

## **Queer ecology: A roundtable discussion**

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Gordon Brent Ingram, Michael J. Morris & Joshua Stephens

*Hosted by Jamie Heckert*

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The recent development of what is known as queer ecology – the bringing together of queer and ecological theories and politics – was a key point of inspiration for this special issue. In order to honour that legacy, and to bring queer ecology discussions to ecopsychology and vice versa, I invited seven contemporary thinkers to sit together at a virtual roundtable. I began the discussion by asking each of the participants to offer their own individual reflection on the nature and value of queer ecology. These scholars bring a diverse range of perspectives to the table (as appropriate for the confluence of queer and ecological perspectives). From literary theory to anticapitalist activism, from the politics of knowledge to the vitality of the material world, from everyday performativities to the enormity of ecosystems, these seven writers offer thoughtful commentary on the intertwined nature of queer, oikos and psyche.

In the second round of the roundtable, each participant offers a response inspired by the contributions of the first round. Collectively, this discussion responds to Andy Fisher's call for a radical ecopsychology (2002) by inviting a careful consideration of the ways in which we see ourselves and the world of which we are a part and, perhaps more importantly, how we can act to undermine, overflow or otherwise release mental and cultural patterns of domination and control. In doing so, we might free up much-needed energy to, in Gavin Brown's words, "appreciate the queer exuberance of ecosystems".

**Jamie Heckert**

## Round 1: What is Queer Ecology and what can it contribute to the world?

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### Jill E. Anderson

My journey toward queer ecocriticism began about five years ago when I read Christopher Isherwood's (1964/2001) novel *A Single Man* in a graduate literature course. What struck me was Isherwood's utilization of his gay, middle-aged first-person narrator, George, as a kind of barometer not just for the ecological destruction occurring around him in California but also the postwar population boom (a reason my own research and writing focuses on the particular historical moment of Cold War America). But more than just observing these things, George explicitly links them and concludes that heterosexual coupling will be the cause of the coming apocalypse and complete destruction of the environment primarily (although the Cold War concern of nuclear holocaust is certainly present). Right after the Second World War, George sees "the Change" occur – "breeders" begin to move into once-idyllic and bohemian places in California: "in the late forties, when the World War Two vets came swarming out of the East with their just-married wives, in search of *new and better breeding grounds* in the sunny Southland, which had been their last nostalgic glimpse of home before they shipped out to the Pacific. And what better breeding grounds than a hillside neighborhood like this one, only five minutes' walk from the beach and with no through traffic to decimate the *future tots*? So, one by one, the cottages which used to reek of bathtub gin and reverberate with the poetry of Hart Crane have fallen to the occupying army of *Coke-drinking television watchers*" (p. 18, emphases mine). I include this extended quote from the novel because it introduces many of the tropes essential to my ecologically queer readings: disparagement of normalized heterosexual couplings and conventional reproduction; abuse of the landscape for strictly human-centered purposes; emphasis on reproduction always necessitating concern for the future and progressive conceptualizations of time; eschewal of more "bohemian" life ways; and the acquisition of consumer products leading to their requisite waste. But this is not the only blueprint for queering ecocriticism and ecologizing queer theory. Other readings might also include: challenges to notions of normalization/naturalization and redefinition of queerness and other sexualities; establishment of homes, spaces, and/or ecosystems as queer-friendly or at least productive of non-heteronormative lifestyles; highlighting of alternative

family formations and reproductions; and rejection of “traditional”, normative, middle-class comprehension of life that include consumerism and unquestioned dominance of the natural world. This list is not exhaustive nor have I pointed out any of the theoretical underpinnings here, but I think this list highlights the important tropes that generally go a long way in questioning our constructions of “naturalness”.

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### **Robert Azzarello**

There are two questions before us. The first is ontological: a question about what queer ecology is, an analysis of its being. The second is axiological: a question about what queer ecology contributes to the world, an analysis of its value. These two questions – the ontological and the axiological – are generally very difficult to parse. Indeed, the philosopher David Hume famously described this difficulty, arguing that ontological description (what something is) is often structured by axiological adjudication (what something ought to be or ought to do), and vice versa. To begin, then, I would say in response to our two questions: what we imagine queer ecology to be emerges in tandem with what we hope it contributes to the world.

But there is an even more basic question to be answered: what is ecology? Ecology, strictly speaking, is a *logos* of the *oikos*. It is not the *oikos* itself, but a discursive logic of the *oikos*, an attempt to put into logical discourse what exceeds logical discourse. Because ecology is not a thing but a selfconscious theory of a thing, it cannot hold the same ontological status as, say, Nature or planet Earth and claim sheer referentiality as these latter terms try to do. Ecology, however, can often be misconstrued as a fancy new ontological name for Nature itself. It can, in other words, inherit the same dogmatic epistemology from its previous instantiation, falling into the objectivist trap of truth versus falsity and repressing the fundamental ontological-axiological connection. For this reason, and in slight contrast to queer ecology, I prefer the term “queer environmentality”.

