

Brigitte McCray
Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge

Mortimer-Sandilands, Catriona and Bruce Erickson, ed., *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2010), 1+410 pp.

At New York City's Central Park Zoo in 2004, two male penguins attracted a great deal of attention after they formed an intense bond. Roy and Silo, as they became known, courted, displayed sexual activity, built nests, and were even provided an egg by another penguin, a 'surrogate mother,' as it were; the couple raised the chick, named Tango by the zoo keepers. The pair became famous as they were featured in a number of news stories, in a children's book, and in the plot of a *Will & Grace* episode. Roy and Silo were powerful symbols for the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer community; they represented the naturalness of homosexuality. The conviction over Roy and Silo's representative power worked to dispel the notion frequently employed by conservatives, that homosexuality is a crime against nature.

The story of Roy and Silo is one of many narratives that run through the collection *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire*, edited by Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson. The volume is preoccupied with the intersections of sex with nature – intersections which, it is argued, are found at a great number of societal and cultural levels, and which need to be scrutinized more closely if we are to construct a stronger environmental politics as well as a stronger sexual politics. Sex and nature are often seen as separate domains; however, nature is often used to construct ideas about sexuality while sexuality is often used to construct ideas about nature and the environment (5). The editors and writers hope to break down such constructions and to provide a theoretical framework that will foster positive change both with regard to environmental issues and in the struggle for LGBTQ rights.

They advance their argument by disentangling "knots of inquiry" (6) in which sex and nature have been tied together and, yet, never questioned. For instance, the discourse of sexuality studies has insisted that nature has nothing to do with sexuality; yet, scientific discourses regularly utilize biology to discuss sexuality. Queer theorists who ignore the scientific discourse will have a difficult time making their arguments politically relevant and useful. Space is also an area where sex and nature intersect. Natural places, such as national parks, have been, and still are, constructed and policed in terms of normative (sexual) behavior. Finally, LGBTQ life has often been associated with urban and consumer lifestyles. Instead, an analysis of what the editors call "eco-sexual resistance," (21) found in, for example, lesbian alternative environments like

Cherry Grove or the Oregon Women's Land Trust, allows us to see queer experiences that are often overlooked. The point of unraveling these knots is to challenge the environmental discourse that also frames their arguments and protests through a heteronormative lens. How subversive can environmentalism be if it remains wedded to assumptions that are similar to those of conservative ideologies? In exposing the ways in which nature is political, Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson can be seen as furthering a project begun by ecofeminism, but carrying it into areas which the latter had left unexplored.

What is perhaps most exciting about the collection is the wide range of theoretical perspectives brought to bear on the problem of nature and sexuality. The call for interdisciplinarity is often heard in academia, but rarely heeded, particularly when it comes to inquiries which cross the boundary between the humanities and the sciences. This is precisely what the collection offers, with contributions that bring together humanistic approaches such as queer theory and performance-based activism with biological and ecological inquiry. Feminist philosopher and zoologist Donna Haraway's theory of naturecultures, first formulated in her book *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, informs much of this work, and its influence is evident in nearly every essay. What makes Haraway's work such an important touchstone for a "queered ecology" is her insistence that critics, scholars, and activists pay attention to how seemingly "illegitimate natures" (31) are used for political ends. Ecofeminism is, of course, a driving force behind the collection; however, the theorists in *Queer Ecologies* offer a deeper analysis of the typical environmental tie of women with nature, found in such stereotypical images as "mother nature" and "mother earth." As the collection makes clear, women are sometimes still viewed as somehow standing outside of culture, even within feminism. Queer theory is arguably more effective than feminism at unpacking the networks of power and oppression found within environmentalism and heteronormativity because it embraces an even wider spectrum of sexual identities. The inclusion of David Bell underscores the importance of yet another theoretical development with queer studies for the larger project which the collection pursues, i.e. spatial theory. Known especially for his analysis of queer space, Bell highlights the need to analyze the ways bodies move through space, especially "natural" space. Bell provides a theoretical vocabulary for a field of study that is of obvious concern for environmentalism and resonates strongly with related ecocritical approaches.

