

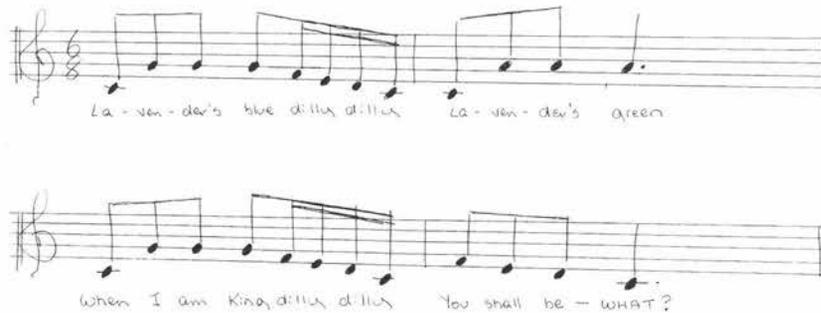
Lavender's Green?

Some Thoughts on Queer(y)ing Environmental Politics



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1.



2.

At the Stein Valley festival in the Summer of 1989, Anne Cameron, who was presumed to be an authority on such things, was asked “what is the place of gay men and lesbians in the environmental movement?” She answered: “everywhere.” Much applause. Next question.

Cameron might have meant that there are multiple places where queer and environmental politics coincide, multiple points of conversation between two profoundly transformative agendas. She might have meant that it is not useful to speak of a *single* ecological space in which lesbians and gay men might find a particular voice. She might have even meant that the entire agenda of environmentalism is in need of a profound “queering,” a process by which a variety of tenets of eco-politics would be held up to polysexual scrutiny.

But in the absence of any significant and sustained conversations between L/G/Bi and environmental politics, I don't think it's possible to read Cameron's statement, or even the applause, optimistically. In the move by which Cameron and her audience so unproblematically moved on to the next question, “everywhere” came to mean “nowhere”: the agenda is already set; there is no useful “queer” specificity to be discussed; get on with it. If you want to be “green,” don't bother showing your “lavender.”¹

3.

- ▼ We're here, we're queer, we're not going nuclear!²
- ▼ Mother Nature is a butch!
- ▼ Out of the closet and into the woods — join us now!
- ▼ 2 - 4 - 6 - 8 - not all life on earth is straight!

4.

It is not enough to point to “one-in-ten” environmentalists, as if the mere presence of gay bodies at blockades of logging roads were a significant form of inclusion or conversation. It is not enough simply to add “heterosexism” to the long list of dominations that shape our relations to nature, to pretend that we can just “add queers and stir” in our formulations of what “oppression” and “exploitation” mean. It is not enough to wear buttons with pink triangles beside the ones that say “Save the Whales” and “Stop Acid Rain.” It is not enough, even, to imagine that the tree you are hugging is the same sex as you.

Or perhaps that’s a start. Maybe it’s even flirting with you.

5.

*This earth is my sister;
I love her daily grace, her silent daring, and how
loved I am.*³

6.

You would think that ecofeminism would be a reasonable place to find some sort of critical examination of the relations between (at least) lesbian and environmental politics. But I am constantly amazed by the profound heterosexuality of its metaphors, the ways in which reproduction, in its narrowest sense, is often located as the “apex” of women’s connection to nature. Why do women not embrace “sister earth” as a lover? Has the sexualization of nature been so completely, so *unwillingly* penetrative—“raping” the wild—as to render celibate our affections?

Or is it that the inclusion of “queer” would force us to call into question the ways in which “women,” as a category, has been invoked in a rather monolithic way, both in ecofeminism itself and in the “worldview” that it purportedly challenges? Discourses of “difference,” meaning heterosexual difference, live on in many ecofeminist discussions of “who women are,” and also in many understandings of “nature” itself. Therein lies a challenge.

7.

Snails are hermaphrodites. Earthworms too. Bedbugs are homosexual [now we know why our parents cautioned us “don’t let the bedbugs bite”]. Geese indulge in *menages a trois*.⁴

8.

Arguments from “nature” have been commonly used to attack any sexuality other than reproductive heterosexual penetration. Despite the considerable evidence that many species engage in same-gender sex (however you may want to understand the validity of using “evidence” from other species to reflect upon human behaviour), “homosexuality” has been socially positioned as “unnatural.” Indeed, when same-gender sex is observed in other species, “the paradigm of heterosexism ... selectively overrides the use of nature as a model of alternate gender and sexual relationships.”⁵ Yet “nature” is still invoked as a tool of condemnation.

At the same time, “homosexuality” has been socially positioned as “uncivilized.” As Gary Kinsman notes, discourses around “degeneracy” have been used in medical and psychiatric practice to define “homosexuals, like criminals, as throwbacks to earlier stages of civilization.”⁶ A mutant Darwin continues to haunt us.

