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Green, Pink, and Lavender: Banishing Ecophobia through Queer Ecologies

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GREEN, PINK, AND LAVENDER

BANISHING ECOPHOBIA THROUGH QUEER ECOLOGIES

Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson, eds. *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010.

GRETA GAARD

Drawing on a range of queer and ecological theories rather than a single orthodox perspective, the thirteen essays in *Queer Ecologies* develop a strong argument for queering environmentalisms and greening queer theory, in three steps: challenging the heteronormativity of investigations into the 'sexuality' of nature, exploring the intersections between queer and ecological inflections of bio/politics (including spatial politics), and ultimately queering environmental affect, ethics, and desire. Clearly, notions of sexuality have shaped social constructions of nature, as seen in the familiar concepts and creation of wilderness, national and urban parks, and car camping. As the first book-length volume to establish the intersections of queer theory and environmentalisms at such depth, *Queer Ecologies* covers a broad range of topics—gay cruising in the parks, lesbian rural retreats, transgressive sexual behaviors among diverse species, literary and cultural narratives of queer/nature. It also establishes topics for future development, i.e., exploring the intersection of speciesism and heterosexism in queer ecologies, and developing a focus on the constitution of the non-white queer subject.

In 1995, when I was actively speaking and organizing in the U.S. Greens, a lesbian delegate from Colorado approached me with a dilemma:

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her state had put forth a constitutional amendment that would strip civil rights protections from gays, lesbians, and bisexuals. She felt passionate about environmental politics but feared for her life if this amendment passed. Where should she direct her political energy? Which part of her identity should she prioritize: her ecological self, or her lesbianism?

When progressive political movements fail to recognize the intersections of oppression, we lose political power: coalitions become less stable, and activists are forced to choose their “first emergency” while backgrounding other ethical and political commitments. In 2010, it’s no longer tolerable (if it ever was) to put one’s sexual identity “on hold” in order to work on environmental issues, and it will be no great achievement if queers gain full civil rights on a planet with few liveable areas due to climate change (where would we go for the honeymoon?). In *Queer Ecologies*, thirteen radical environmental scholars make clear the material and conceptual connections that confirm eco-queers won’t have to choose between ecology and sexuality, and neither will anyone else: these essays deal decisive blows to *ecophobia* and *erotophobia* alike.¹

Mortimer-Sandilands’ past decade of scholarship developing the intersections of queer eco-politics and ecocriticism has laid the theoretical groundwork for this volume, and many of the contributors acknowledge her work in their chapters. She and co-editor Erickson created the deeply feminist and democratic opportunity for the contributors to meet in Toronto to discuss the first drafts of their chapters, opening the editing process to a multi-directional plurality of dialogues that ensures there is less repetition and more cross-referencing, more collective theory-building among the chapters than readers expect from more hierarchically-edited volumes. Each chapter develops the book’s central aim of “queering ecology” and “greening queer politics” by demonstrating “the powerful ways in which understandings of nature inform discourses of sexuality...[and] understandings of sex inform discourses of nature” (2–3).

The introduction offers an excellent overview of the conceptual questions raised by eco-queer perspectives, and I can easily imagine assigning this 47-page chapter in a class on gender studies, ecocriticism, environmental politics, or queer theory. It establishes the need for this inquiry by providing a historical narrative of the ways that notions of sexuality have shaped social constructions of nature in the familiar concepts and creation of wilderness, national and urban parks, and car camping. Moreover,

it's enticing: who ever heard of the performance group Fuck For Forests, or eco-activists like the Lesbian Rangers, and their khaki-clad force of Eager Beavers? Of course we want to know more! Drawing on "a range of queer and ecological theories" rather a single orthodox perspective, the volume's introduction and essays develop the argument for queering environmentalisms and greening queer theory in three steps: challenging the heteronormativity of "investigations into the 'sexuality' of nature," exploring "the intersections between queer and ecological inflections of bio/politics (including spatial politics)," and ultimately queering "environmental affect, ethics, and desire" (30–31).

