

**Complessità.
Riconoscere e favorire
le diversità**

Complexity.
Acknowledging
and promoting the
diversity

The Timespace of Queer Ecology

Tim Waterman

Bartlett School of Architecture, University College London, UK.
tim.waterman@ucl.ac.uk

Abstract

Queerness is a human construct, fitted to human lives and timespaces, whereas the timespaces of ecologies are radically different, often evolving over millions of years. Queerness also does not apply readily to animal sexualities, which are polymorphous, but which cannot be judged or pigeonholed as queer. This short essay seeks to reconcile the two and clarify the usefulness of the term 'queer ecology' by as referring to habitable landscapes and queer and/or trans landscape relations. These relations are seen as nonlinear and intransitive, and thus their orientations also describe a queer relation to the future.

La queerness è un costrutto umano, adatto alle vite e allo spazio-tempo umano, mentre gli spazio-tempo delle ecologie sono radicalmente diversi e spesso si evolvono in milioni di anni. Inoltre, la queerness non si applica facilmente alle sessualità animali, che sono polimorfe e che non possono essere giudicate o etichettate come queer. Questo breve saggio cerca di riconciliare le due cose e di chiarire l'utilità del termine 'ecologia queer' riferendosi ai paesaggi abitabili e alle relazioni tra paesaggi queer e/o trans. Queste relazioni sono viste come non lineari e intransitive, e quindi i loro orientamenti descrivono anche una relazione queer con il futuro.

Keywords

Queer ecology, Timespace, Landscape relations, Futurity.

Queer ecology, Spazio-tempo, Relazioni del paesaggio, Futuro.

Between 2008 and 2013, actor Isabella Rossellini wrote, produced, directed, and starred in a series of shorts for The Sundance Channel titled *Green Porno* (2008). Over three seasons she explores the sexual and mating practices of creatures as various as praying mantises, hamsters, barnacles, and bedbugs. The short films are colourful and cheerful (even when distressing as with bedbugs) employing brightly coloured foam rubber and card cut-outs and costumes. In season two, which focuses on sea creatures, she reenacts various forms of dolphin sexuality (2014) from the mission position to masturbation, same-sex coupling, blow-hole sex, and even a 'genital buzz' which charges the surrounding sea with an erotic vibration. The diverse forms of dolphin sex are every bit as fluid as the water in which they occur, and are focused as much or more on play, companionship, pastime, and pleasure as they are on procreation. Dolphin sex, and that of many other species, obliterates many of the assumptions of Darwin's sexual selection theory. Dolphin sex is social and fun.

It is, however, a step too far to say that dolphins are queer. To call dolphins 'queer' is to anthropomorphise them and compare and contrast their social and sexual practices to and with human heteronormative expectations and prejudices, which are so often the yardstick by which the measure of queerness is taken. However, to think of dolphins as queer gives hu-

mans the ability to see dolphin lives as they actually exist. Seeing the dolphin other with clarity aids in understanding *human* sexuality as necessarily comprising far more than mere reproduction. It also helps diminish the otherness of human queerness and illuminates its embroilment in social ecology, evolution, and cultural evolution. Framings of queer ecologies¹ are rigorous in insisting human sexuality takes forms yet more complex than dolphin sex, for example, and human sexuality only becomes legible and understandable once misleading heteronormative (and often patriarchal) frames for understanding sex, gender, and evolution in all species are set aside (Bagemihl, 1999; Hird, 2006; Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson, 2010; Roughgarden, 2004).

The flexibility and capaciousness of the word 'queer' is evident in these initial paragraphs, and it is useful to define how it is used in the term 'queer ecology/ies'. In queer ecologies, queer stands in for all the varieties of human experience and biology encountered in the abbreviation LGBTQIA+, and in general it describes all people who are not heterosexual and cis-gender. I believe its stretchiness extends even further, to forms of otherness and oddness which may or may not involve sex and gender. William B. Turner's definition is perhaps broader still, namely 'everybody': "Queerness indicates merely the failure to fit precisely within a category, and surely all persons at



some point or other find themselves discomfited by the bounds of the categories that ostensibly contain their identities” (2008, p. 8). What all definitions of ‘queer’ necessarily agree upon is that it describes humans and human behaviour, activity, and sociality, and this is perhaps its most important characteristic when encountering queer ecologies.

