demand a cup of tea without introducing yourself? If we want to be of the same sort of energy, we want to honour and respect everything that we do, we have to ask permission. We have to say who we are, what our intention is and as soon as we start doing that then we start getting that energetic transference of energetic information communications." (Artemis)*

Engaging in NBT provides opportunities for practitioners to care for their own well-being, replenishing their emotional and mental energy through interactions with the natural world. Self-care is vital in maintaining the energy and capacity to offer generosity and love in therapeutic settings. Participants who had been feeling burnt out in their institutional positions shared that they also benefitted from self-car**e** in these environments. One participant shared that when working in a hospital environment, she became very unwell and knew that she couldn't work there anymore. She shared that,

> *"There was just a deep sadness. The point where it's like, it's almost unbearable to live in this world when a part of me felt so disconnected. I felt just so much better personally being outside with the freedom and you know, playfulness and creativity and all that nature brings." (Suh-ny)*

Another participant shared how the shift from office work to seeing clients on a farm created a sense of joy for her,

> *"Pine trees on both sides for about half a kilometer, and immediately I know, immediately I relax, right. Immediately I'm open and thinking, okay, I see the cattle and the longhorns and those little black pigs and the chickens, and the chickens are all running around, and I'm happy like this stuff makes me so happy…it just felt so right to me, I couldn't have been happier, and then when my clients started coming, they loved it." (Sage)*

Participants emphasized that they must consider their own well-being so that they can ethically hold space for their human clients' well-being and their responsibility to the more-than-human world they engage with.

5.4:Liberatory Wildness

Codes: Organic, Unprocessed, Wild, Lived Experience, Decommodification

Wild spaces' unpredictability and organic nature allow for therapeutic experience**s** that challenge the commodified, medicalized models of modern therapy. In these settings, participants agreed that therapy with the more-than-human world is not a cognitive-centric process designed to assess and 'fix' the clients' problems but an experience to be lived in

real-time, with the potential for promoting the expansion of emotional, cognitive, and spiritual boundaries.

> *"Okay, so the chickens might go off, or you know, I say let's take a walk outside because we have this beautiful farm to walk around…there's just so many more opportunities to get away from the constraints - the constraints to me are a certain type of room or office building. It feels medical…the sign on the door of a medical building is huge to people… here they don't feel like they're being labelled or diagnosed out here. Then I'm able to be more fully in my authenticity, more connected, which then allows for [clients'] authenticity, and they can feel safer because I'm not performative" (Sage)*

By resisting the commodification of both therapy and nature, participants shared that engaging with nature offers a way that emphasizes the possibilities for transformation and healing, free from the constraints of neoliberal capitalist and colonial frameworks that influence institutionally managed care.

> "There *were a lot of patients that I would work with, and I think partly because they felt so institutionalized, right? You're in a concrete building. You have significant limitations on your autonomy and going outside was a space for people to feel autonomous. This was very healing for them." (EB)*

In contrast to traditional, controlled therapeutic environments, NBT thrives in wild, organic spaces where control and domestication are minimized. The juxtaposition of *domestication vs. wildness* reflects a tension in therapy between structured, human-dominated spaces and untamed, wild spaces. Nature's unpredictability, represented by wild raptors or untamed landscapes, encourages practitioners and clients to engage with uncertainty and spontaneity, often facilitating more profound therapeutic outcomes. One participant shared her thoughts about this connection,

> *"Many people are struggling with mental health because they have got a voice, they feel trapped so bringing that person into an environment where they have a bird, there is suddenly a heart connection with that bird, there is something that's very wild in a wild place, so they find the wildness within them and that gives them the courage to talk. Working with barn owls is very much working with the deep dark parts of our soul. The barn owl works at dawn and dusk, the twilight time, so it works with the darkest parts of you, and it brings it into the light to be healed." (Artemis)*

NBT offers the opportunity to shift the focus away from commodified, structured therapeutic models to embrace the richness of lived experience in the moment. The generosity of the natural world—whether in the form of a breathtaking sunrise or the energy of a forest—nurtures both client and therapist, removing the constraints and performativity often found in modern therapeutic practices.

Chapter 6: Discussion

In this section, I discuss how the findings of this inquiry apply to my original research questions and how they relate to an ontological turn where I approach the practice and research of NBT for mental health from a posthuman lens. I will review the findings and contextualize them with the literature. Next, I will discuss the ethics of NBT and finally, I will problematize the terms that made up my research question: What is a practitioner/therapist? What is mental health? What is nature?

6.1: Nature is Everything

I once attended a mindfulness retreat where we were invited to eat mindfully. The instruction was to look at our food and trace all the steps that brought it to our plate. When approached this way, even the packaged treats I had brought could be traced back to the sugar from plants that required the sun and water. Even the non-biodegradable packaging could be traced to plastics that come from natural gas, cellulose, and coal. In this way, when conceived through the lens of interconnectedness, everything connects to the more-than-human world. So, what constitutes *nature*? All the participants shared that defining the concept of nature was difficult because it held so many connotations and ways of understanding within our cultural discourses. Reference was made to things being 'natural' if they weren't processed by human intervention. However, even that was challenged by the realization that, like my mindfulness experience, everything is interconnected when it's brought down to its simplest form. For example, one participant queried if the built landscape was nature. She then answered herself by considering that all products that have been processed by human intervention came from an original raw

source such as wood, stone, or water and/or used these elements in the production of the built environment. Eventually, as we discussed the nature of nature, we all agreed that *nature is everything.* If everything is nature, then everything must be one.

6.1: Interconnectedness

In the fall of 2018, while sitting in an undergraduate social work course on communities, I became curious about the response of my classmates to the question, "Who here feels like they are part of a community in the school of social work?" In a class of approximately 60 students, only two people put up their hands, and I was one of them. The question was posed after we had worked together as a class to define what community means - a sense of belonging, that you were connected, cared for and that you mattered. I set about to figure out how to find the connections and/or disconnections in our school community. So, I created the "I am here because…" chalk wall to allow for unlimited and unidentifiable responses to the prompt, "Why are you here?" The large chalk wall on wheels was supplied with chalk, and any staff, students or visitors to the social work floor were invited to participate. In total, I collected 134 responses and night after night, I sat on the hallway floor looking at the responses, trying to see the connections - why are we all here? One night, it hit me -

the "why" was not necessary -

we are just here,

together,

now.

I am here because you are here. You are here because I am here*.*

And in each moment that we have that awareness of interconnectedness, there is an opportunity to stand together in the possibilities for love, freedom and becoming together. Interconnectedness is all that is true - we are all here together now because

We are all interconnected.

All the interview participants agreed that an awareness of the interconnectedness (or oneness) of all living beings was essential to their experiences of working with clients in collaboration with the more-than-human world. A sense of interconnectedness between humans and nature acknowledges the relationality and coexistence inherent in our ecosystems and challenges the neoliberal focus on individualism (Besthorn et al., 2010; Boetto,2017).