So, what is queer environmentality? As a “mentality,” or habit of thought, it expresses a way of looking at the *oikos* that rejects reproductive heteronormativity. It looks out into the world and does not see only males desiring females, and females desiring males, with the sole aim of reproducing the species by any means

necessary. It does not see bodies as mere carriers for the seeds of future life. It rejects this vision because reproductive heteronormativity is ontologically insufficient (it does not do justice to the biodiversity of bodies and pleasures, of aims and desires, in the world) and it is axiologically problematic (it values beings instrumentally only insofar as those beings have the capacity to produce the next generation, their supposed destiny).

Without a doubt, the global environmental crisis stems from specific economies of exploitation, calculated risk, and negotiated ruin. How has the ontology-axiology of reproductive heteronormativity contributed to this crisis? Exploitation happens best if resources – whether human or otherwise – are imagined to give infinitely on and on into the future. Reproductive heteronormativity is put in the service of this mode of exploitation, mitigating risk and enabling ruin, because the world is imagined to have this great capacity to reproduce itself infinitely. What the world needs now is not more reinvestment in reproductive heteronormativity as an ideological insurance plan to fix environmental crisis. Instead, the world needs a queer environmentality: an ontology of radical biodiversity and an axiology of genuine intrinsic value.

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### **Gavin Brown**

For a long while I found myself harbouring the fantasy of thinking through the potential for understanding queer as the permaculture ‘edge’ – that highly productive space where two ecosystems meet and merge. In tentatively exploring this conceptualisation, I was thinking of ‘queer’ as more than a synonym for LGBT, and as something more than an oppositional space to normative sexual and gender arrangements. I was considering queer as an ethical stance of openness to sexual and gender difference and diversity, as a productive opportunity to do sex-gender differently.

But before I ever had the opportunity to fully explore this way of considering the intersection of queer praxis and the conceptual vocabulary of permaculture’s approach to environmental concerns, I began to fall out of love with queer (and, in different ways, with permaculture). Queer theory seems to have run its course, to have outlived its usefulness, and to no longer have much new to offer to emancipatory politics. The radical queer networks that were once so central to my

research, my politics and my desires now seem to have been recuperated, just another niche market for metropolitan hipsters willing to play with the boundaries of sexual and gender identity. The prefigurative possibilities for collective queer autonomy increasingly feel like little more than a variation of the individualised autonomy promoted by neoliberal advocates of the free market these last three decades. I guess I have come to the realisation that ‘queer’ does not stand (as far) outside the sexual politics of neoliberalism as I had once thought.

I say all this to question whether queer thinking actually has anything useful to contribute to debates about how humanity should respond to issues of sustainability and environmental crisis [In writing this, I note that I have slipped quite quickly from the topic of ‘ecology’ to environmental crisis]. Having said this, I acknowledge that there may yet be important and useful work to do to challenge the heteronormative assumptions that are so often entangled in debates about ‘sustainability’. There might be productive work to be done queering the very concepts of ‘sustainability’ and (environmental) ‘crisis’. But those are not issues I want to pursue here either.

There is a large body of work going back several decades now that theorises the political economy of sexualities, sexual identities and sexual politics – so much second-wave feminist writing, John D’Emilio’s important work on the place of homosexuality in changing capitalist divisions of labour, and Lisa Duggan’s work on the new homonormativity as the sexual politics of neoliberalism (amongst others). But it strikes me that while modern sexual identities (including, later, the queer challenge to them) came into being contemporaneously with the ascendancy of neoliberal capitalism, they also coincide with height of high-carbon economies. I think it is time to explore the political ecology of sexualities, to consider the role of (spatially uneven patterns of) (in)direct resource consumption in shaping sexualities and sexual subjectivities. Such work would trace the role of ecological resources in the assemblages of objects and practices through which sexual desires are acted upon and sexual subjectivities are performed. It could also engage in productive ways with what Jane Bennett has described as the ‘vital materialities’ of life-itself. This expanded repertoire of thinking about sexualities might begin to offer ways out of the queer impasse I have described and prompt an expanded understanding of the impact of contemporary sexualities on ecological systems at various geographical scales.

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## Katie Hogan

### *Queer Ecology: Writing as re-vision*

Re-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction – is for women more than a chapter in history: it is an act of survival.

Adrienne Rich (1971). *When we dead awaken: Writing as revision*.