Ecology is “the branch of biology that deals with the relationships between living organisms and their environment” (Oxford University Press, 2024). ‘Environment’ here must be seen to include the organic and the inorganic, and thus the relationships described in ecology are also interspecies. ‘Ecology’ also describes the relationships themselves, also called ecosystems or biomes, at an incredible range of scales. Earth’s biosphere can be described as an ecology, as can a rainforest, a coral reef, a soil, a human body, a microbial community. The space of ecology is, for now, confined to the space of our home planet. It is as yet the only habitable planet we know and which is available for. The time of ecology, though, as it includes

the abiotic, such as air and rock, extends beyond the timespan of individual organisms into geologic time. The timespace of an ecology might describe, then, a rock-bound microbial community. While bacteria might divide every few minutes, some bacteria have lifespans of millions of years, and the rock itself could be billions of years old. The biodiversity in that community could itself have taken thousands or millions of years to evolve.

Habitability and ecology are certainly in dialogue. As Dipesh Chakrabarty points out, the “central concern [of habitability] is life – complex, multicellular life, in general – and what makes *that*, not humans alone, sustainable”. Chakrabarty also identifies a clear distinction between habitability and biopolitics, which “connects life to questions of disciplinary power, state, capitalism, and so on” (2021, p. 83). The timespace of biopolitics is not synonymous with the timespace of the biosphere. The timespace of queer ecologies, to continue this comparison, is yet more confined to the time and space of biopolitics in which



human diversity is suppressed and otherness is produced.

There is another sort of otherness produced within the relation of the human species to the planet. The planet, as Gayatri Spivak has famously noted, is “in the species of alterity” (2012, p. 338), the immense reaches of time and space from its genesis being simply unknowable; any human understanding necessarily partial. Human mythologies and cosmologies have provided ways to explain and simplify earth processes and structure relations to them, and all fields of intellectual endeavour in one way or another are based in earthly relations, but the planetary remains beyond our grasp and there are multiple forms of intelligence we cannot see or only partially comprehend. Queer ecologies, on the other hand, are much more knowable despite their otherness. Matthew Gandy’s essay *Queer Ecology* (2012), for example, examines the messy biodiversity of London’s neglected Abney Park cemetery as an urban ecology, an obviously anthropocentric frame. The cemetery, as

a neglected space, became a marginal space and as it slipped from view, it became a cruising ground for men seeking sex with men. The biological isolation of the space from less messy urban spaces allowed it both to become a sanctuary for plant and animal species, and its isolation also allowed a queer space to emerge. In a footnote he observes that “cruising activity assists species diversity by facilitating the spread of fungal spores” (2012, p. 740). As men move in and out of spaces for sex, they carry with them seeds and spores on their clothing. Their practices participate both in the site’s ecology and biodiversity, and in the diversity of the city’s larger social ecology. These relations move primarily in the temporalities of plants and animals, and in the relatively predictable cycles of human desire. The legibility of this queer ecology stands in contrast to ineffable planetary timespace. Relations here fall within human terms and can be (and are) judged ‘good’ or ‘bad’. From a purely ecological perspective, the movements of these men and the mingling of their metaphor-



ic ‘seed’ with the real seeds of the site can be seen as ‘good’ relations. The movements of animals and plants are in healthy interaction on this site. The ecological lens allows prejudices to fall away. Queer ecology points to the valuing of land relations from outside normative biopolitical frameworks (and heteropatriarchal prejudices). Fisheries scientist Max Liboiron’s *Pollution is Colonialism* focuses on land relations from a queer and Indigenous perspective, with invigorating results. Pollution is a land relation out of balance, without appropriate gratitude, without more-than-human consideration. Knowledges of good relations are learned and taught, innovative, and moved through forms of power (Liboiron, 2021, pp.126-127). These things hang together, often necessarily in states of conflict or compromise, which Liboiron acknowledges is “not a mistake or a failure—it is the condition for activism in a fucked-up field” (2021, p. 134). Queer ecologies are bound to be time-spaces of compromise and contradiction, but whether they hang together in processes that are overall