Especially since the Covid-19 pandemic, where self-isolating mandates meant people had to disconnect from the external world, interview participants agreed that re-introducing clients to the more-than-human world had the effect of connecting clients to something greater than themselves, which seemed to increase a sense of belonging and purpose.

In Western culture, anthropocentric ontologies place humans as separate and superior to nature, allowing for its commodification and exploitation (Braidotti, 2013; McPhie, 2019). However, McPhie (2019) and Braidotti (2013) argue that humans are also commodified for their labour resources and that the global mental health crisis is

inextricably connected to the environmental crisis because of advanced capitalism and the neoliberal focus on individualism that disconnects us from a sense of interconnectedness with all living entities. Ecosocial work and eco spiritual perspectives highlight that reconnection to nature facilitates healing by fostering an awareness of our shared existence with the earth's living systems and encouraging a reciprocation of care (Besthorn et al., 2010; Boetto,2017).

Interview participants shared that NBT offers an opportunity for people to connect with nature, whether that be walking and talking in the forest or connecting with birds of prey, while having a space to feel, share and explore their experiences of being here with a supportive human. These interactions with the more-than-human world become an opportunity for deep connection that has the potential to foster relationships of healing reciprocity - where humans and nature can *care for each other* with an ethic of responsibility and respect.

6.2: Healing Reciprocity

The concept of reciprocity, as a theme, permeated the interview conversations. Reciprocity in NBT is deeply intertwined with the concepts of ethical care, responsibility, and self-care. The concept of reciprocity highlights the importance of *responsibility*—not just for oneself, but for the natural world that supports our healing. As discussed by Kimmerer (2013), Indigenous worldviews emphasize this reciprocal relationship, where nature offers resources for healing, and humans, in turn, have a duty to care for the earth. This responsibility can be expressed in therapeutic settings through small acts of awareness and gratitude for the land, trees, water, plants and animals. Stopping to pick up

litter, leaving space for wildlife, and staying on marked trails are all acts of both responsibility and reciprocity. Even the wind, rain, sun, and sky can be seen as gifts and engaged mindfully, using the senses to listen, look, and feel the environment and then express gratitude for the relationship. This reciprocal relationship fosters a sense of accountability to the more-than-human world, encouraging individuals to contribute to its well-being while recognizing how nature contributes to theirs.

While researching through reading, I found an exercise called Eco Mapping Relationships with Nature. It asked the reader to draw a circle and put your name in the middle. Around the circle, you were invited to write down all the products/services/systems that represented the natural world that you interacted with daily in your life. The task was to draw arrows pointing towards the inner circle if those products/services/systems served *you* and then draw arrows pointing out from the circle if you actively participated in supporting *them* (the natural products/services/systems). When I performed this exercise, I was shocked to see how imbalanced the reciprocal nature of my relationship was with all the natural products/services/systems I interacted with in my regular life. Exercises like this one, while increasing awareness, promote an ethic of responsibility and reciprocal relationships.

Eco-Mapping Your Relationship with Nature Retrieved from Boetto, H., Bell, K., & Kime, K. (2018). Holistic Ecosocial Work, A Model for Transformative Change Through Being, Knowing and Doing. In M.Powers & M.Rinkel (Eds.) *Social work Promoting Community and Environmental Sustainability: A Workbook for Global Social Workers and Educators (Volume 2).* Chapter 2, p.46-57.

One participant shared that they offered small tangible gifts to the land after practicing on it or had ritual acts of both asking for permission to be on the land or blessing the land after a session. By participating in the healing of the environment, participants reported that they experienced a sense of fulfillment and deeper connection to the earth, reinforcing the mutual relationship at the heart of NBT.

Reciprocity also aligns with the principle of *ethical care*, which emphasizes care as a relational and collective process rather than an individual pursuit. In NBT, ethical care involves recognizing that the environment is not merely a backdrop for human activity but a living system with intrinsic value (Boetto, 2017; Braidotti, 2013). All the participants approached their relationships with the more-than-human world with humility and respect, and by practicing reciprocity, they engaged with the more-than-human world in ways that honored the reciprocal nature of the relationship.

I give back to the trees the gift of music. I play my pennywhistle for the forest. The birds always collect around me, cocking their heads in curiosity about this human who sounds like a strange bird. The ground animals collect around me as well with curiosity. I breathe my tunes into the trees, and they return the air I need to keep playing.

6.3: Liberatory Wildness

About three years ago, my young son and I were out for a walk in the forest. We were playing hooky from school and playing outside. It was a perfect winter day; the ground and trees were covered with thick, fluffy white snow from the previous night's snowfall. The sky was blue and cloudless, and the sun felt warm against the exposed parts of our skin. We stopped and lay down on a snowbank to look up at the blue sky and bask in the sun. Suddenly, my son started to sob. I was so curious. When I asked him what was wrong, he replied, "Oh, Mommy, my whole body wants to be wild, but now that I'm in school, my wildness is feeling sad." He had previously attended a forest school I had helped create, and we had just closed it. He was attending school in a building for the

first time at age seven, and all the parts of him that had been allowed to be wild were being constrained inside a classroom. I felt sad, too, realizing that his wildness would be domesticated by the school system.

The terms "wild" and "wildness" were used in many of the interview transcripts. One participant talked about how working with birds of prey allowed clients to connect to their wild parts and their shadow parts and give them expression for healing. Another participant revealed how Disney Corporation (whose influence on culture is significant, as she shared that Disney is one of the top six global conglomerates) has systematically anthropomorphized wildlife in its films throughout the years. She shared that she had done some previous research where she looked at nature (for example, animals, trees, plants, insects) as portrayed in Disney films, starting with their 1937 film Snow White. In this film, she noticed that while the birds with whom Snow White befriended were slightly anthropomorphized, they still looked like birds and whistled like birds, without the ability to speak English. By the 2000s, Disney had birds taking selfies with cell phones and ordering pizza delivery (by humans) to their homes. She pointed out how the 'wild' has been slowly removed from the portrayal of wildlife in animated Disney movies over time, and we both felt curious about what this meant in terms of our western relationship with all things wild including the wild parts of ourselves that were part of our inner nature.

As part of my field research, I would walk through the forest and audio record thoughts as "Forest Reflections". In one of them, I reflected on how domesticating the wildness out of

both humans and nature has been a historical, intentional and ongoing colonial capitalist project. In the recording, I reflect on all the ways that the term "wild" is considered pejorative: 'wild women', 'wild children', 'wild and crazy', and 'wild animals. Our social institutions are spaces for domestication and taming the wild in us. Schools tame children, prisons tame criminals and hospitals tame patients with mental illness. I entered into a lengthy discussion with one of the research participants about all the ways that we, as social workers, might historically be complicit in the colonial taming and domestication project, especially in the fields of mental health and psychiatry. Practicing NBT might be a way to begin to liberate the wildness within our clients and ourselves. When I considered using the term Liberatory Wildness as a theme, it made a lot of sense because this is perhaps what NBT does best.

