

Kudzu Bodies: The Intersection Between Kudzu and Queerness

Evie Horton

Bachelors of Fine Art: Concentration in Sculpture
The University of North Carolina at Asheville
One University Heights
Asheville, North Carolina 28804 USA

Faculty Advisors: Jackson Martin, Leisa Rundquist, Ph.D., Louise Deroualle, Eric Tomberlin, Megan Wolfe, Carrie Tomberlin, Tamie Beldue, Matt West, Suzie Dittenber, Robert Dunning, Brent Skidmore, Rob Anderson

Abstract

Whether crawling through brush, enveloping roadsides or converting once recognizable landscapes into a mass of green, Kudzu has become infamous as the example of an "invasive" Southern Appalachian plant species. Kudzu (known as *Kuzu* in Japan), however, is unaware of its actions and only does what all plants do...survive. Dr. Reid Bertone-Johnson, a landscape professor at Smith College, proposed a binary of invasive and native species. This binary automatically places plants that are not originally from this landscape, such as Kudzu, as bad without acknowledging the historical uses and context of the plant. The hate and backlash of Kudzu—the disregard for its historical uses, medicinal purposes, and its edibility—is conveyed in American society's rejection of it being used for these purposes. This artwork and research argue that this maligned plant is reflective of how queerness is treated in American society. Similar to Kudzu, queerness is seen as something to be eradicated, as dangerous, and something that is a nuisance that prevents society from promoting heteronormativity. *Kudzu Bodies: The Intersection Between Kudzu and Queerness* utilizes Kudzu as a metaphor in this sculptural body of work. The sculptures and research align the historical background of Kudzu as a fiber and its treatment as a so-called invasive plant in America, an analysis and application of queer art and queer theory. This body of work includes many forms of Kudzu weavings that showcase the plant's versatility as well as

its ability to queer its textile materiality. Whether the Kudzu weavings are engulfing the rigid steel forms, or cascading in a network of fishnets, the work disrupts space and defies the normalities of weaving.

1. Introduction

Kudzu is notoriously known as ‘the plant that ate the South.’ Commonly seen on roadsides, draping its vines over the landscape as an all-encompassing blanket, Kudzu is often used as *the* example of an ‘invasive’ species. Its vines create ambiguous shapes as it climbs and covers the trees and hillsides (Fig. 1). The history of Kudzu is just as complex as the feelings American society has over the plant’s existence. Dr. Reid Bertone-Johnson, a professor of landscape studies at Smith College, works to dissolve the binary of “invasive” versus “native” species. “Why are we putting all this blame on the plants,” he asked, “why are we targeting these species that are only trying to do what they are naturally supposed to do: survive?”¹ He shifted this polarity of invasive and native to talking about how most people assign native species to species that are not even from that environment, but are actually from Europe. Dr. Bertone-Johnson’s argument illuminates “invasive” and “native” as a binary that condemns what should stay in the landscape, versus what should not. *Kudzu Bodies: The Intersection Between Kudzu and Queerness* focuses specifically on how queerness is treated in American society similarly to how Kudzu is treated. Queerness is a threat to the structure of heteronormativity. Both queerness and Kudzu are deemed by society as invasive, dangerous, and something that society attempts to eradicate. This paper will explore the complex history of Kudzu in the United States, its presence globally and how it became known as an invasive species. This paper will also delve into the various understandings of queerness, how queerness is evident through artmaking practices, as well as the parallel treatment of Kudzu and queerness in American society. By using Kudzu as a metaphor for queerness, the way queerness is viewed by society is illuminated.

2. Queerness: Seen as The Societal Nuisance

Queer is an umbrella term that encompasses the larger LGBTQIA2S+ community.² The term ‘queer’ is not confined to either sexuality or gender, but is

¹ Dr. Reid Bertone-Johnson (Professor of Landscape Studies at Smith College) in discussion with the author, November 2020.

² LGBTQIA2S+ is an acronym used to describe the identities that align with the queer community. The acronym stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer,

inclusive of all identities that do not follow cisgender heteronormativity. Queerness is not just a term to describe both sexuality and gender, it can also describe a praxis. Queerness challenges the norms, systems, and constructs that are in place by society, as scholar Sara Ahmed writes, “any nonalignment produces a queer effect”.³ Leading a queer life means rejecting cisgender heteronormativity and questioning social constructs. It also means not conforming to societal standards for gender, marriage, and the tradition that the nuclear family is the only support system one can have.

