

Conversations in Queer Ecologies

An Editorial

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In *UnderCurrents* Volume 6 (1994), the editorial collective experimentally mapped out intersections between queer and environmental politics. The goal of Vol. 6, called “Queer/Nature,” was to subvert normative categories of nature by reading them through the perspective of queer identity. In the opening editorial, Shauna M. O’Donnell and the *UnderCurrents* editorial collective wrote that, “a politics of nature can no longer be an articulation of white, male, heterosexual prescriptive or descriptive privilege” (2). Perhaps especially since the release of “Queer/Nature,” critical discussions of/at the intersections of gender, sexuality, and nature have not only become more commonplace, they have also widened in scope to considerations of ecological relationships. Taken in a broad sense, ecology speaks of both complex webs of relations between the human and non-human—themselves ideological, racialized, and problematic conceptual markers—and the simultaneously fraught and comforting notion of “home,” the *oikos*.

In the Faculty of Environmental Studies (FES) at York University, where this journal is housed, queer ecological work has both learned from and contributed to a range

of scholarly conversations (Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson; Hird and Giffney; see also Anderson et al.). At the same time, the *UnderCurrents* editorial collective is itself situated in a community that constantly pushes the limits of a politics of inclusion as part of scholarly-activist-artistic efforts to move beyond apparently settled disciplinary approaches to “environmentalist” and/or “queer” identities and practices. There are many crucial spaces where such efforts unfold: in the individual contributions to the field of queer ecologies by students and faculty, on the walls of and in the physical space of the Zig Zag and Crossroads galleries, in the classroom, and through connections made between queer ecological work taking place here

and work being done elsewhere. However, for this editorial collective of Vol. 19, it is the Equity Seminar Series, organized by the student-led Accessibility, Community and Equity group and sponsored by FES, that stands out for its exceptionally generative re-imaginings of what, exactly, a politics of environmental and ecological justice can—and, indeed, should—encompass. The Seminar Series has consistently highlighted scholarship, arts, and activism at the intersections of disability justice, anti-racist and decolonial scholarship and activism, queer, trans, and feminist politics, and critiques of institutional violence. We note this work here because it shapes how we look at both the process and outcomes of creating this Vol-

ume. Further, and more importantly, the work of the Seminar Series is crucial to the political ecology of knowledge in which *UnderCurrents* is situated. With this in mind, Volume 19, “From Queer/Nature to Queer Ecologies: Celebrating 20 Years of Scholarship and Creativity,” sets out neither to represent queer ecologies as a whole, nor to suggest that the work of re-imagining environmental politics is finished. Rather, we seek to engage with some of the exemplary ways in which queer ecological imaginations continue to evolve in and from our particular context.

Here, we cannot help but think of another context—the broader world of queer theory—in which there is something of a seasonal tradition of editorializing and worrying the boundaries and aspirations of both “queering” and “theorizing.” Such reflection has identified the anxious intersections that define and delimit the potentials of both “queerness” and “theory.” Take Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner’s 1995 piece for *PMLA*, “What Does Queer Theory Teach us About X?” In it, the authors point to the “radically anticipatory” aspect of queer theory, which they offer as a way to confound “assertions that queer theory has only academic—which is to say, dead—politics” (344). Shirking both easy labels of “theory” and the citational universes they invite

and imply, Berlant and Warner opt for a radically open idea of queer *commentary* that addresses and speaks of queer *publics* “that can comprehend their own differences of privilege and struggle . . . whose abstract spaces can also be lived in, remembered, and hoped for” (344). Here, queer derives its salience from resisting presumptions of both “stable referential content and pragmatic force” (344) even as it “maintains a desire to create new contexts, and not just professional ones in which cool work can be performed” (347). These contexts necessarily include political and personal communities that overlap with academia, but are, thankfully, never fully captured or knowable by its particular mechanisms of formalization. The queer personal remains political. Or, we might turn to another introductory editorial written in 2005 by David Eng, Judith Halberstam, and Jose Esteban Munoz that asked, “What’s Queer About Queer Studies Now?” The authors address this question by way of noting “the limits of queer epistemology, the denaturalizing potentials of queer diasporas, and the emergent assumptions of what could be called queer liberalism” (1). Here, queer troubles the intersections of “empire, race, migration, geography, subaltern communities, activism, and class” (2). Their answer to the titular question? “A lot” (3).

As we began work on this volume, we felt similar anxieties and potentials latent in noting—as we did in our call for papers—a shift from queer “nature” to queer “ecologies.” In this movement, we saw an opening for something other than a boundary-drawing or canon-making exercise. Indeed, we hopefully imagined that this volume would sing a different tune about queer theory, one with strong notes of environmental politics and practices, keyed to queer criticisms that have grown around and in those fields of power. The putative shift from “nature” to “ecologies” not only suggests critical pluralization, it also tracks with the movement of environmental studies beyond now well-established, if not mainstream, critiques of nature/society binaries. Certainly, the term *nature* is no less sa-

lient, complex, or contradictory than it was twenty years ago. Nevertheless, a move toward ecologies speaks to the proliferation of sites, relationships, “objects,” and contexts that might either be queer/ed or that might speak back to institutionalized theories and practices of queerness, in turn unsettling our ideas of what such theories and practices should focus on or how they are reproduced both as and in environmental studies.