Liberatory psychology and liberation practices approach working with humans from decolonial and antioppressive frameworks, seeking to encourage conscientization and collaboration in supporting positive mental health outcomes by calling out the structural and systemic oppression experienced through racist, ableist and sanist practices in psychiatry and psychology (LeFrancois et al., 2013) In an online search, some social workers have begun to adopt this frame and incorporate it into practice frameworks (Edwards, 2024; Lee, 2024; Moane, 2014; Sherover-Marcuse, 2024). It occurred to me that Liberatory Wildness was an appropriate description for the participants' shared discourse around choosing NBT to move away from the constraints of neoliberal managerial professionalism and biomedical approaches to mental health. NBT provides a means for both liberating the wildness inherent in humans and honouring the wildness in

nature. NBT provides an alternative to models of practices of psychotherapy that adhere to the dominant biomedical model and that may be triggering for many clients who have experienced the violence of biomedical psychiatrization (LeFrancois et al., 2013; LeFrancois et al., 2016). Supporting this claim all the interview participants shared lived experiences of their own mental health journeys; and how each had experienced some form of psychiatric intervention, which made working in biomedically oriented clinical spaces feel triggering. I have had clients choose my services because they did not feel safe in a typical clinical office setting being (as one participant stated) 'interrogated about their traumas' by a therapist who was sitting on a computer, taking notes.

One of the participants shared that working with the birds of prey was incredibly exciting and emotionally liberating for her clients, especially military veterans and young clients. She has found that her practice with birds of prey has become one where she primarily works with children with autism. The families report that previous counselling using conventional therapeutic practice models, including cognitive-based talk therapies held inside clinical spaces, was not ideal for their children. NBT can meet the needs of many people who require a more liberatory approach to mental health support.

Chapter 7: Ethical Implications for Social Work Practice

The concept of ethics in social work practice is complex and dynamic. Arguably, the code of ethics to which social workers must adhere, in terms of licensing and practice, sets social work apart and defines social work's role and value within clinical interdisciplinary teams. A solid understanding of and adherence to an ethics of social

justice and respecting the worth and dignity of humans is at the core of the Canadian Association of Social Work Code of Ethics (CASW, 2024). Paying attention to how ethics shape social worker subjectivities and the relationship between power, theory and practice is essential to practicing NBT ethically. This section will describe some ethical questions and tensions that arise in my practice and are relevant to practicing as a critical social worker adopting a post human frame.

I am grateful and aware of the privilege I hold doing the work I do with humans and having the privilege to access the more-than-human world with which to practice social work. As with all social work practice, there are ethical considerations. A posthuman ethic requires me to consider my ethical position and actions as they relate to both humans and the more-than-human world.

7.2 Ethics with Human Clients

There are times when emotional expression requires a controlled environment. Still, for the majority of the year, while days are longer and temperatures are tolerable, I meet with clients outside of an office. Especially in mental health, incorporating the more-than-human world complicates the therapeutic relationship and in-person interactions in public outdoor spaces must be considered with ethical considerations for physical safety and accessibility, confidentiality and consent. I have found that the fact that I have little to no power to control the space means that the interactions with the more-than-human world are uncontrived. In this way, I don't direct or lead a session; we walk the path *together,* inviting our senses to come alive with a curiosity for how the natural environment might intra-act with us on any given day.

Physical Safety and Accessibility

There are safety considerations in an environment that can't be controlled such as the weather, including high or low temperatures, unexpected changes in the weather, or unexpected interactions with the more-than-human world. For example, the birds often interact with us - sometimes they will approach us and perch either nearby or land on our hands and sometimes they approach us with territorial aggression. I've always found it necessary to check in with clients regularly to be sure that clients are comfortable with animal interaction and that the client's needs are met by being outside on any particular day. Being able to control the weather, territorial birds protecting their nests, and the occasional bathroom break in the woods can be tricky. In addition, the ground can be slippery or muddy after rain or snow. Some trails have hills and exposed root systems. It is my practice to be highly familiar with the landscapes where we meet and to orient clients to these possibilities prior to starting our time together. The process is one where the client always has the choice to participate in sessions outside. For clients who experience challenges with accessibility, we meet on flat paths that are conducive to mobility aids. Bathrooms are not always possible, so navigating this important human function has the potential to be challenging. Still, in navigating challenging experiences together, I have found that the therapeutic relationship is strengthened.

Financial Accessibility

Recognizing that financial access to psychotherapy is a privilege and is limited to only a very small percentage of people, I strive to mitigate financial restrictions with a sliding-scale policy for people who are uninsured or underinsured. There is no process

for evaluating or proving the need for financial support. Once a therapeutic relationship is created, sessions are never stopped because insurance coverage is used up.

Confidentiality

Confidentiality can also be challenging in public outdoor environments. Often, strangers will approach to converse, and sometimes, we run into someone we know. There are times when emotional expression necessitates privacy. These are examples where transparency and consent need to be ongoing in every interaction. Ethically, I am responsible for meeting clients' need for confidentiality to the best of my ability. However, these challenges are negotiated together as an essential part of the therapeutic relationship.

7.3 Posthuman Ethics with the More-than-Human World

The ethical mandate to uphold and promote social justice is central to the profession of social work. The Canadian Association of Social Work Code of Ethics (2024) was recently updated. Under the section on Promoting Social Justice, there is a new addition that includes a responsibility to "promote the protection of the environment, land, air, water, plants, and animals as essential to the *well-being of all people* (emphasis is mine)." This ethical requirement, in keeping with social work's humanist history, harkens to a colonial imperative that sets to see the more-than-human environment as separate from humans and only needing protection so that it can serve human needs. Hanrahan and Chalmers (2020) argue that "social work must reconceptualize its social justice mission to include the more-than-human world…because interconnectedness and intersectionality are core concepts of critical social work" (p.197).

I am ethically challenged when I consider my practice from this set of ethics. While my license mandates that I advocate for the protection of the more-than-human world, solely for the best interests of humans, a posthumanist approach to ethics requires a reconceptualization of 'human' as a contested construct and requires a broadening of the concept of 'no harm' to be extended to the more-than-human world (Besthorn et, al, 2010; Boetto, 2017; Braidotti, 2013; Puig De La Bellacasa, 2017; MacCormack, 2016). Boetto (2017) argues for a transformative model for eco-social work that insists on "reconceptualizing an understanding of well-being to foster holistic, environmental and relational attributes" (p.50) A critical consideration of this dilemma, through the lens of ethics suggests that as critical social workers, we approach this ethical mandate, that upholds human exceptionalism, by engaging in "an ongoing practice of critical disruption of the methods and practices that recapitulate historical, social, and political projects of unethical relations in social work" (Joseph, 2024, p. 28).