Historically and presently, there have been many attempts to eradicate queerness. The US AIDS epidemic caused high mortality rates, specifically within the queer community, and in the “absence of any effective response from the American government, AIDS became a national crisis and, ultimately, a global pandemic”.⁴ In 1993, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) put into effect a decency clause which sought to censor homoeroticism in art. Recently, homophobic and transphobic laws have been passed or attempted to be passed in the US, such as the infamous North Carolina ‘bathroom bill’ or House Bill 2 which, thankfully, was later repealed. House Bill 2 states that public spaces “shall require every multiple occupancy bathroom or changing facility to be designated for and only used by persons based on their biological sex,” therefore discriminating against transgender and queer folks who are not the gender they were assigned at birth, or are outside of the binary.⁵ In 2023, the Tennessee General Assembly passed Senate Bill 3 which prohibits “male and female impersonators” in other words, drag performers, to entertain in public spaces. Among “adult cabaret” performers listed on Senate Bill 3, drag performers can receive a felony charge.⁶ Also in 2023 in North Carolina, Senate Bill 49 requires public schools to notify parents when their child has decided to go by a different name or pronouns. Senate Bill 49 also states, “Instruction on gender identity, sexual activity, or sexuality shall not be included in the curriculum provided in grades kindergarten through fourth grade,

Intersex, Asexual, Two-Spirit and the plus sign indicates that there are many more identities that are included in the queer community.

³ Sara Ahmed, “Orientations: Towards a Queer Phenomenology,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 12, no. 4 (2006): 557.

⁴ Catherine Lord and Richard Meyer. *Art & Queer Culture*, (New York: Phaidon Press, 2013), 147.

⁵ General Assembly, North Carolina, House Bill 2, “An Act to Provide for Single-Sex Multiple Occupancy Bathroom and Changing Facilities in Schools and Public Agencies and to Create Statewide Consistency in Regulation of Employment and Public Accommodations”, (General Assembly of North Carolina, ncleg.gov, 2016), Section 1.3, Article 81, <https://www.ncleg.gov/Sessions/2015E2/Bills/House/PDF/H2v3.pdf>.

⁶ General Assembly, Tennessee. Senate Bill 3, “An Act to Amend Tennessee Code Annotated, Relative to Adult-Oriented Performances,” (capitol.tn.gov, Tennessee General Assembly, 2023) Title 7, Chapter 51, Part 14, <https://wapp.capitol.tn.gov/apps/BillInfo/default.aspx?BillNumber=SB0003>.

regardless of whether the information is provided by school personnel or third parties.”⁷ Society’s attempt to eradicate queerness is alive and well, as it has been historically. Similar to Kudzu, queerness faces constant hatred through laws, physical and structural violence, and health care systems that do not prioritize the health and wellbeing of the queer community. Being queer is to exist in direct opposition to heteronormativity. Generally speaking, queerness is being attacked; however, queer folks who are not white, able-bodied, or cis-gender are being hit the hardest.

3. Kudzu: Society Views As Nature’s Nuisance

Kudzu is used for a variety of purposes ranging from medicine to fabrics. Kudzu is found in various parts of Asia such as China, Japan, Taiwan, and India. It is a part of the legume family, meaning it is related to plants such as beans and peanuts. It is also nitrogen fixing, therefore it restores nitrogen back into the soil, an element essential for plant growth. In Japan, Kudzu was used for fabrics and underwent a complex process in order to become fabric. The vine is generally broken down into four major parts: the outer bark, the smooth bast fibers, the rough core, and the spongy pith. The bark is stripped from the bast fiber of the vines and cut down into strands, which is the most flexible part of the vine. Once woven, the fabric has a glossy sheen, similar to that of silk and appears naturally as an ivory or gold color.⁸ The woody vines can be used to make baskets. The starchy Kudzu roots can be dried and powdered to use for cooking. Extracts from the root as well as the flowers are used for their anti-inflammatory properties. They are also used as medicine to cure hangovers, common colds, and much more.⁹