Queer ecology has helped me to “enter an old text from a new critical direction”, as Adrienne Rich urged, bringing to view “faith in the imagination as a critical aspect of our individual and collective ecological identities”<sup>1</sup>. It has provided me a chance to see my previous literary explorations with “fresh eyes”, offering me a way to track a personal/ professional transformational journey.

While a graduate student at Rutgers University in the 1990s, I lost two family members to AIDS, and my sister was living with the virus. In response, I decided to write my dissertation on gender, race, and the culture of AIDS. There was not much literary or cultural scholarship on women and HIV/ AIDS, and in most AIDS media women were figured as angelic helpers, child-like innocent victims, or as devious vessels of transmission to men and children. Much of what I saw playing out in mass-produced, literary, and medical AIDS culture was also manifest in my sister’s life as a woman with AIDS.

In my analysis of Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America* – a famous AIDS play that made Kushner an international celebrity – I used feminist theory to challenge his blind spot about the play’s central female character’s risk for HIV/AIDS. Harper Pitt has unprotected sex with her husband – a closeted gay man who has unsafe sex with men – and yet her health risk is not considered. With intimate knowledge of my sister’s struggles with AIDS, I was enraged. In hindsight, and from the vantage point of queer ecology, I now see how that anger, coupled with my nonecological feminist approach to the play, prevented me from seeing Kushner’s feminist and queer take on the environment and how Harper Pitt is central to this project.

It is difficult to convey the shock I experienced when I reread *Angels* from this queer feminist ecological perspective. Saving the planet is presented as on par with saving socially and economically marginal communities – people with AIDS,

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<sup>1</sup> This quotation is taken from conference material for *Earth Matters on Stage*, which took place at Carnegie Mellon University May 30 to June 3, 2012.

LGBTs, women, people of color, and the poor. Kushner's ingenious use of Harper's character to dramatize a queer green rapture, captured in her final speech, emerges as a central moment in the play and epitomizes its ecofeminist sensibility. In this speech, Harper sees a "great net of souls", individuals who have died from famine, plague, and war – bringing to mind AIDS and other massive historical catastrophes – work together to repair the earth's torn ozone. Rather than the typical fiery destruction of earth, and the dramatic departure of the "chosen" to a Christian heaven, this "net of souls" gathers together to heal, rather than escape, the planet (Kushner, 1993b: 144). This visionary queer apocalypse – centered on the restoration of the neglected, the outcast, and the afflicted earth – is only witnessed by Harper, a socially adrift female character whose life is torn asunder by sexism, homophobia, AIDS, and environmental deterioration.

The play's repeated references to the body's failing immune system, the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, and the effects of climate change on ecosystems, link the losses caused by AIDS with the human-induced environmental contamination that surrounds us. These cataclysms create a queer eco-feminist "shock" that reveals the violence of 1980s Reagan's America, a time known for its poisonous silence about AIDS, racism, poverty, and environmental destruction. Without the frame of queer ecology, Kushner's unique transformation of the normative apocalyptic paradigm was lost to me.

Queer ecology, as Mortimer-Sandilands describes it, "takes dominant narratives of nature to task to create space for non-heterosexual possibilities" (2010: 22). Kushner's play accomplishes this creation of space and possibility by aligning queer ecology with feminism to generate a queer-eco feminist perspective enacted in Harper Pitt's character.

### **Gordon Brent Ingram**

#### *Acknowledging the queerness of ecosystems in a time of knowledge suppression*

Back in 2007, a year before any hint that a global economic contraction was coming, I participated in an exceptional colloquium. Toronto's York University with the exceptional support of the Government of Canada's Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council brought together a dozen activist scholars for "Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire." Convened by Catriona Mortimer-

Sandilands and Bruce Erickson, and nurtured by an international centre for interdisciplinary studies of human-environmental relationships, York's School of Environmental Studies, "Queer Ecologies" transpired in the Gladstone Hotel on a more humanistic edge of the gentrifying Queen Street West. Participants returned home to revise manuscripts as chapters of the 2010 anthology (Sandilands & Erickson, 2010).

Much has changed since those early queer ecology discussions including a global economic crisis, further erosion of intellectual infrastructure under the guise of austerity, and a number of popular uprisings. And now we are experiencing the rise of new forms of knowledge suppression, often more pernicious than formal censorship, that are obstructing the funding and other support for empirical and theoretical research. In these difficult times, is an expanded notion of species and ecosystems that is not entirely geared to biological reproduction, a sort of an ecology of diverse pleasures, at all relevant? As a scholar and practitioner of environmental planning engaged in research on how historically marginalised stakeholders reconstruct decision-making frameworks around communities and land, I come to this roundtable with some questions.

