

Carrying On and Going Beyond: Some Conditions of queer / nature

A brand of 'queer' which addresses concerns within the broad parameters circumscribing a site called 'nature' may be as diverse, open-ended, and perhaps contentious as any examination of either of those two terms. Difficult though it may be, trying to map out a space for Queer/Nature within a politics of the environment demands the charting of courses through a discursive terrain of perils and possibilities. As insisted by the writers and artists in this issue of *UnderCurrents*, a politics of nature can no longer be an articulation of white, male, heterosexual prescriptive or descriptive privilege. Here, what is most evident is the disruptive power of any examination of the normative categories of nature and the natural from the perspective of queer identity. The breadth of perspectives demonstrated by the works included suggests the necessity for an ongoing project of investigation which takes apart both the categories of queer and nature, and then defines and recombines them in innovative, constructive ways. By no means is this an attempt to represent all the various ways in which this dialogue may occur and significant topics are absent, perhaps most importantly, the nexus of race, political economy or transgenderism and Queer/Nature. Despite these gaps, we hope to open up a discussion between queer and environmental politics, as well as initiate a consideration of the broader question of how, and by whom, nature is spoken of.

One of the conditions which frames the majority of the pieces included is that of sexual orientation. This may be obvious enough, considering the colloquial usage of the term "queer" as descriptive of Gay/Lesbian/Bisexual identities. But what is of particular note is the multifarious ways in which the authors choose to elucidate the matrices through which sexual identity is organized and maintained. Morgan Holmes' work investigates the North American medical establishment's normalizing activity around the biological and performative aspects of genital identification—in the interest of, as she argues, the dominant culture's maintenance of sex roles and functions. Specifically, she addresses the vastly under-recognized practice of surgical alteration of genital form which occurs with a fair degree of frequency in the "modern" Western world. This monitoring and restriction of physical difference functions not only as a signifier of heteronormative, patriarchal society but loops back as the very bio-

medical manifestation of this authority. Additionally, while Holmes does not make the link explicit here, her piece also necessarily engages in a subtle critique of Western feminist condemnation of genital mutilation in other cultures. She makes clear that discourses around the practice of genital mutilation or what constitutes 'natural' need to be engaged within the context of contemporary Western society as well.

Use of the erotic as an effective conceptual tool for the development of a meaningful relationship with the natural world frames J. Michael Clark's inquiry into the formation of a gay eco-theology. His piece grapples with how gay identity, and its attendant social and political exigencies, constitutes a particular position from which a connectedness with the earth may be viewed and fostered. As with a number of the works in this publication, Clark also considers the fact of AIDS as an ineluctable prism through which these questions must pass. In an attempt to reconcile, as he so eloquently puts it, a "deep gratitude for life and passionate grief," he calls for a renewal of an understanding of life and death, nature and culture, as contingent events and experiences within the continuum of Being.

The Foucauldian formulation of the body as the terminal site for the articulation of power has been broadened (by Foucault and others) to encompass the *space* in which those bodies engage in acts of sociality. That the queer body — an always already political body — informs, as well as reflects, the composition of the body politic, is addressed in Gordon Brent Ingram's piece conjoining issues of queer theory and new geographic or spatial thought. Ingram speculatively raises a number of issues about what does and does not fall within the purview of either gay or environmental politics. He calls for a consideration of the ways in which homophobia, gay bashing, and the paucity of gay identified space—be it urban or rural, outdoor or indoor—can be read, as well as redressed, by placement within an analysis of environmental problems. Through his innovative strategy of locating what has typically been considered as part of the socio-political sphere within the context of an environmental agenda, Ingram provides an example of the potentiality for new kinds of coalitions between political and/or activist constituencies.

This question of the relationship between divergent po-

litical or social agendas is precisely the one tackled by Kate Sandilands. Her epigrammatically structured *querying* of how an environmental politics might manifest itself from a discursive site influenced by queer politics suggests quite strongly that lack of dialogue between any two or more groups devoted to social change cannot be an appropriate reaction to what may be seemingly differing agendas. What is also not acceptable, in Sandilands view, is a rigid interpretation of the concept of nature that serves to exclude. In this vein, Sandilands examines the syncretic possibilities for the notions of wonder and the strange. (Wonder being that position from which one might view the environment, and strange as a metonym for queer.) Sandilands asks whether these two conditions can, in fact, be evoked reciprocally to offer a new way of positioning queer within a politics of the environment.

Deanna Bickford writes of memories and the way one's history seeps into the compartments we construct of our lives. Her understanding of nature is conditioned both by sexual identity and the texture of location and time. Love for the place where she grew up, love for family, and love for women weave through her piece to structure a site from which love for nature can emerge. Bickford does not shy away from a consideration of what is, indeed, a confluence of tough loves. Relatedly, Caffyn Kelly's simultaneously elegiac and hopeful work contemplates

the possibilities for ways of being in the world which transcend the bifurcation of life and death, straight and gay, same and different. For Kelly, love can be a deliberate strategy for participation in the affairs of nature.

Love may, at first glance, appear a bewildering sentiment to invoke in a discussion centered around the generation of a politics of inclusion. Still, any attempt to articulate a relationship between queer and environmental(ist) identities must, perhaps, engage in a consideration of affect. Queer is, for the most part, defined from a position of "affectational preference." And nature is, in the dominant paradigm, "that which is not human." To love, in both of these instances, is to jar up against confining categories of being in this space, at this time, on earth. What is required in this act, as Kelly reminds us, is persistence.

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