Kudzu was not always viewed as detrimental to landscapes in the United States. In fact, in the late 19th century and early 20th century, it was deemed a very desirable plant to have in one’s garden. The first known time Kudzu came into this country was at the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition in 1876 where representatives from Japan showcased the vine. The vine was presented again at the New Orleans Exposition in 1883. Kudzu was encouraged as a decorative plant to provide shade as it grew fast and abundantly. Thomas Hogg, an American horticulturist, also had the vine delivered to his

⁷ General Assembly, North Carolina. Senate Bill 49, “Parents’ Bill of Rights” (North Carolina General Assembly, ncleg.gov, 2023), Lines 12-14, <https://www.ncleg.gov/BillLookUp/2023/H187>.

⁸ Aoyagi, Akiko and William Shurtleff. *The Book of Kudzu: A Culinary and Healing Guide* (Published by Akiko Aoyagi and William Shurtleff, 1977), 72.

⁹ Anna E. Eskridge and Derek H. Alderman. “Alien Invaders, Plant Thugs, and the Southern Curse: Framing Kudzu as Environmental Other through Discourses of Fear.” *Southeastern Geographer*, 50, no. 1 (2010): 113, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26225593>.; Akiko Aoyagi and William Shurtleff, 10-11.

brother in New York City who ran a garden shop while Hogg worked in Japan. From 1910-1935, Kudzu was used as a feed alternative for livestock, as promoted by Charles and Lillie Pleas.¹⁰

Soil in the south was depleted of nutrients from the monoculture of cotton. This crop requires a lot of soil nutrients in order to grow, but does not replace those nutrients back into the soil.¹¹ Cover crops should be used in between seasons in order to replenish key ingredients such as nitrogen, back into the soil. From 1917-1953, Kudzu filled this need and was used as a cover crop and for erosion control on southern farms. It was introduced to public lands by the Civilian Conservation Corps during the New Deal. Not only was Kudzu viewed as the answer to shade coverage, nitrogen fixation, and erosion control, an early 20th century Kudzu advocate Channing Cope argued that it was, “a way to heal a ‘weak and sickly’ southern landscape.”¹² Cope owned a farm outside of Atlanta, Georgia and in 1943, Cope founded the Kudzu Club of America where other Kudzu lovers could connect. Many Georgians came to appreciate the so-called invasive plant so much that they held rallies and festivals and even hosted “Kudzu Queen” contests. Some Kudzu folks felt so attached to the plant that they changed their names to having “Kudzu” be a part of it, such as “Kudzu Jones.”¹³ Kudzu became known for saving the South from complete soil degradation and restored people’s hope in the land. This plant not only has cultural significance in Japan, but also in the South as it became a global entity.

By 1970, Kudzu had spread and taken home in the South. Thriving in the Southern climate, it grew and expanded much faster than anticipated, therefore, the United States Department of Agriculture (“USDA”) labeled Kudzu as a common weed.¹⁴ In the 1980s, the widespread praise of Kudzu had dissipated. The vine was labeled as something to get rid of rather than to be planted. In 1997, Kudzu was voted a Federal Noxious Weed by the U.S. Congress. However, “Kudzu’s alleged ecological devastation is anecdotal and lacks any quantitative backing”.¹⁵ The efforts to eradicate Kudzu from the United States’ landscapes spread faster than the vine itself.

The policies to erase Kudzu include mowing the vine and applying herbicides such as glyphosate.¹⁶ Glyphosate is a chemical that has been linked to damaging other elements of the environment, such as monarch butterfly habitats. When glyphosate is

¹⁰ Eskridge and Alderman, 112.

¹¹ Eskridge and Alderman, 113.

¹² Ibid, 113.

¹³ Akiko Aoyagi and William Shurtleff, 14.

¹⁴ Eskridge and Alderman, 113

¹⁵ Eskridge and Alderman, 114

¹⁶ North Carolina Forest Service, “Invasive Species Leaflet: Pueraria montana (Kudzu),” (NC Dept. of Transportation, North Carolina Forest Service, 2010), <https://www.ncforestservice.gov/publications/Forestry%20Leaflets/IS08.pdf>, 2.

sprayed, it can be picked up by wind or water and spread to multiple environments.¹⁷ While the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) claims that the link between glyphosate and cancer in humans is inconclusive, a study published by the International Journal of Molecular Sciences concludes that glyphosate is strongly associated with neurological damage in humans, rodents, fish, and invertebrates.¹⁸ Even though Kudzu can be used for multiple purposes, the efforts to get rid of the plant can result in harm to other organisms in the environment.



