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Unnatural Passions?: Notes Toward a Queer Ecology [1]

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Introducing queer ecology: from perspective to power

In the opening of her 1997 memoir *North Enough,* Jan Zita Grover describes moving to the north woods of Minnesota from San Francisco: “I did not move to Minnesota for the north woods,” she writes. “I had only the vaguest idea of what the term meant when I first saw them in early spring, the birch, aspen, and tamarack skinned of their needles and leaves. I thought they looked diseased.” [2] Given that Grover had been a front-line AIDS worker in the 1980s in a city violently decimated by the disease, it is hardly surprising that she saw sickness everywhere. “I moved there,” she writes, “to try to leave behind – or at least, at a remoter distance – the plague that had consumed my life for the past six years.” [3] Of course, Grover was not able to leave her plague behind; she was still “heavy with mourning, thick with sorrow.” [4] Although she moved to the north woods with the hope of finding some sort of healing in the natural landscape, a “geographic cure” as she put it, she soon realized that it was not possible.

The idea that one might find natural

wholeness in this hard, boreal landscape was shattered at the sight of its large, multiple clear-cuts and the thin “idiot strips” of trees along the highways that foolishly attempt to conceal the scars to the landscape caused by the softwood pulp and paper industry. The post-contact history of the north woods reveals a region repeatedly marked by human greed and error: Farming was next to impossible on the thin, acid soil, and attempts to drain the ever-present swampland in the 1920s resulted only in crippling debt. Logging, the only commercial option left for the region, proceeded virtually without restraint: No paradise found, here. As Grover writes, “the Upper Midwest is a mosaic of such local disasters, once-intact, living systems plundered in ignorance, greed, and unbounded hopefulness.” 5

Exactly in their ecological defilement, however, these wounded landscapes ended up teaching her. “Instead of ready-made solutions,” Grover writes that the north woods:

> offered me an unanticipated challenge, a spiritual discipline: to appreciate them, I needed to learn how to see their scars, defacement, and artificiality, and then beyond those to their strengths – their historicity, the difficult beauties that underlay their deformity. 6

In this landscape, she came to understand that her challenge was not to leave AIDS behind, but to recognize and accept the impact it had had. In fact, the lasting resonances of AIDS allowed her to meet the challenge of coming to love the north woods

not in spite, but because, of their wounds: "In learning how to love the north woods, not as they are fancied but as they are, I discovered the lessons that AIDS had taught me and became grateful for them." 7

Grover's metaphoric connection between "AIDS and other clear-cuts" is both painful and beautiful. She describes, for example, changing the dressing on a dying friend's leg macerated by Kaposi's Sarcoma: "It did not look like a leg. It looked like freshly-turned soil, dark and ruptured." 8 But Grover finds in the unlikely and horrific space of her friend's dying a real appreciation for the plenitude of living. She can see in a festering wound the terrifying beauty of flesh turning to soil, and she can also thus see in a clear-cut both the ravages of capitalist extraction and the vivacity of jack pines, aspens, and poplars.

In her recognition of the ways in which AIDS influenced her ability to appreciate the natural environments around her, Grover demonstrates what I will call a "queer ecological" sensibility. By this label, I mean that she focuses on dimensions of her experience born in the specific history of a queer community, and uses the resulting emotional resonances and conceptual links to live in nature in a way that reflects this queer experience. Simply put: Grover sees nature through queer eyes, and what she sees is important and unique. I am not suggesting that AIDS is a uniquely "gay" disease, nor that the experience of caring for a PWA would automatically give rise to a queer ecology. But it is apparent that the San Francisco queer community was affected in particular ways by AIDS, and that this set of experiences cultivated some very particular perceptions of life, death,

bodies, and nature.

With Grover as my guide, I am arguing that there is indeed such a thing as a queer ecology. This statement should not come as a surprise for those readers familiar with ecofeminism or environmental justice. Ecofeminists have argued for thirty years that gender is a significant factor in shaping perceptions of natural environments. For example, in some situations such as resource communities, gendered divisions of labor organize men and women's work very differently. In a forest-dependent community in which logging companies employ mostly men to run the heavy equipment typical of industrial forestry, and in which women might work in service industries or in the home, there is likely to be a difference between men and women in terms of their everyday perceptions of the forest. Similarly, the environmental justice movement has brought attention to the fact that ideas of nature are heavily racialized. For example, in a segregated landscape, African Americans have access to very different "natures" than do White Americans, an experience that clearly influences a community's environmental values.