Is the core of an environmental (and political) paradigm of queer ecologies simply the acknowledgement that animals sometimes make contact with and appear to derive pleasure from other individuals of the same species and gender? Can such recognition of what Bruce Bagemihl (1999) termed, "biological exuberance" provide the basis for queer human ways to experience biology, locale and community?

What relationships could acknowledgement of queer ecologies have to further decolonising of modern science at a time when localised and tribal cultures are reasserting traditional and sometimes anthropomorphic knowledge that sometimes further erodes heteronormative views of both non-human life and human 'nature'?

What is the relevance of such potentially essentialist notions of biological exuberance and pleasure within ecosystems at an exceptional time of environmental change, habitat destruction, and extinctions? How does such an idea of biological pleasure have relevance, if at all, to efforts for humans reorganizing to stem ecological destruction?

Could certain experiences of the queerness of ecosystems, processes across places

formed by both natural and social relationships, inspire new forms of cultural engagement in communities of both human and non-human beings? And if some kind of queer knowledge of ecologies could mobilize individuals and groups to engage more effectively and 'ecologically' in their communities, what can we, as scholars, begin to anticipate?

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### **Michael J. Morris**

At the conjunction of “queer” and “ecology”, there is the potential for reconfigurations of the living material world, as well as for articulations of other possible worlds of life and livability. For myself, “queer” and “ecology” are not merely signifiers for a pre-existing real; rather, these terms operate within historically situated material-discursive productions, practices through which the world is not only represented, but also actualized. For “queer”, these practices are generally concerned with destabilizing regulatory norms of heterosexism that are naturalized through social (re)productions in which lives and livability are constrained along the axes of binary – and asymmetrical – gender/sex and an economy of heterosexual reproduction. These naturalizations of heterosexism become iterated through discourses ranging from the natural sciences to the social sciences to the humanities and the arts, as well as through daily performances of bodies as they are lived. “Queer” functions as a spectrum of critical interventions in such normalizing material-discursive practices, articulating possibilities for bodies and lives that do not adhere to the rigid regulation of naturalized heterosexism. Productions of “ecology” also span the natural and social sciences, the humanities, and the arts, encompassing a terrain of diverse analyses, categorizations, and representations of “nature” – or the living material world – as a complex system of interdependency. What circulates as “ecology” informs environmental policy and activism, what counts as “nature” and “natural”, and popular understandings of the human situation in the world, influencing ethical orientations as well as the practical implementations of those ethics in day to day living within human and nonhuman naturecultures. One potential for a “queer ecology” is the critique of ecological practices as material-discursive apparatuses that participate in the naturalization of heterosexism through how they represent – and thus produce – the world of interconnected lives and livability. To queer ecology, then, is to extend the critical intervention of “queer” towards expanding

what becomes livable for both the human and nonhuman, precisely in their relational interconnectedness.

Coming from Dance Studies, my particular investment in queer ecology is towards critical analyses of the ways in which performance – from theatrical productions to performances in daily life – operate at intersections of sexuality and ecology. As both sexuality and ecology are constituted through durational material-discursive practices, I am interested in how performance as a diverse spectrum of embodied activity orients and positions human and nonhuman bodies towards one another, enacting ecologies and sexualities that potentially subvert naturalized heterosexist productions of both. In particular, I am interested in performances that enact encounters between bodies that disrupt normative conventions of sexuality in ways that also destabilize the exceptional category of “the human”, enacting relationalities that reconfigure the world as an endless event of intra-activity through which human and nonhuman material agents are themselves differentially materialized. I believe that through such performances of “queer ecologies”, new ontologies can become performatively articulated, reorienting and proliferating what is possible within sexual and ecological framings of bodies, the material-discursive practices through which such bodies and their framings are produced, and – ultimately – what becomes livable within the worlds that they materialize.

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### **Joshua Stephens**

If we understand “queer” to signify the jettisoning of normative frameworks, in favor of a more tactical practice correspondent with experience and desire, this seems an extraordinarily potent intersection. I think a good deal gets lost in the attempt (conscious or otherwise) to restrict the practice(s) of ecology and “queering” to specific territories; it seems productive of boundaries with which the world simply does not conform. This is as much a candid observation as it is something of a metaphysical claim. In *Logic and Sense*, Deleuze gets into the latter a bit, noting that the abnormal set applies as much and as legitimately to the work of Lewis Carroll as it does mathematics, and that the logic of paradox is that of infinite subdivision (care of the force of the subconscious) and what he calls nomadic distribution – distribution across an open terrain, as opposed to something closed or contained. In other words, we’re a creative species, and we’re invariably inclined to de-localize any logic we come across, and subject it to infinite

iterations/permutations, without much regard for proscribed sites of application.