Figure 1: Kudzu vines covering trees off of Broadway Road in Asheville, North Carolina, 2022.

The terms used to describe Kudzu are extremely negative and loaded. Such use of language “extends beyond its ability to shape reality; it can also be used as an ‘instrument of power.’”¹⁹ The decision for Kudzu to be deemed as dangerous only gave people permission to control it. To classify the plant as ‘invasive’ ignores Kudzu’s complex existence within ecosystems and provides one clear answer to the question of whether or not Kudzu should remain. When Missouri wanted to keep Kudzu outside of

¹⁷ United States Environmental Protection Agency, “Withdrawal of the Glyphosate Interim Registration Review Decision,” (EPA, Office of Chemical Safety and Pollution Prevention, 2022),

<https://www.regulations.gov/document/EPA-HQ-OPP-2009-0361-14447>, 2-3.

¹⁸ United States Environmental Protection Agency, 3; Costas- Ferreira, Carmen, Rafael Durán and Lilian R. F. Faro, “Toxic Effects of Glyphosate on the Nervous System: A Systematic Review,” *International Journal of Molecular Sciences*, 23, no. 9, 4605 (21 Apr. 2022): 27, doi:10.3390/ijms23094605.

¹⁹ Eskridge and Alderman, 115

its borders, Missouri officials made sure that it stayed in its place, the South.²⁰ The Missouri government's language was anti-immigrant, nationalistic, and racially charged. Not only was Missouri afraid that a new plant would creep over its borders, but it illuminated how a plant that did not comply with American standards for plant growth became so threatening. In the context of Kudzu, the language we use to brand the plant—'invasive,' 'alien,' 'the plant that ate the south,' 'choking trees,' 'threatening,' 'terrorist'—expresses the larger socio-political fears of America. These labels and descriptions of Kudzu make it seem unnatural, similar to how queerness is labeled by religious and political groups in America. We would need to change the system in place in order for Kudzu to be managed on a large scale. Kudzu is a plant that is attempting to survive in the habitat that it took root in. It is unaware of the way it has shaped the landscape, it is unaware of our societal wants for plant behavior.

4. Queer Art

Queerness is expressed in a variety of forms, whether that be clothing, performance, or subject matter, queer people have found ways to represent their identities. Queer theory is the application of queerness to writing, ways of thinking, and art. In the context of art, queer theory can be reflected in, but is not limited to, the artist's subject matter, process, and material choice. Jesse Harrod describes their material choice as "inescapable," saying that, "material and technical histories are fundamental to [their] choices as a maker...The materials are stand-ins for political ideas, for people, for moments, for gender expressions" (Fig. 2).²¹ Sheila Pepe identifies queerness within her process, saying, "The way I crochet is messy...I think queers can identify with that in a certain way. And I mean queer in the way that we used it when we were kids- like, 'You're a weirdo.' It just so happens that in my life 'You weirdo' and 'You woman who loves women' became a part of the same thing" (Fig. 3).²² Using materials in an unconventional way as well as presenting the work that disrupts the standard of art making invokes queerness without explicitly using more obvious symbols of queerness such as the rainbow flag. The possibilities of applying queer theory to art are endless, and every intentional choice the artist makes shapes the work as queer.

²⁰ Eskridge and Alderman, 117.

²¹ John Chaich and Todd Oldman, *Queer Threads*, (New York: Exhibition at Leslie - Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art, January- May 2014, Ammo, 2017), vii.

²² Chaich and Oldman, vii.



Figure 2 (left): Harrod, Jesse. *Pensile Arrangement 2*. 2013, Image courtesy of the artist, Photo by Terry Brown. *Queer Threads*, by John Chaich and Todd Oldham, p. 43.

Figure 3 (right): Pepe, Sheila. *Girders and Fence*, 2005, Image courtesy of the artist, Photo by DJ Harris. *Queer Threads*, by John Chaich and Todd Oldham, p. 67.