For ecofeminists and environmental justice advocates, questions of epistemology are inherently linked with issues of power. They argue that sexism and racism are systemic forms of oppression that negatively influence human beings' relationships with the natural world, and also that ideas and institutions of nature are important sites in which sexism and racism are organized. To give you an example: Beginning in the late nineteenth century, the national parks movement advocated the protection of areas of "pristine" wilderness from

encroaching settlement and resource extraction. In fact, we often hold out such park advocates as John Muir, founder of the Sierra Club, as heroic progenitors of the modern environmental movement. Yet we must note that parks like Yellowstone and Banff were understood as destinations for recreational travelers, places where the elite could partake in the healthy and morally uplifting activities of hiking and mountain climbing. In this linkage of preservation with elite recreation, we see a very class-, race- and gender-specific view of nature being imposed on the landscape. It is also important to point out that both Yellowstone and Banff were *inhabited* at the time of their creation: In order to become sufficiently pristine for travelers in search of picturesque wilderness they were physically and legislatively *emptied* of their aboriginal populations.

Clearly, first peoples working in the land were not part of the idea of nature informing the national parks movement, and the institution of that white ideal was an important instance of racial oppression. The very desire for wilderness parks, as expressed by Muir, was also racist. Muir's argument was that the rapidly industrializing cities of the east were, literally, *polluted* by the increasing presence of non-European immigrants, giving rise to the need for "clean" spaces for white folks. By the late nineteenth century such cities were also places where *gender* was undergoing rapid transformation, as women were entering the industrial labor force. Middle-class women were beginning to make inroads into higher education and the professions. Thus, as historian Peter Boag notes, by the time Theodore Roosevelt came along there was a sense among white North American men

that their masculinity was under siege in cities. “In response to shifting gender ideals brought about by alterations in the economic order, middle- and upper-class men sought new ways … to define their manhood.” 9 With Muir and Roosevelt at the helm, such men turned to aggressive nature recreation – sport hunting, mountaineering – as a means through which to affirm their virility; thus, the parks came to embody a specifically *masculine* ideal of nature, one that excluded women, the urban working class, and non-Europeans. To quote Boag again, “as Roosevelt and other middle-and upper-class American men of his era understood it, masculinity and even the whole ‘human race’ depended on environmental conditions opposite of what the city provided.” 10 Thus here, parks are important sites in which to see the intertwined operations of race, gender, class and nature, and are also implicated in the social relations of sexuality. Parks were born *from* a gendered and racialized view of nature, and were also used to impose gendered and racialized relations *on* nature. In turn, parks supported and extended racialized and class ideals of masculinity, and literally erased aboriginal peoples from the landscape, with fairly disastrous results for all concerned, including nature.

Returning rather abruptly to main point of this essay, ecofeminism and environmental justice open our eyes to the fact that nature organizes and is organized by complex power relations. What queer ecology adds is the fact that these power relations include sexuality. But what does an analysis of environmental issues grounded in a queer perspective reveal? What does it mean to think about nature as a site in which the social relations of sexuality are played out,

and vice versa? I will approach these questions in three, related ways. First, I will explore some of the historical connections that have developed between institutions of sexuality and institutions of nature. We can see that modern understandings of sexuality are deeply influenced by historically specific ideas of nature, perhaps most obviously in the classification of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer bodies as, somehow, unnatural. Connected to this conceptual history is a second line of exploration: we can see that many modern formations of natural space – including parks and other designated nature spaces – are organized by prevalent assumptions about sexuality, and especially a move to *institutionalize* heterosexuality by linking it to particular environmental practices. Finally, I will discuss how a queer ecological project might proceed by *challenging* these problematic links between the power relations of sexuality and nature. Queers have, in a variety of ways, challenged the destructive pairing of heterosexuality and nature: by developing "reverse discourses" oriented to challenging dominant understandings of our “unnatural passions”; by borrowing ecological thinking to develop radically transformative gay and lesbian politics; and, like Grover, by taking elements of queer experience to construct an alternative environmental perspective.

Histories of sexuality and ecology: un/ naturalizing the queer

Perhaps the most important starting-point for this analysis is the fact that the categories through which we currently understand sexuality and sexual identity are not “natural.” By this, I mean that the categories gay, lesbian, bisexual,

transgender, and queer are not given “in nature.” Although, as biologist Bruce Bagemihl has demonstrated, homoerotic activity flourishes, and always has, in a wide range of animal species, the way in which we predominantly understand sexuality at the turn of the twenty-first century is a historical artifact located in very specific ideas and institutions. 11 In particular, the idea of sexuality as a part of one’s identity, and a part of one’s identity that might be grounded in some fact of *biology*, is a very recent development indeed. As Michel Foucault has pointed out, “homosexual” as a distinct category of persons is a unique product of Victorian society; prior to the nineteenth century, there was a wide range of forms of sexual activity, but these sexual acts were – among men, at least – understood as potentially occurring anywhere, and between anyone. 12 Thus, for example, the British Navy had a rule by which buggery was perfectly legitimate provided the sailors had been at sea for at least six months; sodomy, here, was not something that happened because a sailor “was gay,” but was simply a particular – if still not quite respectable – sexual activity.