7.4 Problematizing the Research Question

Because of my introduction to new materialist and 'post' theories, my original research question, "What are practitioner perspectives of nature-based therapy for mental health, post-pandemic?" broadened into an inquiry about the concepts that made up the questions: What is a practitioner/clinical social worker/therapist? What is therapy? What is nature? What is nature-based therapy? What is mental health?

Human is (WHAT) is human?

Nature is (WHAT) is nature?

Mental health is (WHAT) is mental health?

Therapy is (WHAT) is therapy?

Critical clinical social work is (WHAT) is critical clinical social work?

Inquiry is (WHAT) is inquiry?

Knowledge is (WHAT) is knowledge?

Reality is (WHAT) is reality?

Truth is (WHAT) is truth?

Ethical is (WHAT) is ethical?

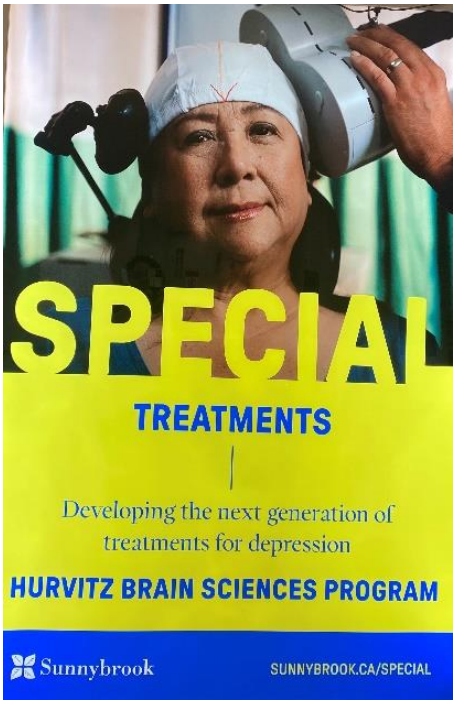
What matters?
What matters.[2]

[2] This poem is a play on feminist materialisms and the concept of matter. The "What" that matters are the subjective interpretation, the material-discursive practice of making meaning matter. The 'What' in these concepts is a construction – the meaning we give shapes our subjectivities and stories our experiences.

What is a practitioner/clinical social worker/therapist? Miriam-Webster defines a

therapist as "an individual specializing in the therapeutic medical treatment of impairment, injury, disease, or disorder" (retrieved online, n.d.). This definition indicates that therapists have specialized medical knowledge and reinforces the idea that distress and extreme emotions are considered disorders that requires fixing. As a critical social worker who works as a psychotherapist, I feel the tensions in the role that I play as part of what's known as the *psy complex.* This term is defined as "an expansive and overarching system that informs and intersects with other neoliberal systems of oppression" (LeFrancois et al., 2016, p.1) in which clinical social work has been complicit in perpetrating racism, sanism and epistemic injustice (LeFrancois et al, 2016). Epistemic injustice in mental health is experienced when a therapist is considered to hold specialized which negates the knowledge of the client, rendering them not credible and in need of the knowledge of the therapist to 'get better' (Fricker, 2007). I do not feel comfortable claiming innocence because I work in nature rather than in a conventional clinic setting. Brenda LeFrancois (2016), a mad survivor and educator, insists that allied professions within the psy complex take an anti-oppressive, anti-racist and anti-sanist approach by questioning medical interpretations and pathologizations and that we reposition ourselves in our work by questioning and contesting forms of knowledge production that cement the biomedical

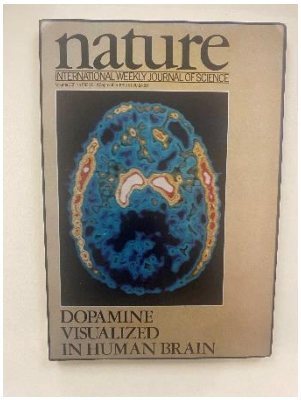
hegemony over mental health discourse, policy, and services. In some parts of Canada, clinical social workers are distinct from other social workers because they have achieved a specialized medical competency that allows them to make assessments and diagnoses using the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM). In Ontario, the title of 'clinical social worker' is protected and prohibited as there is no level of social work that allows for this level of pathologization (CASW, 2024). From my own experience I have spoken with practitioners who call themselves eco-therapists or nature-based therapists and who continue to practice from a biomedical model while incorporating elements of nature and/or mindfulness into their treatment models. In fact, a web search for "forest therapy training in Canada" reveals multiple pages that list organizations offering certification programs. Most of these are offered online (at least in part) and charge exorbitant fees, while still leaning on traditional biomedical models of therapy and the use of nature as a 'co-therapist.'



What is mental health?

I took this picture while at Sunnybrook Hospital in Toronto, Ontario. Sunnybrook was ranked #2 in Canada for best hospital and prides itself on its innovative approaches to mental health care. This representation is indicative of the way that mental health is approached in mainstream biomedical discourses. When I first saw this picture on the wall, I was curious about how normalized this representation has become in western medicine. Curing depression, in this picture is clearly about fixing a "broken brain" (Webb, 2010) and the treatment for depression is targeted toward the individual rather than the systemic reasons for depression and anxiety. In the recent report, *Understanding the Mental Health of Canadians Through Covid 19 and Beyond: Poll #18* (2023), it indicates that an increased number of Canadians are seeking individual, in-person mental health support, indicating an increased level of responsibilization for their own well-being. Responsibilization is the transfer of responsibility for well-being to the individual. This neoliberal approach to mental health management is euphemistically called "self-care" and has become ubiquitous in the mental health field. In this way, the spotlight is shifted from state responsibility for systemic change or publicly accessed support to the individual to seek support, which is usually only available for the more privileged members of society who have access to private insurance.

What is nature?



The first picture is what we typically consider nature and was taken on the trails behind McMaster University. The second picture was taken at McMaster Hospital and was hung on the walls of the School of Medicine. This second representation of nature is similar to the ParX program's representation of "nature as a pill". The journal, *Nature*, is the world's leading interdisciplinary science journal. I took this picture because it aroused my curiosity about the hegemony of the field of Western science to define nature and lead the discourse on mental health using reductionist methods and technological advances as a way to approach the well-being of humans and more-than-humans. This picture represents a paradigm shift in medicine and in particular, in working with schizophrenia, by being able to visually see dopamine in the human brain. While this technology without doubt has supported the alleviation of the suffering of individuals, from a critical disability/mad studies perspective, isolating the neurochemistry and the use of these diagnostics can have deleterious effects on people as well. Self-identified psychiatric survivor, Rachel McMahon (2023), in her article *Stories of the Silenced Manifesto and Mad Studies: An Experience of Biomedicine and Mental Health*, shares how these imaging and diagnostic tools can have the effect of "having life stripped bare by my illness and the institutions which now control it..[and that have] the capacity to stigmatize and dehumanize people with mental health disorders, and how difficult it is to resist the definitions and labels

imposed" (p.2). Is something to consider that this is the discourse on nature that still holds dominance in our medical schools.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

In the wake of the post-pandemic mental health crisis (CAMH, 2020) an increasing number of social workers in Canada are entering into private practice to meet the need for in-person therapeutic support (CASW, 2023). Nature-based therapies (NBT), which integrate the (natural) more-than-human world into the therapeutic process, have garnered interdisciplinary attention for their potential benefits (Arrenstedt &Wahrborg, 2011; Berman et al,2012; Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989; Ulrich et al, 1991; Watkins-Martin et al.,2022). Some examples of NBT include forest bathing, wilderness retreats, animal assisted therapies, walk and talk therapy, horticultural therapy, and the use of animist-based models of talk therapy.