The collection is divided into three sections, each devoted to a set of "sites" where further investigation is needed (31). It thus moves from broad issues to more personal and specific ones, placing environmental politics in the center; indeed, if the personal is political, as second-wave feminism taught us, then the editors of the collection have structured the collection in a way that allows the reader to consider the political first, and, by the end, understand the deeply personal aspects of ecological

issues. In their introduction, Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson express their hope that the issues in each section will overflow the divisions between the thematic sections, revealing the actual connections between the various subject matters and concerns (31). Indeed, key terms such as naturecultures, toxicity, species, and the queerness of nature/space are carried throughout.

The first section, “Against Nature? Queer Sex, Queer Animality,” focuses on the concept “species,” examining the relationship between animals, nature, and human sexuality. The essays in this section argue, each in its own way, that we must acknowledge the diversity within species, both human and non-human, while remaining attentive to a range of naturecultures. For example, Noël Sturgeon’s “Penguin Family Values: The Nature of Planetary Environmental Reproductive Justice” examines Roy and Silo’s story alongside penguin films like *The March of the Penguins* and *Happy Feet*. Penguins have been utilized by both progressives and conservatives to argue for or against the naturalness of homosexuality and traditional family issues such as reproduction (102-103). Sturgeon aptly argues that the very fact that a species like the penguin can be used by radically different ideologies proves how complex both the human and natural worlds actually are (129).

The second section, “Green, Pink, and Public: Queering Environmental Politics,” investigates the word “toxic,” which is central not only to environmentalist discourse but has also been used to stigmatize certain forms of sexuality and queer behavior. The language used by environmentalist heavy-hitters such as Al Gore is basically the same as that used to sound the alarm over seemingly non-normative behavior. Thus Giovanna Di Chiro’s essay “Polluted Politics? Confronting Toxic Discourse, Sex Panic, and Eco-Normativity” discusses the discourse surrounding toxic chemicals and their effect on alligators: When biological changes were observed in male alligators, the manner in which fears about toxicity were voiced paralleled the discourse on decreasing virility in the human male (206). New forms of discourse are needed, the essayists argue, to allow for greater diversity within the environmental movement. This, they argue, must also entail the queering of landscapes and locations like public parks and lesbian environmental collectives. Such spaces, often seen as toxic because queer bodies inhabit them, offer the mainstream environmental movement alternative sites of resistance that could aid in the fight against environmental destruction.

Finally, the third section, titled “Desiring Nature? Queer Attachments,” attends to the way natural spaces and landscapes have been powerfully felt by those within the LGBTQ community. The essayists argue that such attachments challenge both heteronormative society and mainstream environmentalism, calling into question the very naturalness of nature. For instance, Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands’ essay, “Melancholy Natures, Queer Ecologies,” argues that queer narratives and attachments to nature reveal how grief (melancholia as opposed to mourning) over the destruction of

nature and life provides a powerful alternative to the typical “nature-nostalgia” used in, for example, ecotourist pilgrimages that, she says, merely function as a commodity and thus never fully challenge the destruction of the environment in a productive way (332-333). Through an analysis of Jan Zita Grover’s book *North Enough: AIDS and Other Clear-Cuts* and Derek Jarman’s book *Modern Nature*, Mortimer-Sandilands argues that “both Grover and Jarman come to write about and act in nature in ways that develop exactly the kind of political, embodied understanding of death and mourning that is missing from the romantic portrayals of loss and salvation emphasized in contemporary environmental spectacle . . . [creating] an ethical stance that resists, rather than fostering, fetish” (334).

By questioning what we think we know about two highly visible movements within contemporary society, this collection performs a vital task. The manner in which it does so, however, raises two concerns. First, it is not always clear what audience the collection is aimed at, and the sheer breadth of theoretical references will probably overtax most readers. Gordon Brent Ingram’s essay “Fragments, Edges, and Matrices: Rethorizing the Formation of a So-called Gay Ghetto through Queering Landscape Ecology,” for example, would require a bit more briefing about landscape ecology if the argument is to be accessible to readers not already familiar with the field. A closely related, but somewhat more serious problem concerns the larger purpose of the volume: How can its argument about the necessity of blurring nature and culture be made comprehensible and politically useful outside the walls of academia? The non-academic world often finds it difficult to think about issues in shades of gray. More space could have been allotted to the question how we may be best able to utilize the conceptual tools the collection provides so as to actively aid the environmental and LGBTQ rights movements. Despite such misgivings, *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire* is an important contribution to both queer theory and environmentalism and sets a new standard for scholarship at the intersection of these field.