The fact that we now commonly understand sexuality as question of natural identity has a great deal to do with the confluence of bio-medical thinking and social regulation that developed during the latter half of the nineteenth century. At the same time as biological science was creating an understanding of categories of *species* based on their possession of certain traits, medical science was developing a categorization of *sexual* traits with the agenda of explaining sexual behavior as part of the biological life of the human species. The rise of evolutionary thought

defined a biological narrative that had a large influence on medical research on sexuality; particularly important were ideas of sexual selection and reproductive fitness, in which the species survival was understood to be dependent on the strongest and best reproducers getting together. In this narrative, heterosexuality came to be understood, for the first time in history, as a distinct category of sexual practice, the naturalness of which was solidified by its opposition to so-called deviant sexual identities that did not fit into an evolutionary narrative. For Darwin, only heterosexual courtship and mating could be "natural" because it was reproduction that allowed the species to continue; despite overwhelming evidence to suggest that homoeroticism is everywhere in nature, evolutionary thought thus came to define it as aberrant.

In medicine, homosexuality was classified as an *illness* (as opposed to a sin), as a pathology that focused on the sexualized individual rather than the sexual act. As Foucault notes, modern medicine moved us from the regulation of sexual acts to the organization and "treatment" of sexual identities; where once there may have been women who had sex with women (although the Victorians did not ever really acknowledge it), now there were formal bearers of sexual categories –"gender inverts," "tribades," and "lesbians" – whose sexual activities with other women could be linked to some basic biological fault. In short, in the late nineteenth century, sexuality became naturalized; an individual's sexual desires were recoded as expressions of an inherent sexual condition, and that condition was understood in strongly biological terms. But there is an

interesting paradox here: Homosexuality was simultaneously naturalized *and* considered "unnatural," something *deviant* from a primary, normative heterosexuality.

There are many important things to say about this process. In the first place, it is not just that ideas of nature were instrumental in the social regulation of sexuality, but that heterosexuality came to be the defining sexual paradigm for ideas of evolution and ecology. Heterosexual reproduction was the only form of sexual activity leading directly to the continuation of a species from one generation to the next; thus, logically, other sexual activities must be either aberrant or, at best, indirectly part of the heterosexual reproductive process. Preening rituals between male cock-of-the-rocks were read only as competition for female attention, and not *as* homoerotic activity between two males. Even now, some evolutionary psychologists tie themselves into knots trying to explain the eventual reproductive significance of the prolific same-gender sexual activity that regularly occurs among female bonobos. 13

The science of ecology was strongly influenced by this evolutionary narrative. The logic goes like this: If the ability of a species to survive in its environment is tied to its reproductive fitness, then "healthy" environments are those in which such heterosexual activity flourishes. Clearly, this reasoning is not entirely sound, guided more by heterosexist assumptions than by a complex understanding of the diverse social relations of sexuality occurring in various animal species. But it has had unfortunate consequences. In one case, well-meaning ecologists, convinced of the evolutionary pathology of same-gender eroticism, argued

that the widespread presence of apparently lesbian activity among seagulls in a particular location must be evidence of some major environmental catastrophe. 14 Of course, it wasn't: The world is full of lesbian gulls. This kind of "repro-centric" environmental position remains dominant; indeed, it has also been used to argue that the contemporary prevalence of transgender individuals (human and other) must have behind it some contaminating event or process. However much one might want to be able to pinpoint animal indicators of pollution or other environmental change, the *assumption* that heterosexuality is the only natural sexual form is clearly not an appropriate benchmark for ecological research. Yet even in environmental arguments about the destruction caused by human population growth, the paradigm of "natural" heterosexuality overrides the obvious fact that there are plenty of non-reproductive sexual options out there.

In the first place, then, we have a situation in which sexuality was biologized into naturalized normative categories, *and* in which developing evolutionary and ecological thinking was influenced by a strongly heterosexist paradigm. In the second place, it wasn't just evolution that came to be coded heterosexually during this period. While the late nineteenth century saw the rise of both modern understandings of sexuality and evolutionary ideas of species health, including human health, it also saw the beginnings of modern environmentalism, and in particular, the politics of wilderness preservation and urban greening.

Queer environments: the sexual politics of natural spaces

Here, I would like to turn our attention away from ecology as a science and toward environmentalism as a politics of natural space, in which sexuality has also had interesting influences. Indeed, the sexual values enacted in struggles over space have had at least as strong an influence on environmentalism as those enmeshed in the science of ecology. Although there are many stories I could tell, what I would like to talk about, briefly, is the fact I mentioned in my discussion of national parks at the beginning of the paper. To reiterate: In its early incarnation, North American environmentalism emerged as a response to the rise of industrial cities. As I have argued, wilderness and rural spaces came to be valued as sites to be preserved “away” from the corrupting influences of urban industrial modernity. In addition, the cultivation of “natural” spaces inside cities, including urban parks such as Central Park in New York, was conceived as a way to bring health and morality to the city’s inhabitants. Nature was, here, a space of intensive moral regulation; given the increasing association of sexuality with ideas of nature, sex became a key element in the organization of nature as a regulatory space.