Using Barad's (2007) agential realism as my theoretical foundation, I argued that NBT, practiced through a critical social work and posthuman frame can meet the urgent need for providing new, innovative, and ethical support models in addition to the evidence-based, cognitive-centric models that currently dominate mental health treatment options. The aim of this study was to engage with mental health practitioners, who identify as nature-based therapists, to learn how they perceived their experiences of offering NBT, in private practice. The study found that practitioners perceive NBT as a powerful modality for enhancing emotional resilience, fostering well-being, and facilitating a deeper connection with the natural world. However, challenges were also identified such as accessibility, cultural relevance, and the need for systemic support.

Three broad themes emerged: the importance of interconnectedness, healing reciprocity and liberatory wildness.

Using a critical social work and posthuman approach to analyze the practice of nature-based therapies, I have argued that a critical posthuman approach to clinical social work practice is an important ethical aspect of our commitment as critical social workers to uphold our mandate towards social justice. As such, it is important that we insist on extending social justice towards the more-than-human world as an imperative for critical social work practice.

I discussed the implications of being introduced to post qualitative inquiry and the tensions I experienced reconciling humanist methodology within a posthuman frame. I shared my desire to challenge positivist and colonial-based hierarchies of knowledge (re) production by offering my artist parts a place in this thesis.

Importantly, I have shared the ways that this research project led me on a journey of self-discovery towards Barad's ethico-onto-epistemology, and Rossiter's ethic of unsettled social work, which I cannot any longer consider as theory but instead it has just become who I am - as a practitioner, as a researcher, as a mother and as an assemblage of all that and more, moving through and with you as we co-constitute our becoming together, here, now. I enter this space with gratitude for the opportunity. If we are here, now, together then I am ethically obliged and honoured to meet you in the entanglement of all that this moment brings to us - with nonjudgment, with gratitude and with love.

8.1: Future Considerations/ Applications

June's Story

It was early spring.
I had just decided to start a nature-based practice, but I had not yet left the agency where I was working. It was Covid and I spent every morning before work in the forest.
The weather was warming, and the wildlife were all starting to come out from their winter rest.
On this trail, there is a frog pond where bullfrogs come to nest and if you go early in the morning, their croaking is so loud that it dominates the soundscape. I love to lie down on the platform next to the pond, close my eyes and let the sound engulf me.
I am not the only one.
One day, as I was lying there, listening to the frogs, I was interrupted by a soft voice that asked if she could join me on the platform. I, of course, agreed and we got to talking.
Her name was June, and she told me that she loved to come to this spot because it reminded her that there was still a reason to stay here and not give up. She shared with me that she had recently spent six months at West 5th psychiatric treatment center, and she was feeling scared because she was starting to feel unwell again and did not want to be 'locked up' again. She told me that being in the forest was the only time that she felt better, and she wanted to get outpatient support so that she could be free to visit the forest daily.
She shared that she had spoken with a social worker at the Hamilton Family Health Team who told her that it would likely be about a 3 month wait to see a social worker and that she would be receiving cognitive behavioral therapy. June did not find this modality helpful, and she wished that she could have a choice of therapist, but she was thankful to have the possibility of outpatient support, and she was hopeful that her appointment might get pushed up.
4 weeks later…
I was at the downtown location of St. Joseph's Hospital in Hamilton, Ontario. I had just finished having a medical procedure, and as was my habit, I was walking the labyrinth in the small courtyard beside the parking lot. Two people came out and were watching me. I asked the visitors if they would like me to explain what I was doing. When they approached me, one of them pulled her mask down and it was June. She told me she had been admitted to the hospital involuntarily the day after we had talked and had

been there for the last 4 weeks against her will. She sobbed as she reported that she hadn't left her room to go outside once - until that day.
She asked me to talk to the nurse who had accompanied her and share with her that June's mental health was supported by access to nature. I did. The nurse lamented that there was not enough staff to accommodate June's needs.
June asked me if I would use my research to help make sure that psychiatric inpatients are granted more access to the outdoors.
I made a promise that day.
I will do my best to advocate for June.

Access to NBT is limited and is rarely offered in publicly available mental health treatment facilities. Even when access to outdoor environments is available, patient access is limited by lack of staffing and patient safety protocols that restrict outdoor access. For example, St. Joseph's Hospital in downtown Hamilton, Ontario, has little outdoor space, except for a small garden out front and a labyrinth located in a mostly concrete courtyard on the grounds. Labyrinths are geometric patterns that are often used for meditation and are a tool that would greatly support patients, staff and visitors. In talking with staff, they are unaware of its potential for supporting mental health and spiritual care. There are no signs posted near the labyrinth that guide its use. One of the projects that I will be engaging in this year will be to speak to someone at the hospital about running educational workshops with staff about the potential for using this space for self-care and engagement with patients. I also intend to encourage the hospital to add signage that shares the meaning of the labyrinth and its potential for use.

As I consider future directions for this research, I am already starting a new community-based participatory art project to increase awareness about how we can be more respectful and responsible while spending time in nature. As I walk and talk with

clients, I notice so much litter on the ground. Plastic bottle caps, in particular, are a constant source of that litter. I will be requesting community members (potentially the Aldershot High School community) to join me in the collection process of these bottle caps over the next few months and over the winter I will create a large mosaic mandala made from these bottle caps. This art piece will represent the possibilities when the agency of the bottle caps becomes entangled with human agencies. The bottle caps, the community and I will collaborate to co-create an art piece that will communicate the need to be more mindful, respectful and response-able with the more-than-human world and the possibilities for the bottle caps to co-constitute possibilities for change.

I also hope to run more experiential workshops for the McMaster Department of Family Medicine's first and second-year resident trainee groups in the spring of 2025, where I will now include a posthuman perspective to my presentation on NBT and discuss the importance of interconnectedness, healing reciprocity and the benefits of liberating our wildness.

I will continue to play my pennywhistle with love and gratitude for the more-than-human world.