I had the fortune of studying with folks steeped in Murray Bookchin's work, and even Murray himself, before he passed. His elaboration of what he called Social Ecology seems resonant here, inasmuch as he suggests that "to separate ecological problems from social problems – or even to play down or give token recognition to this crucial relationship – would be to grossly misconstrue the sources of the growing environmental crisis. The way human beings deal with each other as social beings is crucial to addressing the ecological crisis".

While I think Bookchin's spot-on, here, I might suggest reverse-engineering his proposition a bit. Ecology inheres certain objective conditions (the limits of which effectively define our present crisis), and they are largely indifferent to our perceived needs or aspirations for convenience. Human beings as a species – as living things arguably defined by contingency, fragility, delicacy, and imperfection – inhere a similar indifference to what are often our needs/aspirations for purity, predictability, etc. This is especially true for us as social change agents.

For me, a "queer ecology" would necessarily describe a more candid, ecological approach to difference, human limitation and desire, and a reflexive, fluid relationship with the unfolding of experience. Whether it's denial or mere confusion, our inability to anticipate, accommodate, and care for these aspects of ourselves in a communal fashion works against us as a sort of contaminating force; it reflects unreasonable demands on our social environment every bit as real as those we recognize in the natural world. An attention to this is a profoundly radical innovation, politically. It offers us a way forward that recognizes the damage capitalism and domination have produced in the human ecosystem, and proposes responsive practices at the level of the present moment.

## **Round 2: Responses**

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### **Jill E. Anderson**

For a national conference a few years ago, I organized a panel on food and the environment. After I presented a paper on the emphasis on repro-timing (Judith Halberstam's term) and the nuclear family in fast food advertisements (and the problem that creates for resource management), an audience member challenged the entire panel: "What are you doing in your daily life to change the world?" At

first I took this as an innocent inquiry, but the question began to gnaw at me. This person was testing me, asking me to justify my career decision in addition to my choice to write this particular paper and participate in this particular dialogue, telling me, however indirectly, that merely researching, writing, and discussing is insufficient. I needed to be living in such a way that made my work acceptable. As Second Wave Feminism taught us, the private is public. But is it not enough that I am a professor, teaching a 4-4 load? Is it not enough that I am a vegetarian and local food enthusiast, partially because I recognize the environmental impact of the food industry on the environment? Is it not enough that I wrote my dissertation focusing on the critical application of queer ecology in the historical moment and literature of the 1960s in America? Maybe it's not enough. I don't actually know. And it's unlikely that I'll ever feel like what I do every day is enough.

This idea of involvement was first posed to us in the roundtable when we were asked what queer ecology could contribute to the world. No one said nothing. No one even really acknowledged the limits of queer ecology itself (although queerness and ecology seemingly have their own limits), but we instead accepted as axiomatic that opening up both queer theory and ecocriticism (or environmentalism, to use Robert Azzarello's phrase) is beneficial. It seems that merely invoking queer ecocriticism is sufficiently political, and it's the political angle from which we all seem to be coming at this subject, in varying degrees. Gordon Brent Ingram's questioning of the experiential place-centeredness of the possibility of queering ecosystems and forming "cultural engagement in communities of both human and non-human beings" is at the heart of what I hope (perhaps delusionally) to be doing in my own criticism. Michael J. Morris's explanation of the ontological power of reframing bodies and their relationality to ecologies and both human and nonhuman others and evocation of making these interconnections livable is political. Joshua Stephens's mention of Murray Bookchin's Social Ecology and his command that we make "more candid" our communal obligations to the "human ecosystem" is political. Gavin Brown's linking of restrictive modern sexualities and carbon economies is political. Katie Hogan's critical examination of the AIDS epidemic and Tony Kushner's "queer green rapture" is decidedly political.

As scholars, teachers, performers, and writers, are we doing enough? Are we inherently activists because we've produced and represented this thinking? Are we

political enough?

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### **Robert Azzarello**

Let me begin this second round of reflections with a small confession. Lately, I've felt very odd talking about queer environmentalism. With many students, as well as with some friends and family members, I've recently had a hard time explaining what I mean when I say that queer environmentalism has both ontological and axiological implications. There are many reasons why this is the case. Because reproductive heteronormativity is so thoroughly ingrained in the mind, it often rubs people the wrong way when it is criticized outright. But there are other more innocent, less ideological reasons why this is the case, too. It's difficult to explain a theoretical argument to an audience unfamiliar with both the argument's context and with its chief terminology. Indeed, there's usually a lot to say before one can even begin to say what one has to say. More than that difficulty, however, I think that my feelings of oddness spring from the kind of question Gordon Brent Ingram posed about the relevancy of queer-environmental theory in the face of pressing political dilemmas.