Of course, shifts in academic queer theory and environmental studies are not metonyms for changing concrete political struggles, even if they are deeply concerned with such struggles. In the twenty years since Volume 6 was published, a thoroughly non-exhaustive litany of such changes would doubtlessly include: The putative “end” of the 1990s HIV/AIDS crisis in North America, the dawn of HIV criminalization in Canada, an increasing mainstream political emphasis on gay marriage and gays in the military, increased mainstream attention to racialized police violence and discourses of “safe space,” the alarming rise of Islamophobia following 9/11, related and complicit projects of homonationalism, the escalation of apartheid conditions in Palestine, the intensification of global warming and the uneven distribution of its impacts in terms of race, class, and gender. Each of

these broad issues finds specific articulations at York, whether in resistance to racial profiling and campus militarization through the Cops off Campus, the persistence of groups such as Students Against Israeli Apartheid despite administrative censorship and sanction, or the continued work of student-activists, including several in our own faculty, to empower communities disproportionately affected by HIV/AIDS and its criminalization.

Our collective decision to focus on queer ecologies in this context has brought forward important, and necessarily challenging, questions: Who and what is part of queer ecologies? Who and what is not? Why? How do our own networks, assumptions, positions, and locations shape our desire for a breadth of submissions, especially from perspectives and fields that have not always been tightly interwoven into the discourses, ideas, and practices of queer ecologies as we had described it in the call for papers? It is one thing to remain open to submissions from trans*, queer, of color, and disability scholarship—an openness we hopefully expressed in our call—but such openness was only a first step toward asking how our own reflections and assumptions about what queer ecologies has been might translate into the concrete work envisioning what queer ecologies might yet become. As



BECOMING WOLF-READING BEUYS. Peter Hobbs.

we release this volume, such work has rarely seemed more urgent or more possible. Indeed, in “From Queer/Nature to Queer Ecologies” we see a celebration of the strengths of queer ecologies’ affirmatively perverse and polyvocal imagination. At the same time, we note the important work yet to be done in further weaving those strengths together with work that not only queerly resists precise definition, but does so while staying firmly fixed on the goal of justice both in our immediate communities and in a wider world.

The contributions to this Volume offer multiple ways into the discussion of what queer ecologies has been, is, and might become. We highlight two particularly powerful contributions here. In “Shimmers Below the Surface: Emergent Strategy and Movement Building through 2-QTPOC Media,” Anabel Khoo explores how queer ecologies articulates with social movements, activist art, and activist scholarship. Focused on the two-spirit, queer and trans people of colour (2-QTPOC) media performance collective Mangos with Chili, Khoo argues that the ecological notion of emergence helps us to recognize the too often submerged, gendered, and racialized labour of collective organizing. Khoo’s piece brings queer ecologies into conversation with the work of collective healing from the deep wounds of racism, colonialism, and the oppression of gender and sexually non-conforming people. Khoo’s approach to queer ecologies also speaks of intersecting sites, systems, and strategies of both oppression and liberation, attuning us to the descriptive power of concepts such as structures of feeling, affective intensities, and relational dynamics.

Bambitchell’s cyanotype series, “Where the Trees Stood in Water,” offers a powerful example of a collaborative, queer, and affective intervention

into environmental politics. Using archival maps of Toronto, Bambitchell’s amorphous, time-travelling, and gender fluid cartographer guides us through the city’s colonial, industrial, and gentrified past and present in a journey that creatively resists hegemonic histories of the land. Bambitchell’s work troubles officialized narratives and surfaces often ignored or silenced stories and queer geographies. Through beautifully layered images, “Where the Trees Stood in Water,” blends craft, fact, and fiction in a manner that exceeds what scholarly work traditionally can—or, indeed, often aspires to—accomplish, while also encapsulating the deeply sedimented forms of power that queer ecological scholarship so methodically seeks to unravel.

While the bulk of this issue is made up of work that we received in response to our call for papers, it also includes edited transcriptions of recordings that we collected from a ninety-minute roundtable conversation with Gordon Brent Brochu-Ingram, Peter Hobbs, and Catriona Sandilands, all of whom have contributed in different and important ways to the growth of queer ecologies. Both the “Queer Ecologies Roundtable” itself and our choice to include parts of it in this issue speak to our desire to give readers many ways to approach a deceptively simple question: What is queer ecologies, here and now? We also see the roundtable as a way to move *UnderCurrents* beyond the page and to take seriously the role of alternative media in democratizing knowledge production and promoting creative pedagogies. In collaboration with *CoHearence*, a podcast series produced by PhD students in FES, an audio podcast will be made available on the *UnderCurrents* website.

Much like the 1994 volume, “From Queer/Nature to Queer Ecologies” is both an experimental and particular

snapshot of what is currently conceived of as queer nature/ecology. Our hope for this volume is to push past well-established discourses of queering environmentalism by looking not only at the journey to queer ecologies, as explored in the “Queer Ecologies Roundtable,” but also at the very ecologies (and queerness) of queer ecology itself. While the document you are holding in your hands or reading on the screen suggests some of the ways that the contributors to Volume 19—along with the *UnderCurrents* editorial collective—imagine potential trajectories for the field, queer ecologies remains necessarily slippery; we hesitate to make any concrete claims regarding its future beyond what we have already called for. We can, however, suggest ways that *UnderCurrents* might continue to grapple with discussions opened up in “Queer/Nature” and taken up again here. So, we end this editorial where “Queer/Nature” began, with a commitment to reimagining the limits of “a politics of inclusion” (3) and to raising questions of what it means to actively undertake such a politics in our institutional work.

As we close, we would like to note that the crucial insistence on social justice as both a topic of discussion and a call to action in our collective will find form and content in the the next edition of the journal, our third since relaunching in 2013. That forthcoming Volume of *UnderCurrents* will focus on Environmental Justice scholarship and activism. As the outgoing editorial collective, we could not feel better about the direction *UnderCurrents* is going as it continues to bring together work that challenges not only the boundaries of scholarly disciplines, but also the boundaries of our political imaginations both in and beyond the university.

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