5. Applying Queer Theory to Kudzu

Kudzu, a plant that has received a lot of backlash and is unwelcome in many landscapes, is reminiscent of how queerness is treated in the United States. Kudzu has a multitude of uses, however, the US does not recognize these benefits and is reluctant to change its treatment of the plant. Kudzu has no neat way of growing and does not comply with societal standards for plant etiquette in a landscape. Similar to queerness, Kudzu transforms landscapes into a new environment and interacts with the landscape differently than most other plants do. Sara Ahmed in *Orientations: Towards a Queer Phenomenology* describes how queerness is treated differently in public spaces because the “queer subject within straight culture hence deviates and is made socially present as a deviant.”²³ In other words, queer people are more likely to face negative attention than straight people because of their orientation away from heteronormativity. For example, a queer person who uses other pronouns that do not align with their assigned gender at birth and pronouns that are outside of the male/female binary will get more questions and comments versus a cis-gendered person. Having an identity questioned can cause someone to attempt to suppress it, or hide it from others. How

²³ Sara Ahmed, “Orientations: Towards a Queer Phenomenology,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 12, no. 4 (2006): 554.

bodies are treated in space affects how they will show up and interact with that space and the people around them. The queerness of Kudzu is also reflected in the way that it exists only in nature. There are no laws of nature, but the ones humans enforce onto it. Ahmed speaks of going against the norm can be frightening. “The hope of changing directions is always that we do not know where some paths may take us: risking departure from the straight and narrow, makes new futures possible, which might involve going astray, getting lost, or even becoming queer.”²⁴ Kudzu is a disruptor and strays from plants that grow neatly or are easily controllable by humans. Its inability to conform and its resilience is also evident in the queer community.

In *Felt Matters*, Jeanne Vaccaro reflects on Emmett Ramstad’s queer fiber works and acknowledges the versatility of fibers. While fibers are used to make clothing, Vaccaro illustrates more possibilities, “instead of imagining an outside for a supposed inside... fiber arts challenge the belief that being transgender is a condition of either interiority or exteriority.”²⁵ Fibers can capture the complexities of queerness because of its lack of restrictions. Processing Kudzu into fibers allows for more movement, flexibility, and highlights the already traditional uses for the plant. Kudzu vertically climbs trees and buildings, it horizontally weaves itself through bushes, and on top of brush, it grows subterranean, runners extending through the soil, and thus, has no straight orientation. The queerness of fibers and Kudzu is apparent in both its non-directionality and few limitations. In Emmett Ramstad’s series of *Becoming*, a body of work dedicated to the complex journey of transitioning, uses both abstract and representational materials. He believes that capturing the process of transitioning and the body “is not containable in a single unit.”²⁶ The combination of both representational and abstract references to the body invites both the physical and emotional to be present together rather than separately within the work.

6. Process

In the summer of 2022, I attended Arrowmont School of Craft located in Gatlinburg, Tennessee. During my time there, I worked in the housekeeping department in exchange for three weeks of classes. One of my classes was Queer Strategies for Textile Thinking taught by HH Hiassen. Amongst my packing, I forgot to pack an ‘identity object’ required for the class. HH encouraged me to take a walk outside to see if anything would catch my attention. I came across the hill near my dorm and stopped to view the Kudzu spilling over the hill. I ran back to the studio, grabbed a pair of scissors,

²⁴ Ahmed, 554.

²⁵ Jeanne Vaccaro, “Felt Matters,” *Women & Performance: a Journal of Feminist Theory* 20, no. 3 (2010): 254, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0740770X.2010.529245>.

²⁶ Vaccaro, 261.

and pulled up the vines. I came back into the studio and began to incorporate the vines into my weaving. Seeing Kudzu reminded me of North Carolina and brought me comfort. I appreciated its transformation of the landscape it was on and how no matter what was in the way, it continued to climb. My fellow classmates and instructor encouraged me to continue this new found relationship with Kudzu and to explore its possibilities. This class and first interaction with Kudzu as a material propelled me into my current body of work.

