Making Tracks: Nicole Seymour

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In the “Making Tracks” series, RCC fellows and alumni present their experiences in environmental humanities, retracing the paths that led them to the Rachel Carson Center. For more information, please click **here**.

The Great Indoors: Notes on a Perverse Path to the Environmental Humanities

by **Nicole Seymour**

One of my colleagues once posted an image from **Someecards**, the online service known for its satirical electronic greeting cards, on my Facebook wall. “I thought you might enjoy this,” he wrote. The image features a man and woman in old-fashioned clothes sharing a cocktail, with the caption, “I’m outdoorsy in that I like getting drunk on patios.” Putting aside the issue of whether the caption accurately describes my personal habits, I want to think about what it means that a fellow scholar thought I would enjoy this image. More specifically, I want to use this image to think through how I came to the environmental humanities in general and literary/filmic ecocriticism in particular, and what animates my work in those areas.

The short academic answer is: queer theory. My undergraduate background in women’s studies lead me in graduate school to study the likes of Steven Bruhm, Judith Butler, Lee Edelman, Judith (Jack) Halberstam, and Eve K. Sedgwick, theorists known for debunking the “naturalness” of heterosexuality, traditional gender roles, and normative embodiment. I was taken not just with these theorists’ work itself, but with how they carried it out: in an infectious spirit of contrariness, perverse playfulness, irony, and irreverence—the kind of spirit we can recognize in the aforementioned image. (We might think of, say, Edelman’s Alfred Hitchcock book chapter, *Rear Window*’s “Glasshole,” which is a dark play on D.A. Miller’s already darkly playful and, dare I say seminal, Hitchcock article, “Anal *Rope*”). As much as this scholarly work meant to me, though, it did not sit well with my growing ethical and intellectual commitment to the environmental humanities. For one thing, it troubled me to recognize that while “nature” and “natural”

are the watchwords of ecocriticism and many environmentalisms, they are bad words in queer theory and many queer circles. Thus, as I wrote in the *Journal of Ecocriticism* two years ago,

> [While] I have always been more attracted to the detached, cool irony of queer theory and queer culture than the self-serious agonizing of ecocriticism and environmentalism … I've found myself comparatively more sympathetic to the project of ecocriticism. … [T]here started to be, in my mind, an alarming gap between the dissolution of social (and ecological) constructions and the rethinking of our social (and ecological) practices; while queer theory seemed capable of doing the former work, it seemed incapable of doing the latter.

In short, then, I came to the environmental humanities because of what I observed to be oversights in my chosen discipline. My first book, *Strange Natures: Futurity, Empathy, and the Ecological Imagination* (University of Illinois Press, 2013), grew out of that observation and attempts to ameliorate those oversights. It contributes to the growing subfield of "queer ecology"—for which scholars such as Greta Gaard and Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands laid much of the foundation—by demonstrating that an ecocritical sensibility is necessary for reading contemporary queer film and literature, and for queer theory more broadly. This is especially true as queer theory has begun to assess its two-decades-long ride and to speculate on potential new directions—as seen, for instance, in Michael O'Rourke's 2011 *continent* article, "The Afterlives of Queer Theory," Michael Warner's 2012 *Chronicle of Higher Education* piece, "Queer and Then? The End of Queer Theory?" and Valerie Traub's 2013 *PMLA* article, "The New Unhistoricism in Queer Studies."

But there's also a personal answer to the question of how I came to be doing the work I do. To begin with, I have always been what one would call environmentally conscious. Some of my earliest memories are of growing up in the severe California drought of 1987€'1992, when one could not order a glass of water at a restaurant, and when it was strictly forbidden to wash one's car (I recall that much fun was had in writing messages on people's back windshields). However, I can't honestly say that I "love" nature, or that I "enjoy" the outdoors, as my colleague clearly recognized with his Facebook post. I am therefore anomalous among many of my fellow ecocritics, including those with whom I came up through my graduate program. (Love of nature and the outdoors is, of course, not a prerequisite for being an ecocritic. But if ecocriticism is "less a method than an attitude" [Tallmadge and Harrington, as quoted in Oppermann 154], then the attitude in question has historically been one of reverential "outdoorsiness.") So when one of these

dear graduate cohort members recently enthused to me about a canoeing trip she was planning, I secretly gave thanks that she did not try to talk me into coming. Now, these sentiments may speak more to my fair-skinned fear of sunburn than anything else. My point, though, is that my interest in the environmental humanities, and ecocriticism specifically, has always carried with it an implicit irony. Narcissistic though it is, I have therefore begun to sense that there is a need not just for scholarly environmental work that does not emerge from a place of "love," but also for a scholarly consideration of what it means to do ecocriticism and/or environmentalism from alternate affective places.

My sense of that need has prompted me to start exploring the ecocritical and environmentalist value of attitudes and modes such as contrariness, perversity, playfulness, irony, irreverence, skepticism, humor, absurdity, and even indecency – attitudes and modes that, as I have indicated above, are the hallmarks of much of queer theory and queer culture, though not exclusive to them. My project for my fellowship at the Rachel Carson Center, currently titled *Bad Environmentalism: Affective Dissent in the Ecological Age*, explores how cultural producers from postmodern novelist Don DeLillo to MTV's *Wildboyz* program to the performance art troupe the Lesbian National Parks and Services have seen fit to raise environmental consciousness while operating in the aforementioned modes. As they do so, these cultural producers parody how environmental consciousness so often looks self-serious, self-satisfied, and even elitist.

So while my first book functions primarily to model what an ecocritical sensibility can bring to queer theoretical scholarship, I now find myself hoping to bring a queer theoretical sensibility to ecocritical scholarship—which, we must note, has been historically resistant to theory. I therefore agree with scholars such as Serpil Oppermann, who has argued that "ecocriticism can play a more effective role in the global arena of academic inquiry by incorporating the questions of discursivity and materiality from a sound theoretical basis" (160), and, further, with her insistence that "[t]heory in this sense implements a form of engagement with both the material world and the world of discourse … [and] [i]n fact, … provides the conditions for an intelligible experience of … natural phenomena" (161). But while Oppermann implies that such a theoretical turn might effectively steer ecocriticism toward "method[ological]" rigor and away from its miredness in "attitude," I don't think we can dispense with "attitude" just yet. It might in fact be the very thing that needs theorizing—especially in a time at which people's attitudes toward environmental crises like climate change leave, at least in the United States, much to be desired.