Heterocentrism charges queer sexualities with being "against nature," so the first step in a queer ecology requires reviewing the literature on non-human same-sex acts, and scrutinizing the definition of species boundaries. In this first section on "queer sex, queer animality," the frequency with which Bruce Bagemihl (1999), Noreen Giffney and Myra Hird (2008; Hird 2004a, 2004b), Donna Haraway (2004), and Joan Roughgarden (2004) are cited proves the eco-queer canon is already being formed. We begin with well-known feminist science studies scholar Stacy Alaimo reviewing the wealth of documented queer animal behaviors, "making sexual diversity part of a larger biodiversity" (55). Here, we learn that Norway has already hosted the first-ever Exhibition on Animal Homosexuality, aptly titled "Against Nature?" (2007) and displaying multiple sexual behaviors that challenge the heterosexist interpretation of same-sex activity between animals as anything but sex. Alaimo deftly points out the limitations of cultural criticism that casts "animal sex into the separate sphere of nature," at the same time that "scientific accounts of queer animal sex have rendered them too cultural, so as to render them not sexual" (62). Like human animals, other animal species are both biological and cultural beings: if not, how shall we explain simultaneously sexual and cultural facts that "many primates not only use, but manufacture, objects to aid with masturbation" (61)? Alaimo's survey of animal sex and gender provides data that will "complicate the foundations of feminist theory.... [and] also denaturalize familiar categories and assumptions in queer theory and gay cultures" (65).

Noel Sturgeon's essay on "Penguin Family Values," the only reprinted essay in the volume, takes up the issue of reproductive justice by bringing an ecocritical lens to examining the nature documentary *The March*

of *the Penguins* (2005) and the children's film *Happy Feet* (2006): both present penguins as "popular symbols that conflate heterosexist family ideals with the need to resist environmental threats" (118). Asking "what kind of environmental politics can encompass the threat to both Emperor penguins and Alaskan Natives from global climate change?", Sturgeon criticizes Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth* for the convenient omission of Arctic indigenous peoples and the foregrounding of polar bears (along with the film's anti-population rhetoric backgrounding the problem of resource consumption—a topic taken up by other authors in this book, notably Andil Gosine). To combat this heterocentric and ethnocentric discourse, Sturgeon brings forward the children's book *And Tango Makes Three* (2005) about the gay penguins in Central Park Zoo, as well as the plight of Arctic native peoples in an era of intense oil extraction and climate change. Environmentalists should not "depict environmentalism as a heteronormative family romance," for such "rhetoric obscures the need to put pressure on corporations to change their labor practices—including health care, childcare, pay equity, and global labor practices.... [issues that are] important to real family values...as part of an environmentalist agenda" (126–27). At the conceptual level, the rhetoric of "penguin family values" limits ideas of "what is natural" and obscures nature's "more agentic" practices (128). Sturgeon invokes Donna Haraway's (2004) concept of "naturecultures" to describe the mutually-constituted relationships among "nature and culture, nature and human, human and animal, and human and machine" (128).

Scrutinizing the heteronormative definition of species as "interbreeding natural populations that are reproductively isolated from other such groups," Ladelle McWhorter documents the ways that "the concept of species has often brought great harm to both racial and sexual minorities over the past two hundred years" and has been used to "underwrite discourses that historically have condemned sexual variation" such as slavery and eugenics (75). Acknowledging claims that "sexual diversity persists because it contributes to our species' health, strength, and prospects for survival," McWhorter nonetheless cautions against "resting proqueer arguments on the concept of species" (91). Doing so gives too much authority to science for deciding "social, political, and moral questions," when "science is [at best] an important tool and component in the process...not a final arbiter" (96). "If sexual and gender diversity are valuable

in human society,” she concludes, “they are so regardless of their value for species preservation or evolution” (96). Here, McWhorter’s perceptive argument offers a critical foundation stone for queer ecology’s relevance to science studies and cultural studies alike.

Like Sturgeon, David Bell’s “Queernaturecultures” employs and augments Haraway’s term, using the examples of sex-positive performance activism in defense of forests (yes, Fuck For Forests), nudist cultures, and the whole project of reclaiming queer animals as necessary but not sufficient strategies for ideological transformation, since they do not challenge but rather “rest on the nature/culture divide” (142). “The project of reclaiming queer animals,” Bell explains, is “driven by a political imperative to naturalize the rights of sexual minorities”—but this project “sits at odds...with the powerful anti-essentialism of queer theory and politics” (139). Strategic essentialism has been used to defend queer civil rights against discrimination, to challenge the logic of the religious-based “ex-gay” movement, and to argue against “gay contagion” using the “born gay” claim. Rather than promote the division between theory and politics in the contexts of queer/environmentalism, Bell argues for “reconnecting to sex” in ways that “renaturaliz[e] humanity...by reminding us of our own embodied naturalness” (137) and acknowledging the impossibility of delinking nature from culture. His questions about public sex—“what would it mean for our understandings of public sex to think about nature-as-public? What does it mean to talk of the publicness of nature? And...what does that mean for the politics of nature and the politics of sex?” (144)—certainly leave readers thinking.