Kudzu Bodies: The Intersection Between Kudzu and Queerness is a series of mixed media sculptures that represent the queer experience both abstractly and representationally. This body of work incorporates both processed Kudzu into fibers, semi-processed Kudzu, and whole Kudzu vines in combination with steel, wood, and found objects. Queerness can not only be explored through the material choice of Kudzu and subject matter of the pieces, but also through the interaction between the Kudzu with the other materials and the unconventional, loose weaving techniques.

Kudzu is harvested from a local pesticide-free patch. The whole vines that are typically chosen for weaving are ones that grow subterranean, or are the 'runners' of the plant. Runners are typically better for weaving because of their thicker core and flexibility. The vines that are best used for bast fiber processing are those that grow and climb on top of trees or on top of grass, usually poking out from the edge of a Kudzu formation. These vines are younger and are not woody. They are green, have short hairs, and often are the vines that have leaves stemming off of them. These vines are best for fiber processing because the epidermis and fiber layers—known as the bast fiber—have not yet fused as it does in older vines and can be more easily separated. Harvesting does take a lot of energy and requires getting comfortable with contorting one's body to the growth of the Kudzu formations. When harvesting the vines I try my best not to disturb the surrounding environment and work in cooperation with the vines to avoid further damage to the trees.

Once harvested, the vines are either processed to the desired thickness right away, stored to dry out and use for a later time, or put into buckets of water where they begin the retting process. Initially, I used a fiber processing technique that I developed through my own research and experimentation (Fig. 4). In order to process the vines, the ends were first beaten with a rubber mallet to split the fibers apart (Fig. 5-6). The outer layers of the vine were then removed from the spongy pith and brittle core. The inner bast fiber is flexible and once dried can emulate a silk-like sheen. The next layer from the inner bark is stronger and is made up of tiny fibrous hairs. Both layers are ideal for weaving and fishnet tying, however, the inner bark is better for tough Kudzu cord spinning.



Figure 4: Previous Kudzu fiber processing technique before Kudzu Camp, Kudzu vines soaking in bins of water, Sculpture Studio at UNC Asheville, 2023.



Figure 5 (left): Kudzu fiber processing, Sculpture Studio at UNC Asheville, 2023.

Figure 6 (right): Kudzu fiber processing: splitting, Sculpture Studio at UNC Asheville, 2023.

The best fiber processing that I use is a combination of the Japanese and Appalachian processing techniques that were learned at the annual Kudzu Camp in the summer of 2023, an event hosted by Kudzu Culture and Fiber House Collective. The camp took place on “Kudzu Mountain” in Marshall which was indeed, almost completely covered in Kudzu. The process begins with placing the young vines into five-gallon buckets where they will rot for five to ten days. The retting process is complete when a foul smell emerges from the buckets when opened and there is a decent amount of mold. The vines are taken out of the rotting buckets and rinsed off with water, washing

away any extra mold from the retting. The skin and pith are pinched off and out of the vines and into another bucket then rinsed with water again (Fig. 7). The bast fibers are then peeled off from the core, the core is now a brittle straw when the pith has been squeezed out. The fibers appear translucent when wet and they are rinsed for the final time. Once dry, the bast fibers turn a shiny, silver color (Fig. 8). Dry young vines can be made into fibers but this process requires a much longer retting time, possibly soaking in water for months, and has a much lower success rate.



Figure 7: Kudzu vines after the bucket retting, outer epidermis layer being pinched off, Kudzu Camp hosted by Kudzu Culture, Marshall, NC, July 2023.



Figure 8: Core and silky bast fibers drying out in the sun after the final rinse, Kudzu Camp hosted by Kudzu Culture, Marshall, NC, July 2023.



Figure 9: Bast fibers being woven on a loom with cotton warp, Kudzu Camp hosted by Kudzu Culture, Marshall, NC, July 2023.

The forms are created in collaboration with the concept and the Kudzu's natural way of bending. Forcing the Kudzu to conform to my imaginings would be forcing it to conform to the role I am projecting onto the Kudzu, thus confining it to a specific orientation and not upholding queerness. Including Kudzu's natural bumps, curves, breaks, and bends only adds to the validity of Kudzu and queerness. In *Chosen Family*, the Kudzu vines twist and turn around the welded steel house armature (Fig. 11). The thicker woven portions and the thinner loose vines create variety and interest when viewing the piece. When imagining Kudzu in its natural state as a vine that transforms and envelopes landscapes, I thought about places and spaces that felt unsafe to be queer in. The house structure is representative of the nuclear family. For me and many other queer folks, our chosen queer family is where unconditional support and understanding stems from. In this piece, Kudzu is essentially invading the traditional house structure, reclaiming it and transforming it, thus queering the concept of family which exists outside of the nuclear family structure.