The early parks movement was, as I mentioned, born partly from a desire to facilitate recreational practices that would restore threatened masculine virtues. Of course, this desire was also planted in the assumption that cities were sites of the particular moral “degeneracy” associated with homosexuality. In part as a result of the idea that homosexuality was a sort of illness, medical thinkers of the late nineteenth century came to believe that the

environmental conditions of large urban centers actually cultivated homosexuality. There were various explanations offered for this supposed urban moral degeneration: the idea that the work men did in cities no longer brought them into close and honorable contact with nature; the racist belief that homosexuality was associated with "immigrant" populations; and the growing idea that homosexuality might have environmental causes. To quote Boag, "pollution, tainted foods, and even the fast-paced nature of urban life," in the minds of some Victorian physicians, "induced" homosexuality. 15 In response, the creation of remote recreational wild spaces and the demarcation of "healthy" green spaces inside cities, was understood partly as a therapeutic antidote to the social ravages of effeminate homosexuality.

The joint construction of sex and nature is quite complex; although I will not get into it here, it is also strongly tied to modern ideas of nationalism in both the United States and Canada. There are, however, two sets of ideas I would like to pull out. First, there is the assumption that homosexuality is a product of the *urban*, and that rural and wilderness spaces are thus somehow "free" from the "taint" of homoerotic activity. Nothing, in fact, could be further from the truth. At the end of the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, the western wilderness was a space heavily dominated by communities of men. These men – prospectors, cowboys, ranchers, foresters -- like British sailors at sea for more than six months, frequently engaged in homosexual activity. Indeed, if sexologist Alfred Kinsey's research was correct, there was in the nineteenth century actually *more* same-sex activity in the remote wilderness than there

was in the cities.

As I suggested earlier, such men were not understood as “homosexuals.” To quote Kinsey, “these are men who have faced the rigors of nature in the wild…. Such a background breeds the attitude that sex is sex, irrespective of the nature of the partner with whom the relation is had.” 16 It was not until homosexuality became coded as an inherent and biologically-based *identity* that it came to be understood as an illness and located in the “artificiality” of cities. Certainly, cities made it easier for interested men to find anonymous homoerotic contacts. Also, port cities such as New York and San Francisco eventually became very important places for homosexual men to carve out spaces for their fledgling sexual communities. But it was the growing *visibility* of these communities, and the increasing association of homosexuality with artificiality, that tied the homosexual to the urban, *not* some actually greater homoerotic presence. Simply put, it was not until the homosexual became urban that he became “unnatural”; emerging environmental critiques of the artificiality of cities were thus instrumental in shaping ideas about the artificiality of queers.

The linkage of homosexuality and cities, here, was clearly a product of ideology, but that ideology has had an enormous material impact on both queers and natural spaces. The pervasive assumption that queer communities are essentially urban has had the effect of erasing the ongoing presence of rural gay men and lesbians whose lives might not look much like Christopher Street. This erasure has contributed to the flight of rural queers from their homes to find “true” community in cities, to the ghettoization of

queer culture, and to the widespread assumption that country spaces are inherently hostile to queer folk. Although one must not ever forget Brandon Teena and Mathew Shepard, it is abundantly clear that urban spaces are often far more dangerous for us than rural ones. In addition, these spatial processes have also affected the spaces of *nature*. On the one end of the spectrum, we see the physical concentration of gay men and lesbians in particular urban neighborhoods; their distinct and diverse patterns of community *organize* urban nature in particular ways. Less well known, however, is the fact that heterosexism in rural landscapes has physically shaped what rural nature looks like.

Recreational and rural natures are materials marked with heterosexism. In the former category, such spaces as national parks clearly bear the developmental imprints of specific gendered and sexualized ideas of nature. For one small example, think about public campgrounds. Particularly after the 1950s, many camping facilities were intentionally designed to resemble suburban cul-de-sacs, each campsite clearly designed for one nuclear family, and all camping occurring in designated “private” spaces away from “public” recreational activities such as swimming, hiking, and climbing. Trees were cut down in a pattern that screened campsites from one another, but not from the roadway or path, so that the rangers or wardens could still see in and make sure nothing illegal (such as sodomy) was taking place.

