

Queer Ecologies Roundtable Discussion

Part 1: From Queer/Nature to Queer Ecologies

GORDON BRENT BROCHU-INGRAM, PETER HOBBS & CATRIONA SANDILANDS

On September 11, 2014 members of the *UnderCurrents* editorial collective sat down with Gordon Brent Brochu-Ingram, Peter Hobbs, and Catriona Sandilands—scholars working within the field of queer ecologies—to talk about the successes, challenges, and possibilities of queer ecological scholarship. We began by asking Gordon, Peter, and Catriona to reflect on the contribution that “Queer/Nature,” Volume 6 of *UnderCurrents*, made to discussions at the intersection of queerness and environmentalism and invited them to reflect on how queer ecologies has changed in the twenty years since that volume’s publication. With an interest in the future of the field, we asked the roundtable participants to tell us how they understood queer ecologies in the present moment and to suggest some of their favourite scholarly, activist, and artistic examples of queer ecological work.

The generous conversation that took place around Catriona’s dining room table, with Brent joining on Skype from Salt Spring Island, British Columbia, opened up avenues through which we might trace the history and sketch the futures of queer ecologies. We have transcribed the conversation and included four parts of it in this

volume. These fragments of the roundtable are scattered throughout in an effort to put them into conversation with the scholarly and creative contributions that comprise Volume 19. Edited for clarity and flow, the pieces are intentionally incomplete, reminding us that any conversation about queer ecologies must remain open to new associations, trajectories, and challenges.

In addition to our transcriptions, and in order to capture the unique conversational nuance and energy of the roundtable itself, members of the *UnderCurrents* editorial collective recorded the roundtable discussion. As part of *UnderCurrents*’ commitment to both creative and collaborative scholarly practice, we’ve teamed up with the *Co-*

Hearence co-producers to create a podcast episode, available publicly on the *UnderCurrents* website and through the *CoHearence* iTunes feed. The podcast offers a fuller record of the roundtable discussion and is an ideal way to give readers auditory access to the voices of the discussants and to allow us to imagine *UnderCurrents* beyond the page or the computer screen.

We sincerely thank Gordon, Peter, and Catriona for participating in this conversation and for generously agreeing to allow us to share it with you here.

***UnderCurrents*:** Shauna O’Donnell’s editorial for *UnderCurrents* Volume 6, “Queer/Nature,” points, in the end, to the question of affect and signals the

political and creative possibilities of introducing what we might call a concept-practice of persistent love into the investigation of queer nature. O’Donnell writes:

Queer is, for the most part, defined from a position of “affectional 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, and this time, on earth. What is required in this act, as [Caffyn] Kelly [one of the contributors to that volume] reminds us, is persistence. (3)

What has persisted in your own scholarly and personal relationship, maybe even your own loving relationship, with practices, ideas, politics, and methods of investigating queer natures and, eventually, queer ecologies?

Gordon Brent Brochu-Ingram: In reflecting on my own 1994 article in “Queer/Nature,” on spatial contextualization of queerness—which is an awkward term that I’d never use now—I was mostly relying on Foucault’s methods for sketching the development and destabilization of institutions of nature,

on one hand, and sexuality, on the other hand; perspectives that had historically been repro-centric and heteronormative. So to talk about queer nature twenty years ago was really to approach a frontier.

Today, my 1994 *UnderCurrents* essay feels a bit naive and over-personalized. From [my current] vantage point, the value of the “Queer/Nature” conversation was in the crude attempts to try on notions of social space as habitat within an ecosystem. . . . Methodologically, I was adapting interdisciplinary methods from environmental studies to queer populations that in 1994 had still only been defined through sociology and epidemiology (especially in relation to AIDS) and literature (in relation to early queer theory). So, a lot of these rich possibilities in 1994 for interdisciplinary investigations have been more recently appropriated and cordoned by cultural geography, a subfield that is too often adverse to recognition of complex biological contexts and mixing qualitative markers with quantitative methods.

From the standpoint of research methods, that 1994 queer natures moment was quite promising in bringing sexuality into environmental studies. But the research that has followed has been less creative, with many interdisciplinary research and methods still underutilized. Forgive me if I’m being a little adversarial. . . . I think that there were a lot more possibilities that the 1994 discussion opened up that haven’t been pursued [by] very many researchers. In my mind, the most promising line was the cluster that Cate [Sandilands] has nurtured at York that has led to the queer ecologies discussion. But that’s largely a York animal and when I get out into the broader world of queer studies and queer theory, a lot of the possibilities that we glimpsed twenty years ago have barely been explored and applied.

Catriona Sandilands: I think you might go to the wrong conferences Brent . . . [laughter] I would almost say the opposite. Certainly in the last three or four years . . . there’s [been] a proliferation of works that are trying to stage a conversation between queer and ecology,

and specifically to take up some of the threads that were raised in the “Queer/Nature” volume, about thinking about queer beyond the subject positions of LGBT individuals.

What I might argue is the point that came up in the “Queer/Nature” [volume] that hasn’t been returned in quite so robust a manner is the relationship between that sort of ontological/epistemological queering and on-the-ground political activism. If I see a gap, that’s kind of what it looks like for me. . . . I think that queer ecology is naming an increasingly diverse set of scholarly and creative practices but I’m not quite sure how it is being manifest in activism.

Peter Hobbs: It’s hard for me to talk about twenty years of queer ecologies/natures . . . but looking back at the “Queer/Nature” issue today, I was struck—and maybe this is echoing some [of the] sentiment that Brent is expressing—[that] I could identify certain tropes, concerns, and sentiments that were expressed in the issue [and that] are still being expressed today. So there is sort of a lag, a proliferation of queer ecology or queer materialism, there is a real interest in using the methods and not so much the theory. . . . I guess queer theory had to end. It couldn’t continue troubling theory where queer ecologies can continue. I see the similarities in the stuff that [was] taken up in [the 1994] issue is still being taken up today. So I was quite impressed when I went back and looked.

Darren Patrick: Cate you’re nodding . . .

Catriona Sandilands: I was nodding because it’s still a very impressive document. And hats off to Shauna [O’Donnell] for dreaming it up and for bringing together a very interesting collection of approaches. It was a bit of a stab in the dark because we had no idea what we were doing. Even the piece that I wrote is a collage piece; there is no coherent sense of what the relationship was going to be between queer and nature, and it is interesting to look back at the piece and see what directions I followed, that

I’m continuing to follow, and what directions have gone by the wayside . . . either dying a good death or [seeing the] things that I may need to look at again.

One of the things I do realize that I am still quite committed to is understanding queer as a mode of politicized estrangement of the familiar. So Jack Halberstam talks about queer theory and queer politics as essentially any version of politics that does not have the white heterosexual couple at the centre of it. And I think that that kind of estrangement is the kind of work that I do and that Peter, Brent, Nicole Seymour, Robert Azzarello, and that Darren do—calling into question some of the comfortable habits of ecological and environmentalist thought that align with this understanding of the couple. So, for example, one of the figures from queer theory who has emerged into the queer ecological universe is Lee Edelman. His book, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, [explores] the notion of reproductive futurity and the ways in which this is an imaginative and psychic structure for capitalist societies. It is also very much part of a certain kind of environmentalist narrative—and several people have used him as a way of calling into question the heteronormativity of much contemporary environmental discourse.

For me, even if the kinds of modes of estrangement, the places where I’m thinking about estrangement, the particular things that I’m trying to make strange have changed, I’m still quite attached to that understanding of queer as an actively anti-heteronormative mode of questioning. Which is actually pretty portable, it goes a lot of interesting places.

Conversation continues on page 27.