The netting is symbolic of what it feels like to be queer. The shiny, silvery bast fibers create a precious and comforting feeling to the wearable performance piece, *Held and Confined: The Duality of Being Queer* (Fig. 12). Rougher fibers made from the core of the vine were also incorporated into the fishnet to not only add variety, but also emphasize the toughness and strength of queerness (Fig. 13). Netting both catches and traps, a duality that is evident in being queer in the United States. By embracing my queerness I feel not only held by my surrounding queer community and secure in my identity, but also trapped in the heteronormative society I live in. Wrapped in this queer duality, I performed and took still images from the film. These images show my body interacting with the fishnet which is representative of what it feels like to be queer (Fig. 14). Whether presented in bast fiber form or whole vines in this body of work, Kudzu disrupts the traditional symbols of spaces and places where heteronormativity is uplifted and takes up space the way queerness should.



Figure 11: *Chosen Family*, Kudzu vines, processed Kudzu fiber, steel, 2023.



Figure 12: *Held and Confined: The Duality of Being Queer*, fishnet weaving process, processed Kudzu fibers, 2023, UNC Asheville.



Figure 13: *Held and Confined: The Duality of Being Queer*, fishnet weaving process, processed Kudzu fibers, 2023, UNC Asheville.

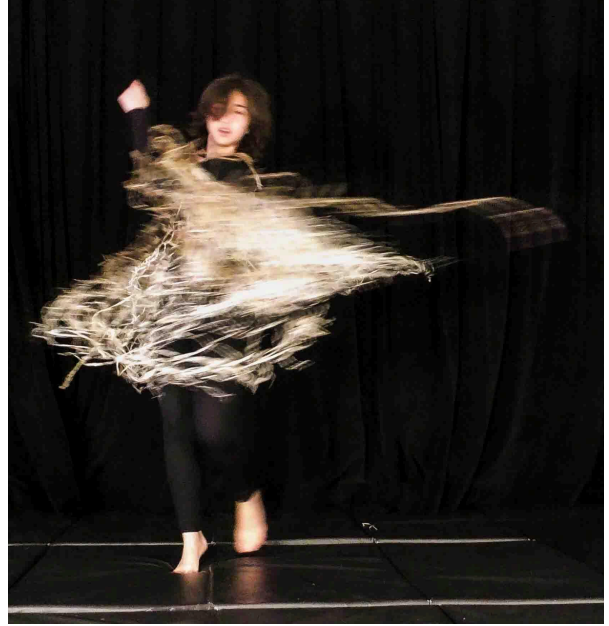




Figure 14: *Held and Confined: The Duality of Being Queer*, Processed Kudzu fibers, still images from film, 2024.

7. Conclusion

Queerness, like Kudzu, is boundless and implementing change in society. Its history as once a celebrated plant and now labeled as invasive exemplifies American society's rejection of what cannot be confined, such as queerness. Kudzu does not grow on a schedule that works for American society, does not grow in boundaries, or keep out of the way. It challenges how society wants nature to behave and conform to standards of this country. Our socio-political climate deems what is right and what is wrong and it historically and presently sees queerness as wrong and disruptive of social norms. Both queerness and Kudzu are natural and both are seen as destructive, dangerous and incapable of becoming a part of society. Kudzu will not change its behaviors, neither will queerness. Utilizing Kudzu as the main material in the sculptural body of work, *Kudzu Bodies: The Intersection Between Kudzu and Queerness*, demonstrates how, like queerness, Kudzu is very versatile. *Kudzu Bodies: The Intersection Between Kudzu and Queerness* illuminates the way the society treats Kudzu is related to the way it also treats queer people and those of other marginalized identities.

8. Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the Studio Art Faculty for their guidance throughout the Bachelors of Fine Arts Program as well as my research. I would also like to thank Dr.