The essays in section two address “queering environmental politics” by examining the environmental and spatial dimension of sexual politics, and the implicit sexualization of environments. “Queer ecology involves a necessary critique of the heteronormativity and whiteness of environmental politics,” the editors explain, as well as a critique of the “metro-normative stereotype of gay life as inherently consumerist” (34). Leading off the discussions, Andil Gosine’s essay explores how both “reproductive sex between non-white people, and sex between men” have been seen as “toxic to nature” (149); both “threaten colonial-imperialist and nationalist ambitions” of white heteropatriarchy (150). Examining reports of arrests for gay male cruising in parks at Merced, California; the Minnesota National Wildlife Refuge near Minneapolis; the Kokomo Reservoir Park

in Indiana, and Vancouver's Stanley Park, Gosine exposes a rhetoric of gay sex as pollution: the cruising areas are described as "trash-strewn pulloffs," with "condoms by the hundreds," and other "unsavory litter" creating health hazards and endangering children. Citing the Vancouver Park Board Commission's sensible strategy of installing extra garbage can receptacles in the area, Gosine directly challenges the belief that "public, homosexual sex is bad for the environment" and shows the heteronormative "solutions" (i.e., cutting down bushes, building fences, paving pathways) tend to be more environmentally destructive than gay sex.

The theme of queer environments is carried forward in Nancy Unger's chapter, which chronicles the construction of lesbian space in the United States, from the black lesbians in Harlem to the white lesbian retreat at Cherry Grove, the back-to-the-land movement in Oregon, the Pagoda womynspace in Florida (later reconstituted at Alapine Village in Alabama), and the lesbian community established through regional and national women's music festivals. Curiously, though Unger notes the lesbian feminist political analysis that placed "vegetarian organic foods" (182) and "healthy food" (189) as an integral part of lesbian space, she fails to mention persistent connections between vegan/vegetarianism and lesbian feminism which were foundational components of the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, The Bloodroot Collective, and many other lesbian-only collectives and communal living spaces (Gaard 2000). These lesbians' dietary choices were inspired by a widespread belief that sexism, heterosexism, racism, classism, and speciesism were part of the same heteropatriarchal system that lesbian feminists wanted to leave behind. In this volume, Unger is not alone in omitting critique of the dominant heteromascularity/speciesism connection, indicating this connection as an area for further development in queer ecologies generally.

The use of animal-based research in disparaging queer sexualities is a case in point, where potential coalitions among queer/environmental/animal advocates could be stronger with more theoretical development as foundation. Giovanna Di Chiro's chapter confronts the misplaced concern over abnormal sex differences (documented through field studies of nonhuman animals) as producing a heterosexist and transphobic hysteria that shifts attention away from serious health problems caused by toxics, such as breast, ovarian, and testicular cancers; immune system breakdown; diabetes, and heart disease. Even progressive environmental scientists and policy advocates have mobilized "socially sanctioned het-

erosexism and queer-fear in order to generate public interest and a sense of urgency to act,” Di Chiro laments (210)—supporting her claim with examples from environmental author Janisse Ray’s association between endocrine disruptors and transgender identity, and from atrazine-researcher Tyrone Hayes, who opens his lecture by establishing both his outsider status (via race and class) and his normality (via photos of his heterosexual parents and present family). As a model alternative, Di Chiro points to the community-based organization Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice, which has created an intersectional analysis of reproductive and environmental justice through projects examining, for example, the cosmetic industry’s use of phthalates, thereby connecting “the environmental health, safety, and livelihood concerns of both consumers and workers” and creating a movement of “young API [Asian Pacific Islander] women who now identify themselves as ‘environmentalists’” (223).

Katie Hogan’s chapter continues the exploration of toxics and coalition-building through cultural texts such as Heather MacDonald’s 1995 *Ballot Measure 9*, a documentary about the Oregon Citizens’ Alliance attempt to amend the Oregon state constitution to discriminate against queers, and Joseph Hansen’s 1984 detective novel *Nightwork*, a gay mystery about “toxic dumping as an aspect of toxic heterosexuality” (237). Together, Hogan argues, these texts “show us what a queer ecocritique and queer environmental justice looks like” (250). Completing the exploration of queers and space/place, Gordon Brent Ingram pairs queer urban history with landscape ecology, examining the diverse histories of gays and lesbians in Vancouver’s West End. Far from being a true “ghetto,” the West End offered a large network of public spaces, secluded forest parklands, and the cleanest air and beaches of the city. Ingram’s narrative illustrates how the forces of racism, classism, sexism, and homophobia worked to construct the West End as a white middle-class gay male enclave, eliminating Stanley Park’s one remaining Native village, briefly nurturing white women’s suffrage activists and (proto-lesbian) women athletes, and shifting to a population of predominantly gay white men by the end of the 1960s. Taken together, the essays in this section explore the sexualization of nature, challenging the myth that queer communities are essentially urban communities by exposing the repeated efforts to enforce and police the unnaturally overdetermined heterosexualization of both urban and rural environments.