positive is how they are to be judged as good relations. As practice theorist Theodore Schatzki writes, “People’s lives hang together not only through cooperation and rationality as well as conformity to ends, norms, and rules, but also through understanding and intelligibility” (1996, p. 16). Queer ecologies help us to understand and interpret landscapes more effectively, seeing them intelligibly for what they are and not what we expect them to be, as with dolphin sexuality or the fertile movements of male public sex. As this is a journal about landscapes, there also must be a further word about how queer ecologies help with landscape understandings. If the dominant paradigm is one of capitalism and colonialism, then it is possible to approach questions of how ecological health and landscape health are conceived. Often this is through calculations and transactional methods, such as various metrics for ‘ecosystem services’ or ‘biodiversity net gain’, for example, which are directly transitive, and which reduce complexity to simple operations. These,



while they might appear to provide clarity or intelligibility, actually do the opposite, substituting 'thin rules' for 'thick rules' (Daston, 2022). Thin rules lead to political correctness which can be found anywhere on the political spectrum. Political correctness is an inability to respond to complex (and often urgent) context and instead hewing to reductive rules which can often become laughable or dangerous or both. Simplifying ecologies is certainly dangerous, as Elspeth Probyn shows when she writes about the 'simplified sea' in marine science. This "refers to what happens when we fish down the food web, resulting in an ocean stripped of biodiversity" (Probyn, 2016, p. 10). Starkly, what occurs is a catastrophic loss of ecological health occurring in human lifetimes, whereas the growth of biodiversity happens far beyond even human generational timespace. Probyn's work follows Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick to show how a queer perspective, is *across* (or trans, perhaps), and aligns with Stefan Helmreich's nautical 'athwart theo-

ry', which "moves sidewise, tracing the contingent, drifting and bobbing, real-time, and often unexpected connections of which social action is constituted, which mixes up things and their descriptions" (Sedgwick, 1993, p.12 cited in Probyn, 2016, p. 18; Helmreich, 2009, p. 23).

To mix things and their descriptions up is to move beyond thin rules, thin descriptors, checklists, and taxonomies to make complexities intelligible and to benefit from queer critical distance. This mixing also blocks or comes athwart a transitive view in which one thing leads to another. Both ecologies and queer timespace are nonlinear. Sarah Ensor's queer ecocritical work shows how ecologies have intransitive properties and uses Rachel Carson's writing in *Silent Spring* as a (queer) example, showing how its grammar is "insistently intransitive" (Ensor, 2012, p. 418). She quotes "the following springs are silent of robin song, not because we sprayed the robins *directly*, but because the poison *traveled*" (Carson, 1996 [1962], pp. 188-189).

Although far-flung and seemingly inexplicable environmental changes, for Carson, connect back to the initial act of pesticide spraying, the intertwined and polyvalent patterns of ecology are more a matter of process and persistence than of direct causal links, or of a linear progression (either grammatical or biological) from subject to verb to object. As a result, ecology is made manifest in these paragraphs by the sheer preponderance of intransitive verbs. (Ensor, 2012, p. 418).