For a second and earlier example, consider the settlement of much of the state of Oregon. In the mid-nineteenth century, the

Donation Land Act (DLA) encouraged a heterosexual pattern of colonization because of the way land was allotted to settlers. “A white male who was twenty-one or older … received a 160-acre parcel and an additional 160 acres for his wife." 17 Women were not eligible for allotments as single people, and it was clearly in the advantage of men to have the two parcels, so “very young girls suddenly became marriageable and were soon wives.” 18 Because of the comparatively large size of these allotments and the popularity of the program, not only did the DLA encourage heterosexual marriage along with the settlement of the west, but it imposed a monolithic culture of single heterosexual family-sized lots on the land, with significant effects on the economic and environmental history of the region from nuclear family farming patterns, the inhibition of town development, and even increased forestation.

As a result of the association of degenerate queers with cities, and rural and wilderness landscapes with wholesome, heterosexual family life, there developed in the nineteenth century the idea that nature is a primary place in which to develop moral and physical fitness. With the hetero-masculine deployment of wilderness at the turn of the century – which, incidentally, also saw the rise of organizations like the Boy Scouts – we can see the antecedents of how nature was deployed during the Great Depression and into World War II as a site for the cultivation of a rigidly *disciplinary* hetero-male ideal.In the United States, for example, organizations such as the Civilian Conservation Corps provided unemployed young men with physically and morally healthy work in the wilderness. At apparent

risk of degeneracy in cities, such men were located in camps far from urban centers and, between 1933 and 1942, strenuously "installed 89,000 miles of telephone line, built 126,000 miles of roads and trails, constructed millions of erosion control dams, planted 1.3 billion trees, erected 3,470 water towers, and spent over 6 million hours fighting forest fires." 19 All of these developments are markers of a national desire for a particular kind of man as much as they are about the infrastructural needs of particular landscapes.

Within cities as well, the idea of nature as a space for the disciplined cultivation of virtue had an important sexual component. For their creators, all in some way indebted to Central Park architect Frederick Law Olmsted, urban parks were "for the people." By this, I mean that parks were developed inside cities not only to give urban inhabitants a public green space in which to gather and recreate, but also that certain kinds of activities were explicitly "designed into" these landscapes. Given the attachment of moral fitness to physical fitness demonstrated by organizations such as the CCC and the Boy Scouts, sporting facilities such as ball fields were prominent in urban park development. In addition, there was a clear sense in Olmsted's and designs that parks were places to see and be seen; they were sites for public spectacle of a particular kind, including the conspicuous display of middle-class respectability and wealth. Parks were places for the public cultivation of morally upstanding citizens; they were thus advocated as sites of regulated sexual contact, in which courting heterosexual couples could "tryst" in an open space that was both morally uplifting and, given its

visibility, highly disciplined. As geographer Gordon Brent Ingram writes:

> many of the city centre parks in North America and Europe were first established or were redesigned in the late nineteenth century with an emphasis on the public promenade, the male gaze, suppression of public sexual contact, and team sports as a means to lift up working-class morality. Such public parks have usually been programmed for what are sometimes conspicuous displays of heterosexual desire, courtship, and conquest. 20

The design of urban parks, then, was explicitly organized around an agenda of discouraging expressions of sexuality other than those formally sanctioned in the public eye; morally and physically sanctioned heterosexual courtship was, in turn, built into the landscape with the strategic placement of such visibly pair-appropriate facilities as benches to punctuate the romantic stroll, and open-walled gazebos.

Queering ecological politics

The final section of this paper turns our attention away from the ways in which sexuality and ecology have been linked as power relations having a negative (if still productive) influence on both queers and nature, and toward the ways in which a queer perspective offers us a unique standpoint on *resisting* these destructive

relations. That said, if I were to judge only from televisions shows like *Will and Grace, Queer as Folk,* and *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, I would hardly nominate queers as the world's best nature stewards. Quite the opposite, in fact: Gay culture, in the mainstream – which, in all of these shows, means affluent urban white men – is extraordinarily tied to lifestyle consumerism. As Andil Gosine writes, "gay men, the story goes, shop. Urban gay men live in chic condominium apartments, buy a lot of hair and body care products, [and] have great taste in cars, clothes, and interior design." 21 Although one might be tempted to celebrate in these shows the general public's apparently increased acceptance of queers, I think it is only a very narrow band of queerness – that portion tied to the fetishistic exchange of aesthetic commodities – that ends up being at all "acceptable." Queers are OK not because they are queer, but because they are exemplary consumers in a society that judges all people by their ability to consume. Note that working-class queer folk, lower-income or anti-aesthetic lesbians, and older, sicker, or even HIV+ gay men, are not the ideal subjects of *Will and Grace*.