In New Orleans where I live, the most visibly constant dilemma has always been about how to sustain a city in the face of sinking land, rising seas, and wetland deterioration. But other environmental disasters – other “surprises”, as it were, like the British Petroleum oil disaster a couple of years ago – always seem to lurk on the horizon. My students, friends, and family feel this kind of affective uneasiness, this kind of unabated threat. What can a theory of queer environmentalism add? How can it help?

“Not much”, I think during those many moments of feeling odd. Of course, in situations involving an audience that is familiar with both context and terminology, I'm all about it. Last weekend, for example, I was at Rice University for an “After Queer, After Humanism” conference. It's times like those, and like this one now, that I am convinced that ethical theory – especially environmental ethical theory – ought not abandon hard questions whose relevancy or practicality may not be immediately apparent. Why not? Environmental thinking is an ideology like any other. One can say that we as a species should minimize our impact on the planet, or one can say the opposite; both of these positions, as well as many in between,

are equally ideological. I have chosen to work in the environmental humanities instead of other fields like engineering, for example, or chemistry. As such, I take it as one of my main tasks to look carefully at the complex nature and real-world effects of ideology. I take it as my task, in other words, to describe the relationship between *Weltanschauung* and *Welt*. This work may not be straightforward, easy, or even practical. But I think it does hold value.

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### **Gavin Brown**

I found it fascinating to read the various contributions to this roundtable. In thinking through what a ‘queer ecology’ might be, it seems we are caught between a pessimistic use of queer thought to critique the role of (hetero)normative assumptions in perpetuating environmental crisis, and an optimistic commitment to exploring the potential for queered framings of human-environmental relations.

I found the contributions from Jill Anderson and Robert Azzarello both enticing and troubling. Although I agree with their basic premise that reproductive heteronormativity enables a view of the planet’s resources as infinitely reproducible, thereby justifying the profligate exploitation and consumption of those resources, this argument also troubles me for a number of reasons. First, I question whether ‘sustainability’ is any less imbued with heteronormative assumptions (even as it thinks in terms of temporal cycles rather than linear progress)? Second, I want to problematize the subtext of their argument, which seems to be ‘we can save the planet if only heterosexuals breed less’. That might be true; but birth rates tend to fall when various quality of life and ‘development’ indicators are achieved, including greater gender equality. All of these things take environmental and human resources to achieve. I question what injustices might be perpetuated if this critique of reproductive heteronormativity is pursued without due consideration of wider global inequalities and patterns of uneven development?

The debates on reproductive futurity seem overly dependent on the experience of societies in the Global North (and particularly North America). But even here there are holes in the argument – do not LGBT people (in the Global North, at least) consume nearly as much as their heterosexual peers and generate just as much waste? Here my training as a geographer kicks in. Rather than generalising about

reproductive futurity on the basis of one or two national contexts, would it not be more useful, more ecological, to study the complex and dynamic interaction of social relations and resource management in specific contexts? This is what Political Ecology has been doing for many decades. Although Political Ecology is increasingly attuned to context-specific gender relations (at various spatial scales) there is undoubtedly still room for more attention to be paid to sexual norms in these contexts and for other aspects of queer thought to be added to the mix. I would encourage a two-way dialogue – what can queer theorists learn from political ecologists?

In this regard, I think Michael J. Morris makes some highly pertinent observations. A queer (political) ecology might usefully “destabilize the exceptional category of ‘the human’” and expand our understanding of what makes life liveable for humans and nonhumans alike. So I return to the competing optimistic and pessimistic tendencies that I noted in my opening remarks. If our (collective) tendency for critique is too strong, if we already know the answers to our investigations before we start them, then we run the risk of failing to appreciate the queer exuberance of ecosystems when we encounter it.

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### **Katie Hogan**

My brief queer green reading of Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America* in my round one piece resonates with several participants’ roundtable contributions. Jill Anderson’s reading of Christopher Isherwood’s *A Single Man* as an apocalyptic population boom narrative meshes with my take on Tony Kushner’s “queer” use of the apocalyptic imaginary as a form of environmentalism. As Andil Gosine has pointed out, apocalyptic anti-population discourse has typically targeted people of color and poor women for centuries – but LGBTs are also prominent targets of this rhetoric. Anderson and I discern how each author’s text employs the fraught discourse of apocalypse to queer a genre that is traditionally used against LGBTs. Isherwood’s focus on compulsive heterosexual reproduction as a catalyst for planetary and community destruction satirizes the typical Christian apocalypse in which pristine chosen heterosexuals escape the moral cesspool of the fallen world for a heavenly paradise. Ironically, in endless contemporary spin offs of “end-times” scenarios, the destruction of the earth is of little consequence. Kushner’s *Angels* also spoofs fundamentalist apocalypse by highlighting a scene of queer

ecological collaborative repair of the torn ozone layer. He also peppers his play with repeated references to climate change, poison snow, and toxic politics. Both Kushner and Isherwood create narratives that display concern for vulnerable communities and the earth.

