

Queer Ecologies Roundtable Discussion

Part 4: Queer Ecologies at the Limits

GORDON BRENT BROCHU-INGRAM, PETER HOBBS & CATRIONA SANDILANDS

UnderCurrents: As we engage in this extended discussion tonight, what about an inversion of the first question: When do we reach a limit after which the work we're doing is *not* queer ecological work anymore? It's a sort of goofy contingent question to pose, but it was something that came up in our editorial process this year.

Gordon Brent Brochu-Ingram: Well, I have a visceral response.

Darren Patrick: Oh, good, we need your viscosity!

Gordon Brent Brochu-Ingram: That is, that we are living in a time of environmental crisis which affects everybody, including queer identified people, [which] often has huge implications for sexual practices. And, I have to say that what's going to drive the notion of queer ecology in the long term is this very queer dynamic between survival quests—quests for survival—whether its protection from violence or recognition of marriage rights or recognition of the right to live outside of any kind of accepted

norm, there's going to be this drive or a kind of queer survival or a larger kind of queer space, on the one hand, and I think, we've alluded to it, I'm thinking of that book [*Cruising Utopia*] by the now sadly deceased José Esteban Muñoz. [All the works we discussed are] struggling with notions of the queer imagination as . . . somehow related to our research and our scholarship and our lives. And it's not easy—we've got these two poles—for many of us it is quite painful to try to figure out how to respond to both of those imperatives in our lives and in our scholarship.

Catriona Sandilands: I think that one of the things that I have struggled with in the midst of some of the more recent

scholarship that has called itself queer ecology, for example, Tim Morton's editorial in the *Pacific Modern Life Association (PMLA)* journal, which a lot of people quote, and he's arguing that queer, that queerness is sort of a fundamental principle of the universe and we all kind of share it. And, in this, he ends up equating queerness with relationality. He has since changed his mind, in his more recent work on hyperobjects, he has become less interested in relations and more interested in objects, but, that's OK. And he gets quoted a lot. . . . A more sophisticated version of this is Karen Barad's work on queer performativity. In which she's also arguing that queer is somehow a basic principle of life. So, on both of those accounts,

there is no limit to queer ecology, because ecology is always already queer. I start wondering, "Well, if everything is queer, than nothing is queer." Because we lose, I think we lose the specificity, we lose the politics, we lose the sense that—Peter is shaking his head, we've disagreed on this publicly before . . .

Darren Patrick: Let's get it on tape this time. [Laughter] Let's commit it to the global archive.

Catriona Sandilands: I don't think it fundamentally depoliticizes, because it is actually calling into question, it is actually calling to attention certain versions of, certain processes of life that are otherwise not considered publicly, so I think it is actually quite important. I think Barad's article is actually quite important.

Is there some way in which we need to have different ways of talking about queerness in different ontological registers? So, within the biological realm, within the political realm, the social realm, within the affectional or other realms. There seem to be different versions of what queer means. So, I think queer [ecology] is potentially limitless, but what I would actually like to see us do is speak more specifically about some of the particular conjunctions, some of the more particular

articulations that appear between and among these realms. So, that's kind of a non-answer to your question. . . . It's potentially everything, but I don't think that it should be everything. I think it should be a bunch of very particular things.

Peter Hobbs: I totally understand that point that you would lose specificity and you would lose specificity by opening up the notion of queer to include starfish and lead. And the idea that "if everything's queer, then nothing is queer." I understand that. And, this is sort of a minor difference, if it is a difference, because, I think we . . . are pretty much the same person. [Laughter]

Darren Patrick: But let's zoom in on the difference a little bit. All the disclaimers being on the table, let's talk about that difference, even if it is a minor difference.

Peter Hobbs: Well I knew this was going to come up. So I was thinking about this axiom: If everything is queer then nothing is queer. And how it sort of is an axiom.

Catriona Sandilands: As long as it's not a cliché.

Peter Hobbs: [Laughter] Yeah, and of

course, if "everything is queer then nothing is queer;" I don't quite follow that. If everything is queer, then everything is queer.

Catriona Sandilands: Both things can be true at the same time.

Peter Hobbs: But, regardless of that—

Catriona Sandilands: Maybe the axiom is: "If everything is queer, then nothing is queer in the way that I want it to be queer." [Laughter]

Peter Hobbs: Yeah, I guess the specificity [is] a specificity for certain stories that haven't been worked over enough that I think that you would be hesitant to lose. . . . A similar criticism is made of the posthuman: that we can't talk about the posthuman because we'd lose out on the stories of all those wonderful and horrible stories of being human. . . . So, I totally understand that, but I think that's maybe the difference between; maybe we haven't talked about the difference between a cultural studies approach to queer ecologies and looking at discourse [analysis] approach. . . .

When materialism has been introduced to queer ecologies and has taken on a role, we're looking to think with and through animals and microbes and plants. That is definitely part of the

queer ecology; that's one of the most exciting parts that queer ecology is thinking with and through the animal or the non-human. And you could say the exact same thing: If everything is going to tell us a story then, of course, we're going to lose certain stories.

But I do want to point out that there is this shift away from a cultural studies to more material studies, a notion of performativity, and this call to think with and through non-human. I think [that is] important to queer ecologies.

Catriona Sandilands: I think that we need both things. And the work that most compels me is the work that actually manages to do both things well.

Gordon Brent Brochu-Ingram: Well . . . I haven't read Mel Chen's work, I know of some of [their] earlier work; I'm still stuck on this idea that queer ecologies—through this recognition of a reprocentric and heteronormative biases of 300 years of modern science—has a huge implication for how we view the world. And I thought . . . the back and forth with Peter and Cate is very important, but, for me, it's still fundamental that queer ecologies is part of a greater critique of—and a very profound critique of—much of what we know as biology and ecology. We've just begun to understand what that means for how we view the world and how we identify what's important and what's vulnerable, what we can count on and what is more ephemeral. So, I like the way this conversation is going, but, again, it goes back to a kind of critique of science; colonial science and neo-colonial science, heteronormative science, patriarchal science, all the things that we have just begun to challenge. Because, what I hear with the back and forth between Cate and Peter is . . . a lot of philosophical kinds of nuance that I haven't been able to explore . . . and I'll for sure look at Mel Chen's reading.

For bibliographic notes and a podcast of the complete roundtable discussion, please visit www.yorku.ca/currents or download the podcast from CoHearence on iTunes.



"A VERY SEXY WOODSMAN." Photo by William Notman via McCord Museum.