8.2: Final Thoughts

According to the McMaster School of Social Work philosophy (2024),

> *"Critical' social work practice and leadership recognize and attempt to address the historical and social inequities that cause (or make worse) individual, family and community troubles. Critical approaches also recognize the contradictions and harms of social work and social policies."*
>
> *(retrieved online: https://socialwork.mcmaster.ca/about/#philosophy)*

I feel unsettled that my research did not fully attend to addressing the historical (and present) social inequities about access to nature and land. I have felt challenged throughout this inquiry by the tensions of being an uninvited settler on land that has been stolen and commodified for colonial, capitalist, and corporate greed and enjoying the privilege of having access to the land for my work. Researching and writing about how the more-than-human world is so important to the physical and mental health of humans has made all the clearer the trauma experienced by Indigenous peoples because of the forced displacement from their ancestral lands. I have wanted to include more in this paper about Indigenous worldviews and how much this planet needs to shift into a new relationship with our more-than-human world by embracing Indigenous knowledges and ways of living with nature "as kin" (Kimmerer, 2013). The CASW (2024) Code of Ethics calls for social workers to promote Indigenous worldviews. But as one of my participants shared, we don't walk into another's home uninvited and expect them to make us tea without being invited. I feel similarly about this study. If this inquiry had led me onto a path where I was invited to learn and share Indigenous worldviews and teachings directly from Indigenous community members, then this inquiry would have gone in another direction. This paper has been created through stories; mine and the interview participants. It's not truth nor is it knowledge. It is written from the perspective of five white female-identified humans who all share a calling to be in service to and hold space for others. We feel most fortified to do that by incorporating the more-than-human world in that endeavour. This paper is about how I learned to give up the quest for answers and instead question everything, and how to find peace in the unsettled social work ethic that I embraced. This was a challenge on many levels.

I questioned how I could, with integrity, promote the benefits of 'nature-based therapy' when it is accessible only to a mostly white, privileged few. I questioned my identities as a social worker and psychotherapist when those titles created an illusion for people that I hold specialized knowledge/power that will 'help' them. And it is an illusion. Like Rossiter (2011), I contend that upholding and promoting the idea that I can

‘help’ anyone with social work knowledge is violence. I do a disservice to others if I advise them. I cannot know the path of anyone. But when I am invited to hold space for others, I now have an embodied sense of knowing that I know nothing. I recognize that when I have been invited into someone's intimate emotional experience, I have been given a sacred response-ability for which I am immensely grateful and honoured. So, I no longer know what to call myself professionally. The terms, ‘social worker’, or ‘therapist’ feel so misaligned with what I hope to bring to my professional relationships. I am critical of the fact that the increased number of social workers entering the field of psychotherapy (including myself) has become a popular answer to the mental health crisis we are experiencing. I have thought a lot about why it is that we need to pay someone to hold a safe, nonjudgmental space in which to share and express our emotional distress. Lauren Berlant (2011), in her book *Cruel Optimism*, also questions this need for what they call “stranger intimacy” (p.45). This is the role I play in so many people's lives. I am a stranger to them in their everyday world, but I am invited into the intimacy of their inner emotional experiences for an hour every so often. I believe this is because we have become so disconnected from the conditioning of an individualist culture that we feel ‘wrong’ if we ask for support and we don’t believe we deserve it, making it hard to receive.

On the day that my daughter hit that tree, my first and most powerfully charged need was to share my fear and pain with my communities. Yet, I hesitated. I didn’t want to burden anyone or take up too much space with my pain. And then I trusted, and I reached out and the amount of support my family received was so huge and so unconditional. I noticed that I felt discomfort with all the love and support. I became curious, I meditated, and I asked for clarity. I reminded myself that when we choose to perceive trust over fear, life becomes more bearable and the capacity to imagine possibilities for something ‘otherwise’ grows.

Throughout this whole process, I have learned five major lessons:

1) Humility and not-knowing are superpowers.
2) It's ok to ask for support and it's ok to receive it.
3) We are never alone.
4) Love what is – trust will always bring you home to yourself.
5) Cultivate compassion for everything.

We are all of us, always doing our best with what we have when the body feels threatened. And when the body feels threatened, we have limited awareness and capacity to attend to the parts of us that sense threat consciously. But we can develop awareness and increase our capacities, so there is hope.

As a critical social worker, recognizing and focusing on the injustices in this reality fuels the desire for change. And that desire for change can sometimes feel all-consuming and overwhelming. Like Sisyphus pushing the boulder up the hill, desiring change can be exhausting and frustrating. I imagine that if you are reading this thesis, you share my desire for radical change, change that would eradicate suffering, oppression, inequities, hate, intolerance and violence in this world. And if you are like me, you feel the tensions in your privileges and feel called to make a difference. So, I end this paper with a quote that will hopefully do for you what it does for me: confuse, challenge, and perhaps provide hope for something better for all of us.

"Only when you are honouring the plane on which it is all totally perfect just the way it is, can you assume on the other plane the responsibility to change it; recognizing that the desire in you to change it is part of the perfection of it all."

(Ram Dass, 1974, on a lecture about social responsibility, Be Here Now Network, Episode 76, "Predicaments on the Path". Retrieved online: https://beherenownetwork.com/ram-dass...)

Appendices

Appendix A – Letter of Information and Consent

LETTER OF INFORMATION / CONSENT

Exploring Practitioner Perspectives on Nature-Based Therapies for Mental Health

Student Investigator:
Carolyn Ralph

School of Social Work
McMaster University
Hamilton, Ontario, Canada
(905) 379-9570
nardicj@mcmaster.ca

Faculty Supervisor:
Dr. Ann Fudge Schormans

School of Social Work
McMaster University
Hamilton, Ontario, Canada
(905) 525-9140 ext. 23790
fschorm@mcmaster.ca

Purpose of the Study:

This study is exploring the perspectives of mental health practitioners, who identify as nature-based therapists or who use nature in their practice. The research aims to better understand how and why practitioners are integrating nature into their practice, with clients. It is the hope that this qualitative study will contribute to a better understanding of the relationship between humans and the more- than -human world from a critical social work perspective.

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What will happen during the study?

You will be invited to participate in a 1-hour interview. This interview will ask questions about how and why you include nature in your practice and ask you to consider your connection to nature both professionally and personally.

Interviews will be conducted using a qualitative research approach, which means that the interview process will invite you to explore your personal experience and perceptions around nature-based interventions for mental health. Interviews will be held via the McMaster University Zoom platform. The interviews will be audio recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed for key themes.

I will be asking you questions about why you have chosen a nature-based practice, and/or how you incorporate nature into your practice, what has led you towards this practice, and how your personal history, education and prior work experience has lent itself towards your choice to become a nature-based therapist.

Potential Harms, Risks or Discomforts

Your participation in this study is voluntary and you may remove yourself from the study at any time. You can decline answering any or all questions. If you choose to withdraw from the study, there will be no negative consequences for you from McMaster University.

There are minimal risks for research participants. You may find yourself sharing stories that are emotional, for example, the difficulties that some of your clients might have faced and how this might have affected you. You will be offered a resource list to access for emotional support. The questions are designed to allow you the opportunity to share some of your experiences and knowledge of nature-based therapy or how nature is incorporated into your practice. You do not need to answer questions that you do not want to answer or that make you feel uncomfortable.