Not only is this band of North American "acceptance" of queer culture thus very narrow, but the continuing mainstream political process by which queers strive to be "accepted" in consumer society limits the full scope of political possibility potential in queer communities. For example, although I would be lying if I didn't say that I was moved by Canada's legalization of same-sex marriage, our pursuit, as queers, for a family form "just like heterosexual marriage" seems, to me, to blunt the *critical* potential inherent in the fact that queers have

developed alternative forms of family that do not necessarily replicate all of the problems of legal, nuclear heterosexuality. To quote Tony Kushner, “it’s entirely conceivable that we will one day live miserably in a thoroughly ravaged world in which lesbians and gay men can marry and serve openly in the army and that’s it.” 22 My argument is thus that we should reorient our politics and take on what I am calling a queer ecological perspective, to work toward more critical possibilities responsive to the kinds of complex relations of power that I have thus far outlined. Here, I am advocating a position not only of queering ecology, but of greening queer politics.

While it is true that the hegemonic pairing of heterosexuality and ecology has had a generally oppressive impact on both queers and nature, the fact is that queers have also used ideas of nature and natural spaces as sites of resistance. Perhaps most prominently, many queer writers have pointed to the fact that there is a long tradition, dating from the Greeks, of a positive and conscious linkage between same-sex eroticism and rural or wilderness environments. Broadly part of a “pastoral” literary tradition dating from Theocritus and Virgil, and continuing through the work of such writers as Walt Whitman and Henry David Thoreau, contemporary gay male writers emphasize that natural settings have been important sites for the exploration of male homosexuality *as* a natural practice. Rural spaces in particular have served, in a wide range of literatures, as places of freedom for male homoerotic encounters. In addition, *because* of the association of nature with ideas of innocence and authenticity, gay male writers have been able to use pastoral literary conventions as

a way of making an argument for the authenticity of homosexuality. This "homophile pastoralism," as literary critic David Shuttleton emphasizes, has not only been used by such writers as Andre Gide to make political claims for gay equality on the basis of the naturalness of homosexuality, but has also been used to challenge the very idea of the naturalness of *heterosexuality*. 23

Briefly, in his work *Corydon: Four Socratic Dialogues*, Gide tells a story based on Theocritus' third century BC poem *The Idylls*, in which shepherds not only engage in same-sex love but muse, together, on the mysteries of making love to girls. The young shepherd is a typical pastoral figure; he is close to nature in his daily work, and is also largely in the company of other young men, with whom he engages not only in the immediate pleasures of the flesh but also in the reflective dialogue associated with the young men's passage from a state of natural, youthful innocence to socialized manhood. What is key, here, is that same-sex passion is associated with that natural innocence, and opposite-sex eroticism is the thing that needs to be *learned* in order to enter the adult social order. What we have, here, is a "reverse discourse" that pairs nature with the homoerotic, and artificiality with the heteroerotic; against an assumption of natural heterosexuality, Gide actually positions heterosexuality as a normative practice *into* which the young shepherds must be disciplined. As Shuttleton writes, "Gide launches a trangressively counter-intuitive argument that it is this compulsory heterosexuality which is constructed and inauthentic since it needs to be taught and culturally maintained." 24

Drawing on a similar tradition, gay men in modern cities have frequently made use of urban green spaces as sites for both individual sexual contact and community-oriented activism. Ironically, exactly *in* the parks that were so frequently designed to discourage homosexual activity, gay men have found and created a form of sexual community that, again, pairs nature and homoeroticism in a positive way. There are at least two important elements to consider. In the first place, what is significant about public sex in parks is that it is *public*, meaning that it overtly challenges heteronormative understandings of what is "appropriate" behavior for public, natural spaces. Here, we must remember that public parks are *disciplinary* spaces, in which a very narrow band of activities is sanctioned, practiced, and experienced; only certain kinds of nature experience are officially allowed. In this context, one can consider public gay sex as a sort of *democratization* of natural space, in which different communities can experience the park in their own ways, and in which a wider range of natural experiences thus comes to be possible. As one frequenter of public parks in Toronto related of a sexual encounter in Queen's Park (no pun intended):

> I stayed there because I loved storms, love to see nature in its violence…. We enjoyed ourselves so much, and of course the rain had swept in and we were all wet, and all those soggy clothes to put on. But it was joyous…. I love wild, spontaneous moments like that where … it just goes crazy and

it's wild. 25

Clearly, wild sex in a public park in a thunderstorm is a far cry from the prim courtship rituals embodied in Olmsted's formal promenades. Whileit is important to point out that park sex is controversial in itself, it seems that gay men's re-appropriation of these natural spaces in fact fosters an alternative and critical awareness of urban nature. Such awareness has galvanized queer communities to take environmental action; to give one example, shortly after the 1969 Stonewall riots in New York, a popular cruising area in Queens, Kew Gardens, was badly destroyed by extensive tree cutting. "Within a week … there were public actions showing conscious visibility, and the first gay liberationist environmental group, Trees for Queens, was formed to restore the park." 26

