

**Whose there is there there?
Queer Directions and Ecocritical Orientations¹**

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In her contribution to this issue of *Ecozon@*, Rachel Stein proposes that a key task for ecocriticism in this new(ish) century is “to become more conscious of the need to think through our assumptions about sex and nature.” As her own scholarship has demonstrated for several years (e.g., her collection *New Perspectives on Environmental Justice*), framing problems of naturalized sexual oppression as issues of environmental justice (EJ) is an important work of political articulation about which ecocritics must think seriously. In the first place, queer ecology asks us to consider that institutions and discourses governing and organizing sexuality have influenced, and been influenced by, environmental ideas and practices: understanding sexuality as a matter of environmental justice, in this context, links more established EJ struggles around class, race and (for example) pollution to emerging struggles for sexual justice in such realms as development policy, biotechnology, and land use and design. Second, queer ecology demands a rethinking of heterosexism and homophobia in environmental discourse more broadly, including challenges to the largely unreflective naturalization of heterosexual reproduction and gender dimorphism apparent in many evolutionary, ecological and other environmental discourses, especially those concerning toxicity/contamination, population, and biodiversity loss; these discourses demand ecocritical interrogation.

But I propose, here, that queer theory has had, and may yet have, an even more far-reaching influence on ecocriticism than is indicated in either of these trajectories. Specifically, I think Stein’s and others’ work has shown unequivocally that queer ecology asks us to look much more *queerly* at the understandings of nature that inform all our projects as literary ecologists. It is not enough, in this view, to consider sexuality as an “added” dimension of environmental justice (which often means that folks who want to can safely ignore it as someone else’s concern); rather, it is necessary – as Lawrence Buell points out but does not pursue in *The Environmental Imagination* – to consider what queer ecology does not to augment but to “*unsettle* normative thinking about environmental status quos” (24, my

¹ With thanks to Carmen Flys Junquera and apologies to Gertrude Stein.

emphasis), including deeply-held heteromascuine views informing some versions of ecocriticism itself. Queer ecocriticism, in this view, is not a sub-specialty: it is a call to rethink the field.

For one view of this rethinking, Simon Estok argues that queer ecocriticism must be part of a larger practice of “confluent” theorizing that takes the problem of excavating what he calls *ecophobia* – “the ethical position that humanity is outside or and exempt from the laws of nature” (216-7) – as a central practice in a rigorous ecocritical project. “An ecocriticism that takes ecophobia as its core,” he writes, “will undoubtedly ... find itself productively continuing the discussion of environmental issues alongside discussions of race and gender and sexuality” (217), because ecophobia is not only “interwoven” with (Estok’s term) but also profoundly *shaped by* other forms of (bio) power: ideas of human separation from nature are, for example, organized and understood sexually, and human sexuality is organized and understood in terms of human exceptionality (think, here, of the multiple valences of “unnatural” in this eco/sexual pairing).² Estok’s own reading of *Coriolanus* demonstrates this biopolitical inseparability quite clearly: “the space of same-sex love ... becomes a no place” for Coriolanus, “the object of this play’s ecophobic fury,” as his desired “world elsewhere” is rendered impossible by homophobic loathing at the same time as its “elsewhere” is guaranteed by its constitution as natural, “disposable excess” (214). Ecophobia and homophobia are, here, interrelated interrogative trajectories in ecocritical analysis; one is not logically or politically prior to the other.³

For another queer rethinking in a very different corner of the ecocritical universe, Timothy Morton argues that ecology itself is *inherently* queer. In a blog posting dated October 11, 2009, he proposes (referencing, I imagine, Judith Butler’s argument in *Gender Trouble* about queer and other identity as performatively constituted⁴) that life itself is

² Estok’s position is actually that ecophobia needs first to be theorized on its own terms before being “eventually” looked at in its interweavings with homophobia, misogyny, racism and speciesism (208). My position is a slightly different one: that these different relations of power are always already articulated in some way, that power relations cannot really be conceived outside the situated, material conditions of these articulations, and indeed that their inescapable specificity is often especially apparent in literary works.

³ Apparently, not everyone likes Estok’s call for a confluent theorizing for ecocriticism: S. K. Robisch writes, in reaction to Estok, “I disagree both with his position on ‘theory’ and his choices in an article ostensibly designed to connect homophobia and the neologism ‘ecophobia,’ which Estok fails to accomplish simply out of a lack of sustained, specific inquiry” (699). The (hetero) sexualized language of Robisch’s objection to “theory” is notable: in contrast to his own pedigreed studies of “literary criticism under the editor of *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*” (698), Estok has, in his view, fallen prey to the degenerate predations of the “sleazy uncle ‘theory,’” a.k.a., for Robisch, “a masturbatory apparatus denying its own past” (698).