The book’s final section, “desiring nature,” functions as a sort of solu-

tion to the problems of seeing sexuality and nature as separate, and offers various visions for the future. Rachel Stein builds on theories advanced in her well-known volume, *New Perspectives on Environmental Justice: Gender, Sexuality, and Activism* (2004), to examine how “the premises and effects of crime-against-nature ideology...dislocate lesbians from social and natural environments” and how lesbian poets Adrienne Rich and Minnie Bruce Pratt use their writing to “strategically resituate homoerotic desire within the natural landscape” (288). In other words, “The Place, Promised, That Has Not Yet Been” is in fact a “revolutionary environment of sexual freedom,” where crime-against-nature ideology is subverted, and the struggles for environmental justice and sexual justice are brought together. Bruce Erickson invokes Canada’s articulation of national identity with eco-sex (“making love in a canoe is the most Canadian act that two people can do,” 309), revealing that, analogous to the function of the cowboy in the American West, the canoe was originally “an indigenous cultural artifact made into a tool of colonization, to extract the nation from the landscape” (312). The national identity and economy are blended and naturalized in the appearance of the canoe on Canada’s currency. In capitalism, the construction of identity is “inherently productive,” fueling patterns of consumption; alternatively, Erikson suggests ways to “reconceptualize the pleasures of canoeing outside of the desire for identity, outside of the demands of nation” (312).

Two essays on love—mourning, and celebration—complete the volume. In “Melancholy Natures, Queer Ecologies,” Mortimer-Sandilands examines the differences between grief and melancholy in the works of Jan Zita Grover’s *North Enough: AIDS and Other Clearcuts* (1997), and Derek Jarman’s *Modern Nature* (1991). Both authors “come to love and understand devastated landscapes,” Mortimer-Sandilands argues, with Grover’s “melancholic refusal to ‘get over’” the loss of so many friends to AIDS as well as “the multiple presences of loss and death in the natural landscape around her” (348), and Jarman’s “queer memorialization that both politicizes AIDS...and also establishes that memory in a sensuous, sensual world of plants, shingle, wind, salt” (351). By “allowing the natural world to be a field of intimately mourned lives and possibilities,” Grover and Jarman draw strong parallels between “non-heterosexual lives in the midst of homophobia, and the more-than-human world in the midst of environmental devastation” (355).

Ending on a more celebratory note, Dianne Chisholm offers an eco-

queer reading of heterosexual nature writer Ellen Meloy's four books, arguing that Meloy rewrites E.O. Wilson's biophilia concept by recognizing "an erotic-ethical affiliation between human and nonhuman life" and describing "a vitalism in which nonreproductive sex is a primary force of nature" (360). Meloy's biophilia includes imagining "leaping into bed" with desert flora to satiate a craving to know their seduction of color" (364) and thus is "pronouncedly queer"; Chisholm argues that Meloy envisions a future "where creatures deemed unproductive by utilitarian standards are valued for their own nature, as well as for their part in determining a healthy local ecology" (375). If this is Meloy's stance, how does she reconcile consuming the nature that she professes to love? Chisholm gives us the paradoxical "aroused biophilia" of Meloy's participation in a bighorn sheep relocation project, where Meloy simultaneously consumes the animals she is allegedly saving: "the taste of the meat lingers on my tongue. Rain and river. Bedrock to soil to plant to milk to bone, muscle, and sinew. I am eating my canyon. Eating stone" (Meloy, cited in Chisholm, 372). Chisholm's rather flippant question—"Does [Meloy's] ethics of becoming-bighorn not challenge the most radical platform of queer activism, no less than the 'save-the-whale' (and other select-species versus companion-species) campaigns of animal rights?" (376)—is neither developed nor supported, again confirming that this intersection of speciesism and heterosexism has yet to be explored in queer ecologies.