In short, Kushner and Isherwood enact an environmental justice perspective that challenges the conventional opposition between landscape/nature vs. human life by proposing that the problem of the dominance of the natural world encompasses the dominance of human community worlds. Joshua Stephens' roundtable contribution evokes this idea as well when he makes use of Murray Bookchin's point that ecological and social problems are enmeshed. As Bookchin argues, "The way human beings deal with each other as social beings is crucial to address the ecological crisis" (cited in Stephens).

Queer ecology also illuminates Adrienne Rich's notion of writing as revision – another theme of my short Round I piece – and Rich's idea plays out vividly in Gavin Brown's contribution. Brown says, "I guess I have come to the realisation that 'queer' does not stand (as far) outside the sexual politics of neoliberalism as I had once thought." That queer ecology is part of – rather than outside of – neoliberal ideology and practice is a crucial observation that has profound implications. Brown raises the specter of queer ecology's complicity in the service of critical analysis, and he calls for the development of "the political ecology of sexualities". Neoliberalism's pervasiveness in LGBT life, queer theory, and activism is also evident in Tony Kushner's life and work, and Kushner, like Brown, articulates awareness and resistance to it. In a striking statement about marriage rights and military service, Kushner asserts:

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 (quoted in Gosine, 2001).

Despite the pernicious reach of neoliberalism, the "thoroughly ravaged world" can remain a focus of queer politics and ecology.

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### **Gordon Brent Ingram**

In further exploring, through this round table process, the possibilities for better acknowledging and confirming queer ecologies, as a more expanded framework

for learning about and intervening in human communities, the word that keeps coming to my mind is 'context'. Queer theory was not very successful at acknowledging context; rarely were broader communities and ecosystems of importance especially in the analyses of literature. And seldom have the interfaces between communities, ecosystems and political economies been explored where sexual minorities have been a major concern. Carolyn Dinshaw's 1995 essay on Chaucer first voiced queer theory's discomfort with biology and environment as heteronormative fictions. The 2008 Giffney and Hird anthology, *Queering the non/human*, began to tease out the heteronormativity in many more conventional notions of ecosystems. Jeffrey Cohen's essay in particular (Cohen 2008) outlined what drove many queer theorists and activists away from working with concepts of organic collectivities. And Giovanna Di Chiro's 2010 essay further explored the toxic nature of heteronormative notions of ecology. As someone who has conducted work on ecosystems for three decades, Giovanna's framings of the "toxicity" of many conventional notions of nature ring true to me. But I have only been able partially realize (and recover from) the depth of this "toxicity" and what it has meant for my own scholarship and activism.

In support of a comment by Joshua Stephens, the queer ecologies line of thinking outlined above has a curious tension with, and amounts to an extension of, Murray Bookchin's (1982; 1990) notions of both "social ecology" and his critiques of socio-biology. And while the particular nuances of Bookchin's social ecologies have largely been neglected with the ensuing decades, the influences of socio-biology, and its uses in justifying neoliberal policies that often relegate sexual minorities to abjection, have not been fully critiqued. Perhaps, queer ecologies is part of a renewed project to further critique the perniciousness of socio-biology through repositioning human culture, and sexual cultures not oriented to procreation in particular, as a significant ecological factor as important to human communities and environmental relationships as those that have been supposedly determined by genetics.

Queer ecologies, as a project in my work as a scholar and practitioner of environmental planning, means finding new ways to learn about systems of communities and places in the context of indefinite decolonisations while challenging persisting attitudes that are heteronormative, misogynist, and culturally chauvinist, on one hand, and that recognizes the greater and poorly explored

diversity of biological and cultural relationships and possibilities on the other hand. Queer ecologies confirm a far more fabulous, awful, and sometimes enchanting biosphere of possibilities and alternative futures than were previously fathomed by the Enlightenment and European imperial and civilizational projects. Finding ways for us to successfully relate this expanded worldview to better day-to-day engagement in human communities, sexualities, institutions, political economies, cultures, and environments in the throes of terrific change will become a central role of fields such as cultural studies, geography, and community planning over the coming decades.

