

Book reviews

Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire

Edited by Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands & Bruce Erickson,
Indiana UP, 2010 \$30.00

REVIEWED BY SARAH MAY LINDSAY

The interconnectivity of social, sexual, political, and environmental thought is explored in the volume *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire*. Compiled and edited by scholars Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson, this anthology includes contributions from a diverse pool of academics, drawing especially from gender relations, philosophy, English, and critical geography.

Queer Ecologies' subtitle is substantial in its scope; each aspect is a dot on a continuum. It may be helpful to understand this volume as an interdisciplinary examination of broad issues that are intricately connected. Thus, as a multi-point intervention into current queer and environmental discussions, it is useful to scholars in various social, ecological, and philosophical fields, and still accessible enough to act as an in-road for those with less knowledge of these themes.

In their introduction, Sandilands and Erickson choose the iconic film *Brokeback Mountain* to investigate the Western cinematographic practice of relegating homosexual acts to certain spaces—a shaming of sorts, fostering a feeling of being apart and reinforcing the need to withdraw from society. Certain spaces and societal arrangements

(alone together, on a mountain) are portrayed as acceptable places for homosexuals to live and love freely. Indeed, the contrast of homosexual desire and open spaces (“spatial-sexual processes”) and heterosexist cultural structures is stark and cold in *Brokeback*. The editors of *Queer Ecologies* critically expose this and point to the melancholia that comes with being suppressed and viewed as something other than “normal.”

This root sadness is woven throughout the volume’s three sub-sections, covering oft-contested “factual” and moral ground in chunks of related thoughtfulness. Beginning in the realm of species distinction and animal studies, the idea of the natural is deconstructed. In Western culture, heterosexuality has been naturalized to such an extent by what Stacy Alaimo claims is biased or misleading research, which results in an incorrect or incomplete knowledge base. Alaimo suggests that the scientific community is “professionally responsible for refuting claims that homosexuality is unnatural,” and that “the scientific silence on homosexuality in animals amounts to a cover-up, deliberate or not.” Throughout her contribution to *Queer Ecologies*, Alaimo questions the legitimacy of heterosexuality as *the* natural or normal mode of

investigation.

A hierarchical structural understanding of ecological communities based on a subjective taxonomy is commonplace. This is embodied both by the naming of species and the practice of speciesism. Elsewhere, ethical theorist Peter Singer explains speciesism as a combination of racism and anthropocentrism. Part 1 of *Queer Ecologies*, “Against Nature? Queer Sex, Queer Animality,” challenges a hierarchal ideology, querying where culture, reproductive justice, and “normal” animal behaviour meet within this pyramidal order. The authors reshape hierarchal thought, recombining the natural into something like David Bell’s “queernaturecultures”—where one does not need to qualify as an individual, independent being to have value; life does not seek legitimacy or acceptance. The authors of the essays in this section ask whom and what constitutes nature, and why homosexuality—particularly in non-humans—is somehow understood as unnatural? Wonderfully, inclusivity is stressed and divisions are blurred in *Queer Ecologies'* first collection of essays.

In Part 2, “Green, Pink, and Public: Queering Environmental Politics,” the focus shifts to politics. Questions reaching across space and place, ecological systems, and community structure fill section two. Andil Gosine addresses reproduction as a necessity, and how this implies “queer acts” are somehow “against nature.” Race is also introduced as a major theme in this section, as contributors speak to the connection be-

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tween space and race, and how portions of society have been claimed, cordoned off, excluded or defended for these purposes. Here, the ecology of landscapes meets ideas of sexual orientation and societal feelings of safety. Lesbian community structures in the USA (Unger) and ghetto environments (Ingram) are identified as locations of strife, both ecologically and socially. In great detail—from a nuanced understanding of “appropriately” queer living quarters, to physical barriers and spatial matrices—the queering of space that occurs in this second section freely admits that “place matters” (Unger) in political cultural organization.