That exploration needs to come quickly, for queer ecology is catching on. Already in Spring 2011, the leading magazine of nature writing, *Orion*, has published a very readable essay explaining the core concepts of queer ecology (Johnson 2011), at the same time as a leading ecocritic in Britain has denounced their plausibility in the scholarly journal of the Society for Literature and Science, *Configurations* (Garrard 2011). There, Greg Garrard claims that the "queer commitment to transgression seems to outweigh concerns about conservation," since conservation relies on the Endangered Species Act, and thus, species do matter; but McWhorter's essay did not argue for the end of species, only for a healthy suspicion of the concept's ontological position, and for extricating arguments for sexual and gender diversity from arguments for the value of species preservation/evolution. Or, on the topic of "toxic discourse" Garrard insists "it seems unlikely that ecologists are merely dupes of heteronormativity for drawing attention to feminization as a consequence of pollution," when in fact Di Chiro's essay acknowledges the urgency of responding to hormone

disruptors—without having to access divisive rhetoric around heteronormativity. The more substantive challenges Garrard raises—the need for “a green bailout for queer theory,” for example, or for considering the full range of “ecopolitical consequences of the critique of species”(95)—merit more serious responses.

For example, does the ecology of ecoqueers include the self-determination of other species, or do we merely celebrate their polymorphous perversities and then eat them? Donna Haraway’s *naturecultures*—and Bell’s queering thereof—seem to offer liberation for human animals but not other animals. Where are the vegan lesbians who have been defending the intersections of sexuality and animality since the 1970s? Where is the greening of queer theory, which has roots not just in the Lesbian Rangers but also in queer critiques of gay rodeos, in the formation of PETA’s Gay and Lesbian Animal Rights Caucus, and in the Gays and Friends for Animals Rights presence in the San Francisco Pride Parade of the 1990s (Mills 1994)? It seems odd in a book celebrating lesbian seagulls and other nonreproductive sexual behaviors among animal species that there’s a silence about queer ecocritics eating queer birds and their eggs, or drinking the breastmilk of other species. Now, that’s perverse—but not deliciously so. As Annie Potts and Jovian Parry (2010) have recently argued, for some environmental and sex-positive activists, vegan sexuality challenges heteronormative masculinity, so perhaps there’s a connection between “what you eat and what you do in bed”(1993-94).

Would today’s vegansexuals—who, within their own sexual orientations, prefer vegan sexual partners—also be considered queer? Perhaps so, if heterosexual nature writer Ellen Meloy is offered the final word in *Queer Ecologies* for her descriptions of interspecies eroticisms. Though an ardent fan of inclusivity, I am nonetheless concerned about how such extensions of the term “queer” may make its meaning too ambiguous for use as a critical tool, eliding important differences between the real material, cultural, and “lifestyle” experiences of gay men and lesbians (class and economics among them). Is “queer” an identity, a set of behaviors, a perspective available to people of all sexualities, or all of these simultaneously? Are there sets of experiences or concepts that a queer ecological perspective would *not* illuminate? For example, Ingram’s chapter describing the different material experiences of lesbians vs. gay men in Vancouver’s West End, or Unger’s history of lesbian feminist space as motivated largely by politics, suggest there are significant reasons for studying sexual-cul-

tural groups separately as well as collectively. Is queer ecology always feminist? Given the historical foundations of lesbian feminism, ecofeminism, or material feminisms for many of the contributors, it is curious that there is no specific articulation of the feminism-queer ecology connection. Unavoidably, despite the volume's richness and range of discussion, a few questions remain.

Among them, perhaps one of the most important questions is how ecoqueer theory will develop once it moves beyond this initial collective articulation from primarily Anglo-American scholars. As Andil Gosine's essay pointedly asks, "is the production of 'queer ecology' a decidedly Euroamerican project?" and "is the privileging of Euroamerican stories of environmentalism—even for the purpose of critical examination—complicit with the agendas of empire, and American imperialism in particular?" (166). Instead of separating "the queer subject from the racialized-as-non-white subject" and effectively "disappearing the non-white queer," as well as the diasporic subject, Gosine suggests "a special focus on the constitution of the non-white queer subject...[as] a more insightful project of queer ecology" (167). As the first book-length volume to establish the intersections of queer theory and environmentalisms at such depth, the publication of *Queer Ecologies* has decisively created a rich field for further research. May the Lesbian Rangers be our guides!

NOTES

- 1 Simon Estok (2009) defines ecophobia as "an irrational and groundless hatred of the natural world, as present and subtle in our daily lives and literature as homophobia and racism and sexism" (208). Similarly, I offered the term "erotophobia" (Gaard 1997) as "the larger problem . . . of Western culture, a fear of the erotic so strong that only one form of sexuality is overtly allowed; only in one position; and only in the context of certain legal, religious, and social sanctions" (118). That ecophobia and erotophobia are intertwined concepts is proven in *Queer Ecologies* through the essays' many examples of the mutually-constituted concepts of nature and sexuality.

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