⁴ The blog is not expansive, so I apologise to Morton if I am making incorrect assumptions about what his argument will eventually be. He notes that he has a paper forthcoming in *PMLA* on queer ecology, and I am very much looking forward to it.

performative: species become themselves over and over again through a process of evolutionary “satisficing” (the term, from decision-making theory, is an amalgam of “satisfy” and “suffice”⁵) in which they take on an identity or mode of being in relation to the signifying demands of their environments. Like a drag queen, it would seem, an anteater performs itself for an ant just enough to satisfy the ant (and the anteater’s environment more broadly) that the anteater is what it is (and vice versa); its identity is thus not internal and essential, but constituted sufficiently (or perhaps interpellated, to use Butler’s Althusserian term) in and for particular species interactions over evolutionary time. In Morton’s words, then, “rabbits are deconstructive all the way down — signifying and display happen at every level.” “Queer ecology,” he writes, “would go to the end and show how beings exist precisely because they are nothing but relationality, deep down — for the love of matter.” Much ecocriticism, from his perspective, misses this point: in its celebration of a romanticized and heteromale Nature, it sets up the natural world as a transcendent external, not an ecological realm of inescapable, constitutive interconnectedness.

There are many other ways a queer perspective could “unsettle the normative foundations” of ecocriticism. For example, one recent hotspot in ecocritical conversation has concerned the centrality of “place” in ecocritical thought and practice. Ursula Heise has, of course, already done a great deal to challenge both the cultural specificity and the ecological and political adequacy of the localist insistence on “sense of place” as the apex of ecocritical thought and practice: although an “ethic of proximity” may be understandable as a response to the spiraling deterritorializations of global capital, the common ecocritical position that “the local” holds the capacity to restore sensuous meaning and thereby create a sustainable future fails on numerous counts, not the least of which being the hard-won knowledge of marginalized groups (like sexual minorities) that local politics are often highly exclusionary and local nature-knowledges frequently permeated with xenophobia.⁶ Indeed, Greg Garrard argues that there is an inherent opposition between lococentric pedagogy and queer ecology on this count, between the “reinhabitation” of place in much ecocriticism and the

⁵ According to Wikipedia, “satisficing explains the tendency [in decision-making] to select the first option that meets a given need or select the option that seems to address most needs rather than the ‘optimal’ solution” (like me choosing to use Wikipedia as my source of information).

⁶ I would argue that Heise’s “eco-cosmopolitanism” is already fairly queer. At the very least (and it includes far more), her position insists that any useful understanding of place must consider the multiple, globally articulated power relations that have brought a given place into being. A queer interrogation of the local would insist on making its experience *unfamiliar* as a way of revealing these relations and calling into question its normativity. To put it differently, one cannot consider place as a mode of resistance *to* global capital without unsettling its normalized place-ness *in* global capital. On queering time and place, see Halberstam.

“decolonization” of place in a queer imaginary focused on the *disruption* of heteromale discourses, perceptions and experiences. For those LGBTIQ individuals who, as Stein would point out, find themselves positioned as “unnatural” in dominant nature discourses – and even more for those who insist politically and ontologically on a trans-local queering of the (hetero-) naturalization of sexuality and nature through understandings of hybridity, mobility, artifice and performativity – the eco-normative idea of place is far from innocent. As Garrard writes, “it may well be the idea of reinhabitation *itself* that needs to be decolonized” (n.p., original emphasis): any ecocritical activity to find sensuous reinvigoration through or in place needs to interrogate critically both the global relations through which places are produced and experienced and those through which the desire itself comes to be understood as “environmental” in the midst of complex global interdependencies.⁷ Where many ecocritics might lament of globalization that “there is no there there,” a queer ecocriticism would ask “*whose* there is there there” – and how?