Letter of Information/Consent Form (Version date: November 2022)

Direct quotations may be used for emphasis in the 'Findings' section of the thesis. You will be asked for consent to use your direct quotations. You will be given the opportunity to read the final transcripts before the start of the analysis and may have any potential identifiers or parts of the transcripts removed and you can request that direct quotations not be used.

While your privacy may be compromised in the stories that you share, your information will bed e-identified using pseudonyms of your choice and you will be given the final say as to what parts of your stories are included in the final edit of the research thesis.

Potential Benefits

The research will not benefit you directly. It is my hope that what is learned because of this study will help us to better understand how the relationship between humans and the natural world may support mental health outcomes and inform social work education, practice, and research. This project may contribute to the relevant literature, support changes in social policy, and/or social work curriculum development. The research project will contribute to the completion of my master's degree in social work.

Confidentiality:

You are participating in this study confidentially.

Every effort will be made to protect your confidentiality and privacy. I will not use your name or any information that would allow you to be identified. However, we are often identifiable through the stories we tell. Please keep this in mind in deciding what to share in the interview.

The interviews will take place in person or via Zoom, at your convenience and will be audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.

If you decide to participate via McMaster's Zoom platform, please note that this is an externally hosted cloudbased service. Additional security features will be used like the use of a 'waiting room' and passcode entry. Whilst this service is approved for collecting data in this study by the McMaster Research Ethics Board, there is a small risk with any platform such as this of data collected on external servers falling outside the research team's control. Please discuss with me if you have any concerns. You may also contact my supervisor Dr. Ann FudgeSchormans at fschorm@mcmaster.ca. Please see the Zoom privacy policy https://zoom.us/privacy.

Information kept on a computer will be protected by a password and transferred to OneDrive for storage, which is password protected. Once the study is complete, and with your permission, the data, without identifying information, will be maintained on OneDrive for a period of three months post-thesis defense (December 2023) so that I can prepare a brief summary of the study results should you wish to receive them. If you wish to have a summary of the results, they will be emailed to you.

The results of this study will be presented as partial fulfillment towards the completion of a master's in social work (MSW) degree. The findings may also be published in peer reviewed journals or presented at conferences to share the learning from the study with a broader audience.

Incentive/Payment:

You will be given an honorarium in the form of a $25 Starbucks gift card, which can be delivered via email. Please note that should you wish to withdraw from the study for any reason, you will still receive your honorarium.

Participation and Withdrawal:

Participation in this study is voluntary. If you decide to be part of the study, you can stop (withdraw) from the interview for whatever reason, even after giving consent or part-way through the study, up to August 1st, 2023. You may simply tell me of your wish to withdraw via email or phone. If you decide to withdraw, there will be no consequences for you. In cases of withdrawal, any data you have provided will be destroyed unless you indicate otherwise. If you do not want to answer some of the questions you do not have to, but you can still be in the study. You will still receive your honorarium if you decide to withdraw.

How do I find out what was learned in this study?

If you would like a brief summary of the results, please let me know how you would like it sent to you (email or regular mail).

Questions about the Study: If you have questions or need more information about the study itself, you may contact me at:

Carolyn Ralph nardicj@mcmaster.ca
905-379-9570

You may also contact my supervisor, Dr. Ann Fudge-Schormans with any questions or concerns at: fschorm@mcmaster.ca or 905-525-9140 ext. 23790.

This study has been reviewed by the McMaster Research Ethics Board and received ethics clearance. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a participant or about the way the study is conducted, please contact:

McMaster Research Ethics Office
Telephone: (905) 525-9140 ext. 23142

E-mail: mreb@mcmaster.ca

CONSENT

*

I have read the information presented in the information letter about a study being conducted by Carolyn Ralph of McMaster University.
I have had the opportunity to ask questions about my involvement in this study and to receive additional details I requested.
I understand that if I agree to participate in this study, I may withdraw from the study at any time or up until August 1st, 2023.
I have been given a copy of this form.
I agree to participate in the study.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Name of Participant (Printed) _____

Consent Questions:

Would you like a summary of the study results? If yes, where should we send them (email)? Yes / No

_____

Do you agree with audio recording? Yes / No

Do you agree to the use of direct quotations from your interview in the "Findings" section of the thesis?

Yes / No

Appendix B – Oral Consent

Study Title:
Exploring Practitioner Perspectives on Nature-Based Therapies for Mental Health

Oral Consent Script Introduction:

Hello. I'm Carolyn Ralph. I am conducting research about practitioner perspectives on nature based therapies for mental health. This interview is part of my master's thesis at McMaster University's School of Social Work in Hamilton, Ontario. I'm working under the supervision of Dr. Ann Fudge Schormans of McMaster's department of McMaster's School of Social Work.

Thank you for your interest in participating in my research.

Have you had time to read the Letter of Information I sent you?

Great, then I would like to take a moment to review some main points from the Letter of Information before we continue.

You will be invited to participate in a 1-hour interview. This interview will ask questions about how and why you include nature in your practice and ask you to consider your connection to nature both professionally and personally.

The interview process will invite you to explore your personal experience and perceptions around nature-based interventions for mental health. Interviews will be held via the McMaster University Zoom platform. With your permission, the interviews will be audio recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed for key themes. Once this is done (within 1-2 months post interview), you may be asked to provide additional feedback prior to completion, in the form of a follow-up email, phone call or Zoom meeting that will be no longer than 30 minutes. This will be voluntary, and you may decline this option at any time.

I will be asking you questions about why you have chosen a nature-based practice, and/or how you incorporate nature into your practice, what has led you towards this practice, and how your personal history, education and prior work experience has lent itself towards your choice to become a nature-based therapist.

Your participation in this study is voluntary.
If you do not want to answer some of the questions you do not have to, but you can still be in the study.

You can decide to stop at any time, even part-way through the interview for whatever reason.
If you decide to stop during the interview, I will ask you how you would like me to handle the data collected up to that point, whether returning it to you, destroying it or using the data collected up to that point.
You can ask to remove your data from the study at any time.
Your data will be collected using pseudonyms for anonymity purposes.
This study has been reviewed and cleared by the McMaster Research Ethics Board.

Do you have any questions, or do you want me to go over any study details again?

Consent questions:

Do you agree to participate in this study?

If yes,
Would you like a copy of the study results? If yes, where should we send them (email, mailing address)?
How would you like to receive your incentive? (Emailed e-gift card)
Do you agree with audio recording?
Do you agree to allow direct quotes from your interview transcriptions to be used in the "Findings" section of the finished thesis?

Thank you for your time.

Appendix C – Email Script

Study Title*:*

Exploring Practitioner Perspectives on Nature-Based Therapies for Mental Health

Hello. My name is Carolyn Ralph, and I am conducting research about nature-based therapies for mental health. This research is part of my Master of Social Work (MSW) at McMaster University's School of Social Work in Hamilton, Ontario Canada. I am working under the supervision of Dr. Ann Fudge-Schormans of McMaster's School of Social Work.