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### **Michael J. Morris**

In round one of this discussion, Gavin Brown describes a “queer impasse”, suggesting the possibility that, “Queer theory seems to have run its course, to outlived its usefulness, and to no longer have much new to offer to emancipatory politics”. Brown directs our attention towards the possibilities of a “political ecology of sexualities”, towards an examination of resource availability and consumption as conditioning factors in the practice and formation of sexualities and sexual identities, and towards a consideration of how contemporary sexualities impact “ecological systems at various geographical scales”. This suggests a provocative intervention in how we might understand sexuality itself. From queer theory – primarily from the work of Judith Butler – comes the appreciation of sexuality as performative, as enacted, iteratively produced over time. Sexuality is never reducible to desire or object choice; it is an assemblage of ongoing performative practices. These performatives do not only produce sexualities; they produce the very subjects of such sexualities as well (Butler, 1990). Brown’s suggestion of a “political ecology of sexualities” would seem to consider the roles of materials and objects within the performativity of sexuality, and thus the formation of subjects themselves.

Here, to “queer ecology” seems to turn towards an “eco-sexuality”, an ecological perspective of sexuality that accounts for the nonhuman material relations that condition, enable, and affect the practices and possibilities of sexuality. Considered ecologically, such material relations cannot be considered to be the setting or accessories of sexuality; rather, such relations must be recognized as internal to the formation of both sexualities and subjectivities. This perspective of sexuality

suggests an emphasis on sexuality, subjectivity, and even bodies as material and relational. Indeed, to bring attention to the material relations of sexuality would allow – if not necessitate – us to consider human bodies themselves as assemblages of materialization in a vast continuum of life and matter on this planet. I am reminded of a passage of Karen Barad’s *Meeting the Universe Halfway*:

What is needed is a robust account of the materialization of all bodies – ‘human’ and ‘nonhuman’ – including the agential contributions of all materials forces (both ‘social’ and ‘natural’). This will require an understanding of the nature of the relationship between discursive practices and material phenomena; an accounting of ‘nonhuman’ as well as ‘human’ forms of agency; and an understanding of the precise causal nature of productive practices that take account of the fullness of matter’s implication in its ongoing historicity (2007, p. 66).

A “queer ecology” might be the pursuit of just such an account, an account that considers sexuality to be a form of discursive practice that participates in the ongoing differential materialization of both human and nonhuman bodies, as well as their agential roles in such processes. To “queer ecology” – in a way out of the “queer impasse” Brown describes – might be to queer the anthropocentric norms of sexuality itself, not only in order to consider the non-heterosexual behaviors of nonhuman life, but also in order to consider sex and sexuality as processes through which matter comes to matter in lived and living forms.

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## Joshua Stephens

There’s a real danger, I fear, in the recurring references to heteronormative reproduction as a factor in ecological crisis. It seems to confer upon an overwhelming generality culpability for a crisis driven by policies and practices in which a similarly overwhelming majority have enjoyed virtually zero input. In the same breath, it draws us nearer to reenacting prior encounters between radical social movements (of a progressive variety) and Malthusian discourse. We ought to be quite clear in our fundamental and unequivocal rejection of anything that slouches in that direction. Further, we ought to hold ourselves to candid interrogations of our own reductive, racist impulses when allocating responsibility for ecological catastrophe. Given recent attempts by xenophobic, quasi-Eugenicist tendencies to hijack powerful environmental organizations such as the Sierra Club, this vulnerability is a real one.

As many have discussed here, neoliberal modes of self-formation popularized in

the last three decades or so have, indeed, crept into and (in many ways) effectively colonized queer subjectivities. It's inadequate to take aim at the low-hanging fruit of mainstream recuperation of "queerness", when consumption and entrepreneurship have been normalized in even arguably radical corridors. At the level of the grassroots (the anarchist bookstore; the organizing meeting; the activist listserv – for instance), one is hard-pressed not to notice a sort of open marketplace of vocabulary in which much is traded, but little is absorbed or made one's own. The language of (anti)oppression often serves an overtly (to say nothing of fiercely) competitive performance of radical authenticity; a sort of fog sitting atop a landscape in which the ethics from which that language springs seem to animate very little. Simply in repurposing this language in such performances, we can observe a certain colonization, and the reinscription of a colonial ethics – an insult salting the injuries of ongoing institutionalized domination, and our failure(s) to break with it.

At the intersection with ecological considerations, we might cast a critical, ethical gaze (and, in turn, practice) toward neoliberal approaches to self-formation; the manner in which they perpetuate an inertia with predictable ecological returns – in both the most material sense, and in the sense of the less material landscapes in which we encounter each other. While his being quoted on it is now so frequent I fear it's lost much of its gravity, German anarchist Gustav Landauer was onto something quite powerful when he argued that the State is a social condition, and way of being; that we dismantle it to the extent that "contract other relationships" and "behave differently". The task is not to atomize radical transformation into isolated lifestyle choices, furthering the neoliberal project. The task is, rather, in the contracting of other relationships that give central place to critique as an act of intimacy; where interventions against ecologically destructive patterns in both our relations and the world at large are deeply erotic undertakings – acts that cast care as an overt gesture of refusal.

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