“Queers” have thus been positioned as boundary-creatures: neither fully “natural” nor fully “civilized.”⁷ Surely here the inclusion of “queer” into environmental politics would have us interrogate the discursive relations by which such a position is possible? Given the tendency in (some) environmental political theory to describe “oppression” in terms of the operations of hierarchical dualism (nature/culture, man/woman), it would seem that the inclusion of “queer” would also have us interrogate the adequacy of “dualism” as a description of power, and the political forms that result from such an analysis.⁸



Cock-of-the-Rock

9.

queer, a., & v.t. 1. Strange, odd, eccentric; of questionable character, shady, suspect. 2. Spoil, put out of order.
- Concise Oxford Dictionary

10.

Perhaps we are asking the wrong question. The inclusion of “queer” into environmental politics must involve not so much a noun as an adjective and verb. Rather than enumerate some series of points where lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and transgenderists can carve out some sort of unique “position” in relation to environmental issues, perhaps the point is to “queer” nature itself, to create “queer” environments.

To queer nature is to question its normative use, to interrogate relations of knowledge and power by which certain “truths” about ourselves have been allowed to pass, unnoticed, without question. It is a process by which all relations to nature become de-naturalized, by which we question the ways in which we are located in nature, by which we question the uses to which “nature” has been put. To queer nature is to “put out of order” our understandings, so our “eccentricities” can be produced more forcefully.

Queer environments are thus those in which the boundaries between “nature” and “culture” are shown to be arbitrary, dialectical, mutually-constitutive. These are places where “unnatural” and “uncivilized” combine to produce questionable, shady, suspect, characters who are not comfortable inhabiting existing bifurcations.

11.

The cock-of-the-rock, a native of South America, has a permanently erected crest that practically conceals its small beak. This strange bird’s chief claim to fame lies in its extraordinary ritual dancing ceremonies. During these performances, one male at a time cavorts and postures on a rock or outcrop whilst the other males and the females watch near by.⁹

12.

Read the cock-of-the-rock as a drag queen both to call into question the “naturalness” of any particular sexuality or gender, and to force us to consider the situatedness of all interpretive practices around “nature.”

Position drag “in” nature both to suggest that “nature” may be partially performative, and to challenge the boundaries between “truth” and “artifice.”

Speak of nature and artifice as non-mutually-exclusive to suggest that the truth may be stranger than we could ever imagine.

13.

The earth has innumerable modes of being that are not human modes. Our direct intuitions tell us that the earth is infinitely strange, even where gentle and beautiful.¹⁰

We have met strange and it is us.¹¹

14.

A politics that would have us celebrate “strangeness” would place queer at the centre, rather than on the margins, of the discursive universe. It is not that we encounter “the stranger” only when we visit “wilderness,” but that s/he/it inhabits even the most everyday of our actions. To treat the world as “strange” is to open up the possibility of wonder, to speak also with the impenetrable spaces between the words in our language.

Such a project lies at the core of refiguring both human relations to nonhuman nature, and human relations to each other. It involves both a certain humbleness, and, in William Connolly’s words, a certain generosity. “Not a generosity growing out of the unchallengeable privilege of a superior social position and moral ontology, but one emerging from enhanced appreciation of dissonances within our own identities.”¹² Not a rigid boundary between Self/knowledge, and Other/fear, but movement in the world through a multitude of queer environments.

15.

*I would have loved to live in a world
of women and men gaily
in collusion with green leaves, stalks,
building mineral cities, transparent domes,
little huts of woven grass
each with its own pattern—
a conspiracy to coexist
with the Crab Nebula, the exploding
universe, the Mind —¹³*



16.

Gaily in collusion. Such a process would seem to mark the subversive conversation between queer and environmental politics, a conversation that demands of each change, accommodation, displacement. The “nature” of environmentalism, here, would seem to depend on such an articulation.