Turning to the lesbian community, one can see different but related patterns of resistance to the pairing of heterosexuality and nature. Like their gay male counterparts but with very different gender politics involved, lesbian authors have also used pastoral literary traditions to develop a "reverse discourse" that argues for the naturalness of women's same-sex love relationships. These "lesbian pastoral" literatures have a history that extends well back into the nineteenth century, for example into the writings of such authors as Sarah Orne Jewett and Willa Cather. In the early twentieth century, Radclyffe Hall made overt use of pastoral conventions in *The Well of Loneliness* to paint a picture of her gender-invert protagonist, Stephen Gordon, in which Stephen's identity was very natural, and morally very positive. The problem for Stephen was not her "nature"; it was the

artificial heterosexism and social intolerance that surrounded her as she made her way into adulthood.

More recent lesbian authors have, in fact, consciously taken on the idea that women in lesbian relationships might experience nature differently, and possibly more positively, than is generally the case within the confines of compulsory heterosexuality. Most obviously, lesbian *feminists* have consciously connected a radical feminist politics with a radical ecological politics. In the 1970s and 1980s, for example, utopian and science fiction writers such as Sally Miller Gearhart overtly tied the destruction of nature to patriarchal, heterosexist social institutions. In her 1979 novel *The Wanderground*, she envisioned a world in which women, freed from oppressive male influence, were able to live together in polygynous sexual relationships in a rural world that was actively and intentionally separate from destructive, male-dominated cities. In that woman-centred world, women were better able to find both rich erotic and social relations to one another, and rich social and erotic relations to their natural environments, all of which were actively prevented in heterosexual, patriarchal societies. Thus, such novels actively criticized heteronormativity, arguing not only that heterosexuality was not natural, but that it was destructive to both women and to nature; here, we have a narrative that reverses the idea that homosexuality is an urban illness, and instead argues that heterosexism is the urban “ill” to which lesbians must respond. In a healthier environment, one organized according to homosocial and homoerotic norms, women could create a more profound connection to each other and to nature. Whatever one

might say about the essentialism of such understandings of a “natural” woman/nature connection, it is clear that the transgressive pairing of ecological with lesbian feminist politics posed a significant challenge to the overarching assumption that heterosexuality is not only natural, but also good for nature.

Influenced by these literary currents, some women began in the 1970s to actually develop intentional communities based on the combination of ecological and lesbian separatist politics. Communities like the Womanshare Collective in Southern Oregon were founded on the idea of rural nature as a privileged set of spaces in which women could find, "in the healing beauty of nature,” “a safe space to live, to work, to help create the women’s culture [they] dreamed of.” 27 These “wimmin’s lands” had complex ecological goals, ranging from opening rural landscapes to women by transforming heterosexual relations of property ownership; to withdrawing the land from patriarchal-capitalist agricultural production and reproduction; to symbolically reinscribing the land with lesbian erotic presence. While many of these communities have disappeared, others are still there as living examples of what it looks like to live one’s life intentionally as a lesbian ecologist. To quote one long-term resident: “Women’s land, lesbian land … [is] land that women have purchased and are living on [as lesbians]. It is intended to serve lesbians, not only the ones who live here, and it is intended to be lesbian land evermore…. And moving to the country stretches who a lesbian is.” 28

I have to point out a delicious irony: The state of Oregon contains a particularly high concentration of separatist wimmin’s lands.

As I described earlier, that state, in the nineteenth century, was particularly heterosexually organized because of the DLA's privileging of heterosexual families in its allotment practices. Because this land allotment strategy had, among other things, the long-term effect of discouraging town development, in the late twentieth century we see, even on the Interstate corridor, very sparse settlement and relatively low land prices. Both of these factors helped to create an ideal environment for lesbian intentional communities. Thus, it is especially accurate to say that the Oregon lesbian separatists have withdrawn their lands from heterosexual forms of inhabitation, and created in them a space that may be liberating to both lesbians and other species.

Conclusions

These stories certainly do not illustrate the full range of queer ecological politics, past or present. I have not discussed the conversation between queer ecology and ecofeminism that Greta Gaard began in her 1994 article “Toward a Queer Ecofeminism”; 29 I have not discussed the fact that the liberation of eroticism and physical desire has played a strong role in many historical and contemporary environmental movements; 30 I have not even begun to consider the ways the experiences of transgender individuals call us to question the interrelations among sexualities, natures, gender identities, and bodies. I may have also given the impression that gay male ecological politics are about sex in nature, and lesbian ecologies are about the liberation of nature; pointing to both lesbian cultures of public sex and “radical faerie” gay male communities, I assure you that

this is not the case.