The final section in this examination of queerness and environmentalism, “Desiring Nature? Queer Attachments,” looks at desire, with rich discussions of love, sex acts, need, and understanding. The conversation is heavy with a fierce mixture of frustration and freedom. Questions of what is “natural” are connected to ideas of passion, longing, and belonging. For example, Rachel Stein reviews how feminist, lesbian poets Minnie Bruce Pratt and Adrienne Rich expose homophobia as a “crime-against-nature” ideology.” Stein also brilliantly summarizes the core aim of *Queer Ecologies*, recognizing:

the power of queering nature, making obvious the potency of our ideas about nature and our use of naturalization, for ill or for good, and the very real effects of such discourses on our social/sexual identities and relationships with natural environments.

Moreover, the contribution by Castriona Mortimer-Sandilands, “Melancholy Natures, Queer Ecologies,” works with what is most troubling within the crossing of environmental and queer epistemologies: sadness. Grief lies in the myth that only human societies are violent and unaccepting, and that all others—meant generally (the environment) or specifically (other species)—are peaceful and forgiving; angst is centered in the absence of a safe resting spot. Environmental destruction

parallels societal oppression, and then twirls and combines in a multitude of complex cultural constraints. Mortimer-Sandilands points to mourning, fear, and pain as universalities. Ecological sadness is not set apart from heteronormative oppression—instead they are jointly encased in an overarching state of grieving.

Queer Ecologies is important on many levels of queer and ecological thinking. Problems and triumphs of emotion, fear, oppression, freedom, and understanding flow throughout, making this volume essential to the current

discourses of sexuality, human and other-than-human interconnectivity, and environmental malaise.

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The Once and Future World: Nature as it Was, as it Is, as it Could Be

By J.B. MacKinnon, Random House Canada, 2013 \$29.95

REVIEWED BY SARAH MAY LINDSAY

J.B. MacKinnon’s *The Once and Future World* aims to displace utopian ideas of a ‘perfect’ pre-*Homo sapiens* planet, as well as fictional past accounts of societal peace with ‘nature’. Indeed, MacKinnon paints a powerful temporal trail of ecological loss, expertly situating social phenomena within the larger context of systemic, planetary destruction. Fundamentally, in *Future World*, human societies have perpetually maimed much that was ‘natural’ under the guise of ‘progress’; MacKinnon more precisely explains progress as anthropocentric ‘greed.’ What was once ‘natural’ bears little resemblance to current environmental conditions, as problems such as species extinction, pollution, climate change, habitat loss and poverty are the new normal. *Future World* seeks to reconnect humanity with ecology, pointing to the impossibility of disconnection: humans are in and of our ‘environment.’

This is a work of non-fiction, yet the content and beauty of the author’s prose would lead you to believe you are a reading an account of another place, another time, another world altogether. MacKinnon gently prods the reader with intriguing historical myths of “what once was” while vehemently seizing his audience with warnings of

what will be. This, however, is not a tale steeped in desperation or melancholic messages of the end of days. There are triumphant stories of resilience despite apocalyptic change. Take, for example, the alternate telling of the fate of Rapa Nui’s (Easter Island’s) human citizens. The familiar fable is that the island’s Polynesian settlers harvested the native tree species population to the point of extinction despite their complete reliance on the trees’ existence for their own survival. Excess and greed thus fueled and determined the settlers’ own demise. MacKinnon offers up a competing, increasingly probable fate for at least the humans of Rapa Nui. In this version, the native trees are still culled, yet the Rapa Nuians remain in healthy numbers, having *adapted* to the environmental shift through alternate (rock) gardening practices and the routine consumption of the rat “pests” they had (unknowingly) brought with them from the mainland.

Neither telling has been concretely “proven.” MacKinnon uses these alternate accounts strategically, cautioning that greed in human societies may manifest as a complete disregard for nonhuman animals and the environment, or that, conversely, species annihilation in places of limited and competing re-