Ensor's work is essential not merely for its radical openness to intransitivity, but for its extraordinary sensitivity to forms of queer futurity. Her most recent book *Queer Lasting* points to the hidden fact of "queerness's constitutive intimacy with futurelessness" (2025, p. 9). AIDS, for example, severed queer futures from Western expectations of longevity; reproductive futurity is relatively if not totally absent; queer lives, often clandestine, are shot through with "temporary encounters and provisional practices"; and queer thinking through its acrossness and athwartness provides for a "capacious dimensionality and distension of the present" (2025, p. 9). There is abundant, even magnificent possibility *in the absence of futurity*. Queer futurelessness helps to subtract human judgments and expectations from ecological thinking, such as that ecologies might have drives or ends. This futurelessness is, perhaps ironically, a tool with which to think about futurity with greater clarity and intelligibility. One account of queer theory is, she writes, "the study of how the futureless last" (2025, p. 10).

previous pages, Figs. 1-4 - Frames from *Green Porno*, conceived, written and directed by Isabella Rossellini, 2008-2013. © Sundance Channel / MUBI.

For species without memory or imagination, time is a capacious present and space is known through a sensorium, complex or not. For humans, time and space are not only experienced but reasoned, comprehended, made intelligible, but often based upon human expectations which may bring little to or, worse, obscure the object of knowledge. Queer ecology is necessarily rooted in human experience, understanding, and timespace, but its questing mode comes across these expectations, creating a radical openness, a crucial critical distance, and a rich complexity. Queer ecology also frees possibility from future expectations (indeed, from any future at all) and past prejudices. Though it cannot fully open a human relationship with the planetary and its ineffable timespaces, which must always remain 'in the species of alterity'; it provides crucial tools for understanding the messy and glorious lifeworlds of other beings, and thinking through association and intransitively to build knowledges which are contingent, without certainty, yet robust.

Note

¹Note the preference for the plural – queer ecologies over queer ecology – indicating the dazzling diversity of forms of ecology across different environments, scales, and times. I wrestled with the title for this essay, worrying that plural forms were necessary here too. However, the pragmatic contemporary need for online 'discoverability' won out in the end, as the singular forms of 'timespace' and 'ecology' are more prevalent and searchable.

References

- Bagemihl B. 1999, *Biological Exuberance. Animal Homosexuality and Natural Diversity*, St Martin's Press, New York.
- Carson R. 1996, *Silent Spring*, Beacon, Boston [First published 1962].
- Chakrabarty D. 2021, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London.
- Daston L. 2022, *Rules: A Short History of What We Live By*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ.
- Ensor S. 2025, *Queer Lasting*, NYU Press, New York.
- Ensor S. 2012, *Spinster Ecology. Rachel Carson, Sarah Orne Jewett, and Nonreproductive Futurity*, «American Literature», vol. 84, n. 2, Duke University Press, Durham, NC. DOI 10.1215/00029831-1587395.
- Gandy M. 2012, *Queer Ecology. Nature, Sexuality, and Heterotopic Alliances*, «Environment and Planning D: Society and Space», vol 30, pp. 727-747.
- Helmreich S. 2009, *Alien Ocean. Anthropological Voyages in Microbial Seas*, University of California Press, Berkeley.
- Hird M. 2006, *Animal Transex*, «Australian Feminist Studies», vol. 21, n. 49, pp. 35-50. DOI: 10.1080/08164640500470636.
- Mortimer-Sandilands C., Erickson B. (eds) 2010, *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington.
- Ecology*, in Oxford English dictionary, Oxford University Press 2024. [https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/6977061619\(01/25\)](https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/6977061619(01/25)).
- Probyn E. 2016, *Eating the Ocean*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC and London.
- Rossellini I. 2008, *Green Porno*, The Sundance Channel. <<https://web.archive.org/web/20080511005442/http://www.sundancechannel.com/greenporno/>> (12/24)
- Rossellini I. 2014, *SEDUCE ME: Dolphin*, from *Green Porno*. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l3BzLHA-jiNE&ab_channel=SundanceTV> (12/24)
- Roughgarden J. 2004, *Evolution's Rainbow. Diversity, Gender, and Sexuality in Nature and People*, University of California Press, Berkeley.
- Schatzki T. R. 1996, *Social Practices. A Wittgensteinian Approach to Human Activity and the Social*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky (1994), *Tendencies*, Routledge, London.
- Spivak G. 2012, *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA and London.
- Turner W. B. 2000, *A Genealogy of Queer Theory*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia.