



Queer ecologies

Mortimer-Sandilands, Catriona, & Bruce Erickson: *Queer ecologies: sex, nature, politics, desire*, Indiana University Press Bloomington Indiana 2010 (410 sidor)

HOW CAN QUEER theories shape ecological thinking? How might we “green” queer theories? How can we better understand the intersection of sex and nature? What kinds of politics can and should grow out of such a focus? And what can Jack and Ennis teach us about sex, nature, queer and ecology? This last question deserves some background, for it prefaces my own infatuation with this volume. The book begins with an insightful historical and cultural analysis of the relationship among queer identities, masculinity, sex, and nature in Ang Lee’s *Brokeback Mountain* (2006), a movie featuring two “not queer” white men, Jack and Ennis, who have sex (and a relationship) situated in and through the space of a mountain in the U.S. where they work herding sheep. I can hardly think of a better way to start a book, and to paraphrase a recent U.S. campaign about queer politics – one that itself ignores the vexed issues of race, class, space, nature, gender, native sovereignty, and species so prevalent in this collection – it gets better.

In their introduction, Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson define queer ecology in political terms, arguing that it probes “the intersections of sex and nature with an eye to developing a sexual politics that more clearly includes considerations of the

natural world and its biosocial constitution, and an environmental politics that demonstrates an understanding of the ways in which sexual relations organize and influence both the material world of nature and our perceptions, experiences, and constitutions of that world” (5). Turning to the deeply imbricated histories of sexuality and ecology, the authors interrogate the white heteronormativity prevalent in several strands of evolutionary thinking. A discussion of the sexual politics of natural spaces that analyzes the history of parks as both “wild” spaces that operate as sites for the active cultivation of white heteromascularity, and urban spaces that foster heterosexual citizenship, is followed by a reading of queer ecological politics. Arguing for the need to challenge “hetero-ecologies”, the authors assert that the volume’s contributors share not only the goal of opening up environmentalism to an understanding of justice more attentive to the intersection of sex and nature, but also a biophilic sensibility that lends new potential to the shared imaginings of queer politics.

And what of the animal in all of this? There are five essays of particular relevance to those of us interested in the intersection of queer theories and animal studies in *Queer ecologies*, the first of which is Stacy Alaimo’s “Eluding capture: the science, culture, and pleasure of ‘queer’ animals”. In part an impressive compilation of extant research and writing on “queer” animals, Alaimo’s essay makes a compelling case for the ways that the sexual diversity of animals matters, invoking both Bruno Latour’s “matters of concern” (2004) and the more material sense of matter as something (often of the flesh) whose touch can shape and even reshape a world. Worried by the implications of an insurgent move to document homosexuality among non-human animals as a means to assert the “naturalness” of same-sex desires, Alaimo suggests we take animals’ sex practices



Recension: Queer ecologies

not as a means to practice human politics another way, but on their own terms, as behaviors that, like those of humans, are inextricably material and social (60). This move helps Alaimo critique both scholars that cast animal sex into the realm of nature and those who read such practices as overly cultural—such as the scientist who argues that the proliferation of same-sex sex among bonobos serves the purpose of reducing social conflict. Attention to non-human animal “sex-gender systems” (Rubin 1975), coupled with a critique of “eco-sexual normativity” drawn from the multitude of sexualities and sexes evident in non-human animal kind marks the scholarship Alaimo espouses. And then there is the title of the piece, “Eluding capture”. Indeed, what the truly multiple amounts of sexes, sexualities and behaviors of non-human animals reveal is that “the world is not only more queer than one could have imagined”, but also that this world “confounds our categories and systems of understanding” (67), evading the grip of both language and thought. Echoing Michel Foucault’s assertion that any system of thought is unable to “tame the wild profusion of existing things” (xv), this insight also resonates with Ladelle McWhorter’s writing on “species” as a concept and category.

In “Enemy of the species”, McWhorter deftly articulates what we inherit in “species”. Beginning with discourses centered in “diversity”, McWhorter argues that diversity’s positive associations can be traced to an implicit biological understanding in which genetic diversity is seen as a species’ “shield against extinction” and “a resource for its evolutionary advancement” (74). For McWhorter, the export of “diversity” into public discourse fails to critically examine the concept of “species”, for while popular contemporary understandings of “species” take it to mean “a collection of individuals who do or could have fertile sexual contact with one another” (91), the

term comes from eugenics. Outlining the ways competing scientific renderings of species were shaped by both the institution of slavery and Jim Crow laws, McWhorter demonstrates how “species” has historically functioned as an instrument for racism, sexism, homophobia, and the oppression of disabled people. What then of “diversity”? McWhorter cautions us to “pause as we consider biology as a resource for valuing the lives of non-homosexual and transgendered people” (96), and be wary of drawing on scientific concepts to further political goals. Rather, McWhorter asks that we critically analyze the ways scientific concepts reflect science as a cultural practice, one that can and does participate in the very systems of oppression against which queer political movements often agitate.

Noël Sturgeon’s “Penguin family values: the nature of planetary environmental reproductive justice”, takes up an issue key to many recent debates in queer political movements: the family. In wonderfully humorous prose, Sturgeon articulates the ways that “reproduction is a materialist and planetary issue” (108) through the lens of the recent cultural fascination with penguins. Pointing to the Christian right’s espousal of *March of the penguins* (Jacquet 2005) as a depiction of ideal family values (monogamy, sacrifice, and child-rearing), Sturgeon contrasts the documentary’s narrative of heteronormative romance with recent “gay” penguin news coverage. For Sturgeon, the media sagas about penguins in zoos who enter into same-sex relationships reveals how penguin relationships have been deployed to naturalize homo- as well as heterosexual human family relationships. And yet, as Sturgeon notes, “penguin sexuality, it turns out, is quite variable,” exceeding both hetero- and homosexuality by penguins’ breeding in trios, quartets, and as single parents (113). Further, Sturgeon argues that this focus on penguin families obscures not just the very real danger of penguin extinction due



Recension: Queer ecologies

to climate change, but also the role of human nuclear family formations (gay or straight) in creating an environment that threatens this extinction. Advocating “environmental justice family values”, Sturgeon asks that we “shake off normative ideas about nature” and see it “as more dynamic, more interrelated with human practices, more agentive, and more complicated” (128) than the family values read into penguin sex might lead us to believe. Responsibility to and for our ability to change this nature, Sturgeon asserts, is the only perspective that might lead us out of this morass, a move that both “greens” queer theories and queers environmental justice.

Focused on the triad of eco-porn, queer animals, and naturism, David Bell’s “Queernaturecultures” explores the juncture of “naturecultures” (Haraway 2003) and sex. First analyzing how the non-profit Fuck For Forests (FFF) critiques both sex-negative and nature-destroying human cultures, Bell then turns to the “nature trouble” (Barcan 2004) that stems from projects of reclaiming queer animals, moments when readings of nature reveal seemingly unnatural behaviors. The contemporary naturist movement, which tends to divorce nude bodies from eroticism as a means to behave naturally, rounds out Bell’s discussion. Arguing that these three cases point to the ways that the binary of nature/culture so predominant in Western societies begs the question of whether sex is nature or culture, Bell turns to the neologism that is his title: queernaturecultures. Donna Haraway’s “natureculture” underscores, for Bell, how culture is natural; Bell augments this term with “queer” in order to emphasize how taking nature and culture as inseparable and mutually constitutive alters understandings of sexuality. Rethinking nature as a public space rather than a backdrop, Bell closes with the provocative question: “if we can speak of more-than-human publics, what does that mean for the politics of nature and the politics of sex?” (144).

Almost more of a poem than an essay, Dianne Chisholm's "Biophilia, creative involution, and the ecological future of queer desire" is the last piece in the collection to directly address the role of non-human animals in queer ecologies. Discussing Ellen Meloy's nature writing about the Western U.S., Chisholm locates a powerful erotic truth: that "nature writers desire to know what nature desires" (361). For Chisholm, Meloy's writing is strongly evocative of the work of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, connecting to their sense of "becoming-animal" (1987) in Meloy's "cognitive adventuring" among, for example, bighorn sheep. Further, Chisholm argues that Meloy's "slickrotica" (2002), a neologism that catalogues "the thousand tiny sexes that more complexly compose desert flower seductiveness", allows her to enter "zones of proximity with the flower where her floraphilia becomes most intensely aroused by the multiple colors, shapes, and touch of sex" (366). This "rhizome sex" helps Chisholm to understand Meloy as practicing what Deleuze and Guattari term "involution", a means of generation that actively disrupts normative Western kinship and sexual formations. For Chisholm, Meloy's writing reveals "the ecological future of queer desire", for Meloy's "floraphilia, zoophilia, piscophilia, and so on 'are like *n* sexes' that trouble not only binary sexuality but also evolutionary certainty through the survival of the straightest", promising "a queer paradigm of desire that replaces the apparatus of heterosexual genealogy, while embracing other, creative variations of becoming-life" (376). Chisholm's own prose furthers this sense of queer desire, for she reads and writes in such close proximity to Meloy that one can almost feel the creeping tendril-like touch of a shared biophilia reaching up from the page. Indeed, this extension of "rhizome sex", if one can term reading writings about and full of desire as such, communicates a vibrant and different kind of queer politics rooted

in mutually constitutive human and nonhuman animal worlds.

What prompted my somewhat cheeky assertion that *Queer ecologies* only “gets better” the further one reads is the kind of queer desire these writings inspire. It is a joy to read with writers whose passion translates into humorous and even rapturous prose, and there is undoubtedly something queerly erotic about such a relationship with a text, an eroticism that troubles both the “natural” and the “cultural”. These writings also push at a tendency endemic to many other writings on nonhuman animals, for the specificity of their attention to indigenous politics, racial formations, gender, and sexualities articulates understandings focused on *particular* non-human animals and humans, rather than “the” animal and “the” human. The role of ecology is also important, for it necessarily takes non-human animals with their worlds, pushing us to think in a manner more carefully situated in animal “naturecultures” than we otherwise might. In addition, the pieces take us well beyond the search for queer sex among animals as fodder for nature versus culture debates, giving us instead complexly textured understandings of animal cultures, cultures of nature, natural cultures, animal sexualities (including humans as animals), and animal sexes (again, humans included). Finally, these writings all address important lacunae in both queer theories and animal studies in the act of taking them together and reading their intersection.

What I had hoped to find more explicitly addressed in this collection is the relationship among sex, gender, and sexuality. As many who teach gender and sexuality studies know, the more queer and trans theories one reads, the less these terms seem to make sense. This volume’s insistence on “naturecultures” would suggest that we should not take gender as cultural, sex as biological, and sexuality as social (if we ever did); rather, we need to take these terms as con-

textually and specifically imbricated, a task that complicates how to consider them. Indeed, I want to know how unpacking a multitude of both sexes and sexual behaviors among human and non-human animals changes things, especially given the ways that non-human animals very clearly have their own sex/gender (or sexgender) systems? Further, the slippage in English of “sex” as a signifier of both bodily sex characteristics and the act of having sex slides even more in these writings about queers, animals, and “queer” animals. I confess that, while a part of me finds these slippages and conjunctions quite promising, I want more. I am not worried about, say, “trans” being folded into queer (although many other trans scholars are, and such a concern is quite valid), nor am I worried about the ways differences in gender expression are rendered as queer in this volume. What does trouble me is that if we can and should find promise in the intellectual lineage of “naturecultures” as disruptive to clean distinctions between sex/gender/sexuality, the logical endpoint of much of the reasoning in this collection, well then, where should we go?

Another concern I would have loved to see taken up in this volume is the relationship among human and non-human categories. While the pieces speak wonderfully to the ways that particular sex/gender formations inhere in historically and culturally specific relationships with nature(s), they do not address the crossover in human and non-human categories, regardless of their ability to contain the wild profusion of things they describe. I am fascinated by the ways that practices of relating between humans and non-human animals demonstrate how particular formations of sex, gender, race, class, and nation are not merely reflected in animal relations but also made possible by them. Indeed, Jack and Ennis’s identities as prototypical gay cowboys/shepherds are made possible by their relationships with



Recension: Queer ecologies

cattle and sheep. And the role of, say, a lap dog, is only possible in a world where there are human laps to inhabit. The ways that particular species, breed, sex, and gender formations are not only reflected in but emerge through human/nonhuman animal relationships deserves attention, and I would love to see more work that takes up this generation (involution?) of identities. That said, there is much to love and desire in this collection, and the pleasure of reading it strikes me as both queer and natural, perhaps even queernatural.

WORKS CITED:

- Barcan, Ruth (2004): *Nudity: a cultural anatomy*. Oxford.
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Felix Guattari (1987): *A thousand plateaus*. Trans. Brian Massumi. Minneapolis 1987.
- Foucault, Michel (1970): *The order of things*. New York.
- Haraway, Donna (2003): *The companion species manifesto*. Chicago.
- Jacquet, Luc, Dir. (2005): *The march of the penguins*. Bonne Pioche Productions.
- Latour, Bruno (2004): "Why has critique run out of steam?: from matters of fact to matters of concern", *Critical Inquiry* 30/2004:225–248.
- Meloy, Ellen (2002): *The anthropology of turquoise: reflections on desert, sea, stone, and sky*. New York.
- Rubin, Gayle (1975): "The traffic in women: notes on the 'political economy' of sex", ed. Rayna Reiter, *Toward an anthropology of women*. New York.

HARLAN WEAVER