What I hope I *have* done is illustrate that, not only is heterosexism part of the web of oppressive power relations through which human relations to nature are organized, but also that queers have made interesting ecological moves to challenge some of these relations. Not all of us are content to practice our sexual politics within the narrow circles offered to us by consumerist and other mainstream agendas; some of us like to think that queers might have an interesting and diverse set of experiences from which to develop more critical, and more ecological, politics. Thus in closing, I return to Jan Zita Grover. Grover's work is far from being a lesbian separatist utopian vision, but it is, for me, a particularly inspiring queer ecology. For her, an environmental perspective grounded in the painful experience of a gay community allows her to see and find beauty in a natural landscape ravaged by the visions of others, for whom its beauty is simply a question of resource extraction. She is keenly aware of the devastations of both AIDS and clear-cuts; indeed, her experience as a primary caregiver for PWA's has allowed her an especially intimate view of the resemblance between the two. But her standpoint didn't just afford her the metaphoric ability to see, in diseased leg and burnt-out stumpage, the same possibility of continuing life and beauty. It also taught her about responsibility: In the gay community of San Francisco, it was often lesbians and other "chosen" community members, not biological family, who took on the hard work of caring for the dying. Thus, Grover's queer ecology is both about seeing beauty in the wounds of the world and taking responsibility to care for

the world as it is. I leave her the last words: "We assume responsibility for a place when we are able to look both backward at the burden of its history and forward at our responsibility for those parts of its future that lie under human control." 31

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1. This paper was originally delivered as the annual Starshak Lecture, Marquette University, February 19, 2004.

2. Jan Zita Grover, *North Enough: AIDS and Other Clear-Cuts* (Saint Paul, Minnesota: Graywolf Press, 1997), 3.

3. Grover, 3.

4. Grover, 5.

5. Grover, 142.

6. Grover, 6.

7. Gover, 6.

8. Grover, 23.

9. Peter Boag, “Thinking Like Mount Rushmore: Sexuality and Gender in the Republican Landscape,” in *Seeing Nature Through Gender,* ed. Virginia Scharff (Lawrence, Kansas: The University of Kansas Press, 2003), 50.

10. Boag, 50-51.

11. Bruce Bagemil, *Biological Exhuberance: Animal Homosexuality and Natural Diversity* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999).

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13. Paul Vasey, “Kama Sutra Primates,” *Equinox* 110 (2000): 35-36.

14. Martin Silverstone, “The Case of the Lesbian Gulls,” *Equinox* 110 (2000): 6.

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16. Cited in Boag, 52.

17. Boag, 47.

18. Johansen in Boag, 47.

19. Bryant Simon, “’New Men in Body and Soul’: The Civilian Conservation Corps and the Transformation of Male Bodies and the Body Politic,” in *Seeing Nature Through Gender,* ed. Virginia Scharff (Lawrence, Kansas: The University of Kansas Press, 2003), 80-81.

20. Gordon Brent Ingram, "'Open' Space as Strategic Queer Sites," in *Queers in Space: Communities/Public Places/Sites of Resistance,* eds. Gordon Brent Ingram, Anne-Marie Bouthillette and Yolanda Retter (Seatlle: Bay Press, 1997), 102.

21. Andil Gosine, "Pink Greens: Ecoqueers Organize in Toronto," *Alternatives* 27 no. 3 (2001): 35.

22. Cited in Gosine, 35.

23. David Shuttleton, "The Queer Politics of Gay Pastoral," in *De-Centring Sexualities: Politics and Representation Beyond the Metropolis,* eds. Richard Phillips, Diane West and David Shuttleton (London: Routledge, 2000), 125-146.

24. Shuttleton, 134.

25. John Grube, "'No More Shit': The Struggle for Democratic Gay Space in Toronto," in Queers in Space*: Communities/Public Places/Sites of Resistance,* eds. Gordon Brent Ingram, Anne-Marie Bouthillette and Yolanda Retter (Seattle: Bay Press, 1997), 127-145.

26. Gordon Brent Ingram, "Marginality and the Landscape of Alienation," in *Queers in Space: Communities/Public Places/Sites of Resistance,* eds. Gordon Brent Ingram, Anne-Marie Bouthillette and Yolanda Retter (Seattle: Bay Press, 1997), 47.

27. Catriona Sandilands, "Lesbian Separatist Communities and the Experience of Nature: Toward a Queer Ecology," *Organization and Environment* 15, no. 2 (2002): 137.

28. Sandilands, "Lesbian Separatist Communities and the Experience of Nature: Toward a Queer Ecology," 142.

29. Greta Gaard, "Toward a Queer Ecofeminism," *Hypatia* 12, no. 1 (1997): 114-137.

30. See Catriona Sandilands, "Desiring Nature, Queering Ethics: Adventures in Erotogenic Environments," *Environmental Ethics* 23, no. 2 (2001): 169-188.

31. Grover, 164.