Leisa Rundquist for her advice and support. The current Art History seniors and the students who have participated in the Bachelor of Fine Arts program from 2023-2024, for their critiques and revision suggestions. Kudzu Culture and Fiber House Collective for hosting Kudzu Camp, an accessible event to learn more about Kudzu fiber processing. Thank you to Amanda Simons for their suggestion of resources and advocacy of this project. Thank you to my friends and family for their encouragement and endless support. Thank you to the Black Mountain College Museum and Arts Center and the Journal for Black Mountain College Studies for uplifting this research and body of work.

9. References

1. Ahmed, Sara. "Orientations: Toward a Queer Phenomenology." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 12, no. 4 (2006): 543-574. *Duke University Press*. doi:10.1215/10642684-2006-002.
2. Aoyagi, Akiko and William Shurtleff. *The Book of Kudzu: A Culinary and Healing Guide*, Published by Akiko Aoyagi and William Shurtleff, 1977.
3. Chaich, John and Todd Oldham. *Queer Threads: Crafting Identity and Community*, Exhibition at Leslie - Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art, NY, January- May 2014, Ammo, 2017.
4. Costas- Ferreira, Carmen, Rafael Durán and Lilian R. F. Faro, "Toxic Effects of Glyphosate on the Nervous System: A Systematic Review," *International Journal of Molecular Sciences* 23, no. 9, (21 Apr. 2022): 1-37. *National Library of Medicine, National Institutes of Health*. doi:10.3390/ijms23094605.
5. Eskridge, Anna E., and Derek H. Alderman. "Alien Invaders, Plant Thugs, and the Southern Curse: Framing Kudzu as Environmental Other through Discourses of Fear." *Southeastern Geographer*, 50, no. 1, (2010): 110–29. *JSTOR*. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26225593>.
6. General Assembly, North Carolina. House Bill 187, "Equality in Education", *North Carolina General Assembly*, 2023. <https://www.ncleg.gov/BillLookUp/2023/H187>.
7. General Assembly, North Carolina, House Bill 2, "An Act to Provide for Single-Sex Multiple Occupancy Bathroom and Changing Facilities in Schools and Public Agencies and to Create Statewide Consistency in Regulation of

- Employment and Public Accommodations,” *North Carolina General Assembly*, 2016. <https://www.ncleg.gov/Sessions/2015E2/Bills/House/PDF/H2v3.pdf>.
8. General Assembly, North Carolina. Senate Bill 49, “Parents’ Bill of Rights”, *North Carolina General Assembly*, 2023. <https://www.ncleg.gov/BillLookup/2023/H187>.
 9. General Assembly, Tennessee. Senate Bill 3, “An Act to amend Tennessee Code Annotated”, *capitol.tn.gov*, 2023, *Tennessee General Assembly*, <https://wapp.capitol.tn.gov/apps/BillInfo/default.aspx?BillNumber=SB0003>.
 10. Lord, Catherine, and Richard Meyer. *Art & Queer Culture*, Phaidon Press, New York, 2013.
 11. “Making a Kudzu Basket.” *A Natural State*, *Knowitall.org*. EVT: Commission A Natural State. 2016. https://www.knowitall.org/sites/default/files/kiad7/kudzu_instr_reduced.pdf.
 12. North Carolina Forest Service. “Invasive Species Leaflet: Pueraria montana (Kudzu).” *NC Dept. of Transportation and North Carolina Forest Service*, 2010, <https://www.ncforestservice.gov/publications/Forestry%20Leaflets/IS08.pdf>.
 13. Tommey, Matt. “How to Weave a Basket with Kudzu: Climbers.” *Matt Tommey: Woven Sculpture from Nature*. Tommey Capital LLC. 2013. <https://www.matttommey.com/basket-weaving-techniques/how-to-weave-a-basket-with-kudzu-climbers>.
 14. United States Environmental Protection Agency. “Withdrawal of the Glyphosate Interim Registration Review Decision.” *EPA, Office of Chemical Safety and Pollution Prevention*, 2022. <https://www.regulations.gov/document/EPA-HQ-OPP-2009-0361-14447>.
 15. Vaccaro, Jeanne. “Felt Matters.” *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 20, no. 3, (2010): 253-266. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0740770X.2010.529245>.