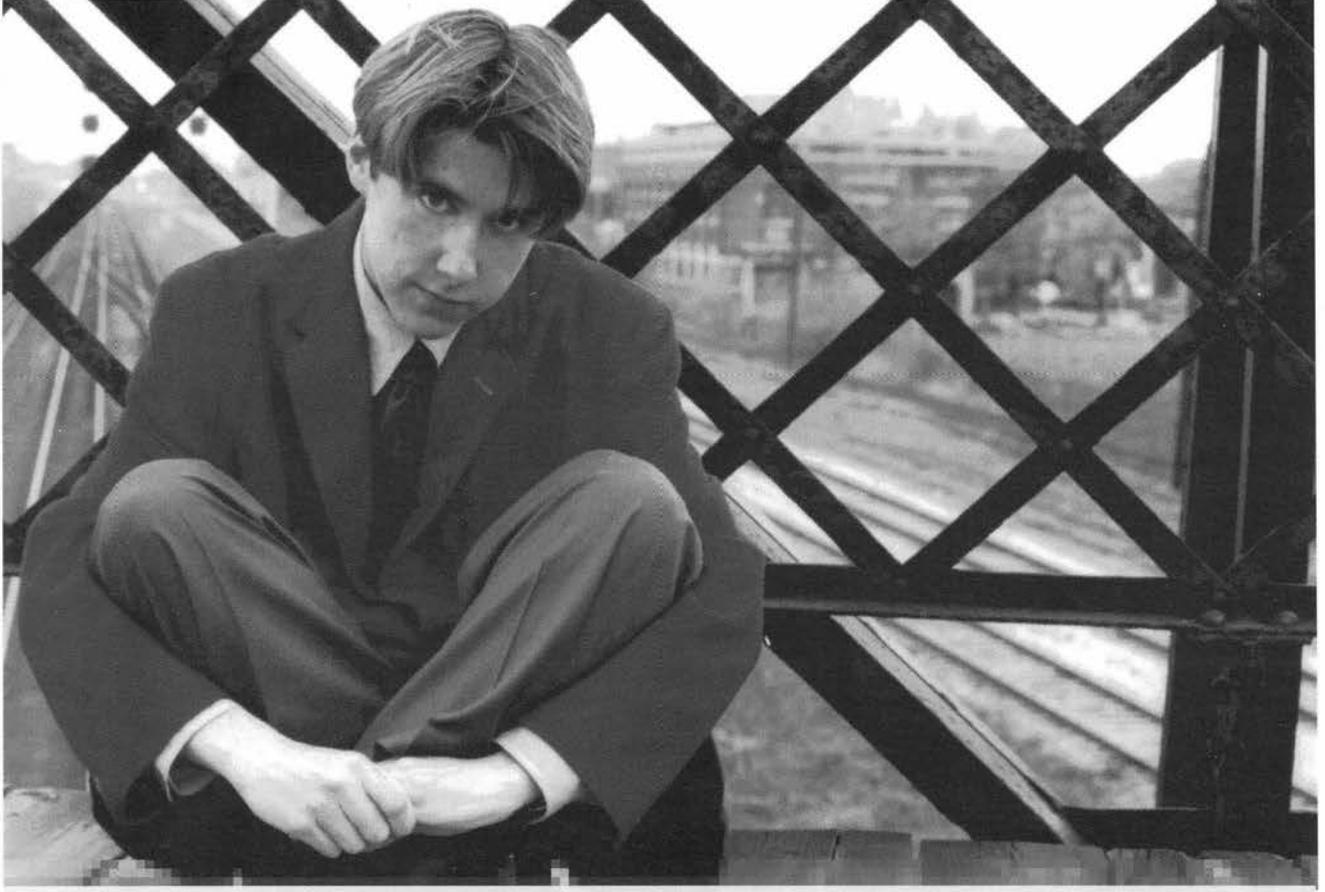
Strange bedfellows, perhaps, queers and environmentalists, but stranger, hopefully, the results.

Notes

- ¹ The corollary position — if you want to be “lavender,” don’t bother showing your “green” — will not be discussed in this paper. But I encourage the question: how can one speak of “greening” the queer, and not just “queering” the green?
- ² Queer Nation, during the Gulf War, chanted “we’re here, we’re queer, we’re not going to war” in a variety of demonstrations. I found this much more interesting than the otherwise endless repetition of old John Lennon lyrics.
- ³ Susan Griffin, *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), p. 219.
- ⁴ Jane Curry, “On Looking to Nature for Women’s Place,” in *And a Deer’s Ear, Eagle’s Song, and Bear’s Grace: Animals and Women*, ed. Theresa Corrigan and Stephanie Hoppe (Pittsburgh: Cleis Press, 1990), p. 152.
- ⁵ Bonnie B. Spencer, “Lessons’ from ‘Nature’: Gender Ideology and Sexual Ambiguity in Biology,” in *Body Guards: The Cultural Politics of Gender Ambiguity*, eds. Julia Epstein and Kristina Straub (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 330.
- ⁶ Stephen Jay Gould, cited in Gary Kinsman, *The Regulation of Desire: Sexuality in Canada* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1987), p. 50.
- ⁷ On this paradox, see Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 132.
- ⁸ Donna Haraway’s argument similarly critiques the idea of “dualism” as a description of contemporary forms of power. Her “cyborg” is, of course, also a boundary-creature; one could even argue that the category “homosexual” is “cyborg,” insofar as it is at least partly a scientific construction (see Kinsman). So here, I invoke her discussions of fractured and partial identities, although not in detail. See Donna Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century,” in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991).
- ⁹ Desmond Morris, *Introducing Curious Creatures* (London: Spring Books, 1961), p. 64.
- ¹⁰ Alan Wittbecker, “Nature as Self,” *The Trumpeter* 6:3 (Summer, 1989), p. 80.
- ¹¹ Paraphrased from Walt Kelly’s “We have met the enemy and he is us,” on a Pogo Poster for Earth Day, 1971.
- ¹² William Connolly, “Voices from the Whirlwind,” in *In the Nature of Things: Language, Politics, and the Environment*, eds. Jane Bennett and William Chaloupka (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 221.
- ¹³ Adrienne Rich, from “The Phenomenology of Anger,” in *Adrienne Rich’s Poetry*, ed. Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi and Albert Gelpi (New York: W.W. Norton, 1975), p. 71.

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Heather Cameron, "DandyLions" 1993, from the Queer Sights, Toronto exhibition