The aim of the proposed study is to engage with mental health practitioners, who identify as nature-based therapists, to learn how they perceive their experiences of offering nature-based therapy for mental health in private practice. For example, why they have been drawn towards a nature-based practice, how has their prior education and previous work experience informed their choice of practice, and what have they perceived as having value for their clients (and themselves) by choosing to adopt a nature-based practice. From a critical social work perspective, this research intends to garner deeper understanding of how mental health practitioners' experiences of offering nature-based therapies might inform future possibilities for social work education, research, and practice that are more inclusive of holistic approaches to mental health support. It is the hope of this study to contribute to an increased

understanding of the relationship between humans and the more-than-human world, especially within social work practice, education, and research.

For the purposes of this study, the definition of 'nature-based therapies' will be broad and inclusive, but in general, nature therapy involves a trained, supportive professional, like a therapist, in a green (outdoor) environment, appreciating and exploring nature. Some examples of nature-based therapies include the following: walk-and-talk therapy, forest bathing

(Shinrin Yoku), wilderness /adventure therapy, animal-assisted therapy, horticultural therapy (gardening/farming), star gazing, mindful walking, therapeutic animism, outdoor ecstatic

dancing/music. It is hoped that this research may contribute to the existing literature and offer valuable perspectives toward alternatives to conventional mental health treatment models.

You are being invited to participate in an interview that will take approximately 60 minutes for which you will receive a $25 Starbucks gift card. The study will take place on a McMaster University Zoom platform.

For the full details of the study, please read the attached Letter of Information.

I would like to thank you in advance for your time and consideration.

I will send you a one-time follow-up reminder in a week.

If you have any questions, please contact:

Carolyn Ralph
nardicj@mcmaster.ca

Dr. Ann Fudge-Schormans
fschorm@mcmaster.ca

This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance from the McMaster Research Ethics Board.

Appendix D – Interview Question Guide

Interview Questions

Exploring Practitioner Perspectives on Nature-Based Interventions for Mental Health

Carolyn Ralph
McMaster School of Social Work

.

Information about these interview questions*: These sample questions offer you an idea of what I would like to learn about your perspectives on nature-based therapy/incorporating nature for mental health.*
Interviews will be one-to-one and will be open-ended (not just "yes or no" answers). Because of this, the exact wording may change a little. Sometimes I will use other short questions to make sure I understand what you told me or if I need more information when we are talking such as: "So, you are saying that …?), to get more information ("Please tell me more?"), or to learn what you think or feel about something ("Why do you think that is…?").

1)What is 'nature' to you? How do you define it?

2) What are some of your personal experiences with nature?

3) Why have you been drawn towards a nature-based practice?

4) What value do you perceive it to hold for your clients (and yourself)?

5) How has your prior education and previous work experience informed your choice of practice?

5) What is your background in mental health?

7) Is there a story about working with a client in nature that holds meaning for you?

Interview Guide (Version Date: March 2023) Page 1 of 1

Appendix E – My Bird Story

(shared with EB for their Anthology of Bird Stories)

"If a blue jay crosses your path, it's generally a sign that you're on the right track and that you should continue on your current path.
This may happen at a time when you're at a crossroads or you're uncertain whether you're heading in the right direction. Take the appearance of a blue jay as a positive confirmation to keep doing what you're doing." (birdwatchbuzz.com)

Last year I decided to transition from my indoor job as a mental health practitioner and start seeing my clients in the forest. It was a change that held a sense of uncertainty even though I felt so directed towards it.

I am privileged to have access to a forest trail close to my home and during the pandemic, I would walk the trails daily, to heal myself and release some of the 'heaviness' of holding space for the fear that others were experiencing. We were all feeling fear and facing the challenges of adapting to a life post-Covid - where we were increasingly divided over politics and worldviews.

I started to find it increasingly difficult to bring myself inside a dark office all day, and so when I decided to start walking the trails with my clients, birds started to show up regularly as 'co-therapists' but not just for my clients. They started communicating with me. Or maybe they were always communicating, but the difference was that now I began to listen.

The trails are popular with humans, mostly because of the many songbirds and water birds that have made this forest their home. Most of these birds have been tamed by human interactions with food. It is not unusual to have chickadees, nuthatches, redwing blackbirds and even an occasional downy woodpecker or cardinal alight itself on a human hand for seed. But the bluejay, while interactive and curious, never seems willing to make that intimate connection - until the day one did, but not for food.

One day, I was walking the trail, and my attention was drawn towards a loud and curious bluejay who was seemingly tagging along with me. It was landing on branches, always about 5 steps ahead, looking at me and calling out now and then. I sat down on a bench to have a stretch and some water and as I stretched my head back, the jay stationed

itself on a branch not twelve inches away from my face. It cocked its head to lock eyes with me, first, one side then the other, and I mirrored the gesture playfully. I struggled with the issue of feeding the wildlife, and so I had no seed and told it so, half expecting it to understand the song of my human language and choose to leave. I momentarily struggled with what I expected to be a transactional moment of rejection - I would deny the offering of seed and it would recognize that I had nothing of value and leave me for another human with food (hmm…where else had this experience of transactional relationships around my value and expectations of rejection been showing up in my life?) But the jay surprised me and flipped the narrative. It stayed. For a while. And we sat there, connecting eye to eye to eye to eye and spoke and sang to one another. I shared my feelings about how thankful I felt to be with it, in the authentic and loving curiosity of each other, and I pondered this relationship that had no tangible transactional value - for the jay, in terms of easy nutrition, or myself, in terms of an intimate moment of touch and physical connection with bird energy. I just sat in that energy, basking in the connection we were sharing, with intense gratitude, and an ineffable quality of clarity and awareness that felt like 'one-ness', filled my soul. After what seemed like an hour, (but on the clock time was more likely about three minutes), another human with a dog arrived on the path and the jay was distracted away. The other humans had been noticing our connection while they had been walking toward us and commented on the interaction with wonder and delight. While a part of me was sad that my moment with the Jay had ended, I was also validated by a 'witness' to the incredibly special moment I had just experienced with the Jay.

For the rest of the season, the bluejay would always seem to find me and we would travel together from a distance. Once, a client commented that she thought we were being followed by a jay and wondered if it was possible that it was the same jay that was with us throughout, or if there were many on the trail and it just appeared as though we had one 'special friend'. She said she wanted to google what it meant to see a blue jay, when she got home. I didn't question ever that it was indeed *my* bluejay friend, but I suppose that's part of the gift of that relationship. The possibility of a relationship with a

wild bird seemed hard to believe for my client. And yet, outside of the constraints of the 'box,' that was my former office, it seemed so natural that I was having a relationship with a wild bluejay.

Even before I sat down to a computer to search "What does it mean when a bluejay crosses your path?", I intuitively knew I was right where I was supposed to be.

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