Following the eco-cosmopolitan, place-skeptical trajectories of Heise and Garrard, then, we might consider how a queer ecocriticism could offer new, ecologically and politically important perspectives on both place and current ecocritical desires for a different kind of sensuous experience of place. For that kind of questioning about bodies in sensuous interrelationships in global context, I would offer that a *queer phenomenology* would help us to question the “naturalness” of particular (proximate and other) habits of place and embodiment even as it would also prompt us to remember the importance of corporeal relations in ecocritical understandings of both place and planet.⁸ Sara Ahmed’s recent book *Queer Phenomenology* offers a beginning-point for exactly this kind of reconsideration. Stripping phenomenology of some of its normative, naturalizing tendencies, Ahmed investigates the question of “orientation” as a complex, historical and sedimented spatial relation in which particular bodies achieve, and are constituted by, a sense of direction and being-oriented offered up in ongoing material interactions between environments and (in this case, human) corporeal capacities. Bodies (arguably) “have” environments and achieve

⁷ Heise also reminds us, of course, to be skeptical of uncritical celebrations of globality, in which particularities of power and perspective are equally erased in an utopian embrace of the whole. “Sense of planet” is not just “sense of place” on a larger scale, but rather takes into account the uneven and difficult ecological, technological and political contingencies of “g/local” interrelations.

⁸ Richard Kerridge, in his review of Heise’s book, offers a similar provocation: “as for the ‘embodied’ and Heideggerian perspectives, if they are indeed to be central to ecocriticism, their proponents need to extend their scope, so that ... forms of scientific and technologically mediated data can themselves be explored phenomenologically, rather than merely rejected as inauthentic” (n.p.).

orientation in them: environments are “the starting point for orientation” ... “the ‘here’ of the body and the ‘where’ of its dwelling” (8; the argument is thus related to familiar eco-phenomenological accounts of sense of place ⁹), but that “here” does not mean that a particular orientation is given in or naturalized by that environment. Instead, orientation is an iterative body/environment directional relation shaped by sedimented past and compelling present desires, environmental affordances and contours, actions and prohibitions. To quote Merleau-Ponty, “what counts for the orientation of my spectacle is not my body as it in fact is, as a thing in objective space, but as a system of possible actions, a virtual body with its phenomenal ‘place’ defined by its *task* and *situation*” (qtd. in Ahmed, 66, my emphases). For Ahmed, sexual orientation is profoundly directional and spatial (as are many shaping metaphors for sexual attraction); similarly, corporeal relations of being oriented and “knowing where one is going” are shaped by a compulsory heterosexuality that privileges some attractions and directions over others, marking bodies with certain (straight) lines and activities and not others (I particularly like her assertion that “compulsory heterosexuality is a form of RSI [repetitive strain injury]” [91]). Ahmed thus creates a dynamic understanding of spatially-transformed bodies as they take on tasks and situations in bodily-transformed spaces.¹⁰ Rather than a naturalizing sense of place, then, Ahmed offers us a questioning of what and whose sense makes “sense” of place in the first place (and how); for ecocritics, as I will (I hope) pursue in my own work in the future, she suggests a way of asking about the proximate sensibilities of bodies in places that acknowledges the multiple corporeal and ecological entanglements of any such sensibility, including everything from deeply-inscribed lines and habits of global commodity exchange to intimate relations of touching and reaching (and, qua Morton, performing) between particular human and other-than-human creatures.

If, then, we understand a queer ecocriticism as potentially defamiliarizing some of the heteromale assumptions informing environmental desires and the ecocritical practices upon which such desires rest, there is much indeed to queer. Stein, Estok, Morton and many others – including the contributors to the forthcoming anthology *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire* – do not understand the queer ecologist’s or ecocritic’s task of

⁹ I do not pretend, here, to represent the intricacies of Heidegger’s views of dwelling or Merleau-Ponty’s of embodied perception; I do, however, begin my movement into queer phenomenology with a general skepticism toward ideas of a single, “proper” alignment of beings and things.

¹⁰ Ahmed also offers a style of phenomenological writing that offers an interesting counterpoint to narrative ecocriticism: hers is a phenomenological *de-narrativization* of corporeal movements through environments, an estrangement of accustomed body/world/word relations in the service of conceptual unsettling, political denaturalization, and unexpected discovery.

denaturalization as opposed to desires for ecology or sustainability; we simply demand a less heteronormative and decidedly queerer rethinking of what our inhabitation of the world is supposed to look and feel like. Whether it is in the specific interrogation of the intersections between sex and nature in a literary work, or the huge rethinking of nature as itself queerly performative and relational, or the in-between task of queering the senses in sense of place, it is clear that “queer” will be an important ecocritical orientation in the twenty-first century.

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