

Queering Eco-poetry Film

Caleb Parkin

Like everything, my thoughts on queering eco-poetry film are very much *in process*. So, what follows provides a developing context for the term 'queering' eco-poetry and what this might mean for an aesthetics of eco-poetry film. In November 2019, I hosted a session on queering eco-poetics at the Poetry in Aldeburgh weekend, so this builds on and develops my thinking from that session – connecting it to my individual and collaborative work.

A Queer World

Some (usually straight) poets have asked why a queering of eco-poetics is necessary – or whether it's even a 'thing'. This (rather wilfully) overlooks the ways sexuality and gender shape our perceptions not just of the human, but the more-than-human, world. Reflecting on 'Queer Poetics, Plant Reproduction, Plant Poetics, Queer Reproduction', Heineman (2017) puts it:

While the term 'queer' is referring to a very specifically human (and mostly white, Western) subject's navigation of a social world, it is also inaccurate to think of plants (and other species) as exempt from and untouched by this discourse. Given the prevalence of anthropocentrism, the reading of gender in plants inevitably reverberates and affects human understanding of human gender, and the reverse.

Our linguistic relationship with ecology is a back-and-forth, endlessly reproduced and evolving relationship. It's also important to notice the 'ecological mandates' (Johnson, 2011) of what's considered valid as 'natural'. These terms are cited by so many – including world leaders currently playing an active role in destroying the planet's ecosystem. If one actually reads about biodiversity in all its exuberant glory, 'The world itself, it turns out, is *so queer*' (Johnson 2011).

New Natures

Our continued imagining of a pristine, distinct Nature, 'over there' is a major impediment to environmental action. The challenging of this Nature/Culture binary – as well as various others like male/female, gay/straight, indeed ecology/technology, or animal/human – is part of what queer eco-poetics and eco-poetics can offer. This is especially true for intersectional queer eco-poets, who can experience exclusion from both an idea of 'nature' and from dominant cultures.

For me, a queer eco-poetics should be open to imagining an 'infinite number of possible Natures' (Johnson 2011) and not a singular entity there to 'protect'. Instead, life could be, as Professor Timothy Morton (2010) puts it, 'catastrophic, monstrous, non-holistic, and dislocated, not organic, coherent, or authoritative' – a 'liquid life' that is a 'non-totalizable, open-ended concatenation of interrelations'. Phew! Morton started out in literary theory before moving into the realm of ecocriticism – and his conception of ecology resists ideas of

originals or fixed texts, playing instead with postmodern ideas of endless copies and reversions.

Step-Nature

Kinship and homemaking have become interesting threads in queering eco-poetics for me, offering a way of breaking down inside/outside or home/outdoors binaries. This has developed simply through writing about my own noticing of *incursions* of the more-than-human – whether writing about the dogs with whom we cohabit, or the black mould we've been attempting to excise from the bedroom. Like Morton, I'm also interested in Vajrayana Buddhism, the teachings of which wouldn't see 'outside' and 'inside', 'outdoors' and 'indoors', as separate at all.

Rahimtoola and Hume (2018) also invite us to consider, 'the ways in which our environmental future is so often cast in the sentimental and domestic terms of the heterosexual nuclear family'. What other kinds of kinship might we imagine? How might we rethink and stop pathologizing 'crazy cat ladies', instead viewing their domestic practices as (re)inhabiting the 'normativities of home' (McKeithen 2017)? As Mark Doty explored at length in his memoir, *Dog Years* (2008), why should we feel embarrassed by our relationships with companion animals, or belittle the grief at their passing?

Camping Up the Crit

If we're to bring about emotional affect towards environmental action, I think we need to stop focusing solely on earnest and shame-driven spectrums of emotion, and explore a richer palette of moods. Nicole Seymour powerfully makes this case in her essay on 'irreverent ecocriticism' (2012) which, for me, was a turning point in understanding the role of humour and playfulness in my own writing. Seymour suggests that, 'instead of remaining serious in the face of self-doubt, ridicule, and [a] broader ecological crisis, we embrace our sense of our own absurdity, our uncertainty, our humour, even our perversity'. Queer artists and poets have always harnessed humour, camp and absurdity as devices – or defences – in a world so often trying to put us down. They don't mean we're not serious about what we're saying, as anyone who's been 'read' properly (warmly, wittily – incisively) by a drag queen will tell you. But we need to hold our seriousness and earnestness in check, for our own resilience and self-care; and because, frankly, seriousness, self-righteousness and guilt *simply aren't working*.

Yes, we need to act. But we also must recognize that any action is also a performance, and possibly in drag. Any writer who chooses the more-than-human world as subject must acknowledge both the complexity and paradox contained within the subject of nature, as well as the contradictions wrapped up within the writer's very self (Johnson 2011).

So why not embrace our contradictions, implicate ourselves in the crisis, play with some of those paradoxes? We can say what we mean, but that doesn't mean we can't offer a wink as we do.

Queer Eco-poets and Eco-poems

As an emerging field of artistic and critical practice, I've been searching around for work which feels for me like queer eco-poetics. I really enjoyed Boston Review's *What Nature?* edition (Spring 2018) in which queer voices and approaches felt well-represented. Of course, there's C. A. Conrad's singular *ECODEVIANCE*, where the poet carries out '(soma)tic poetry rituals' and documents their outcomes as poems. My favourite is 'SECURITY CAMERAS AND FLOWERS DREAMING THE ELEVATION ALLEGIANCE', in which Conrad looks into security cameras while tonguing flowers, then yelling at the bemused security guard who appears: 'I'M A POLLINATOR, I'M A POLLINATOR!!' I love his irreverent, deadly serious, sensuous and outrageous approach to these rituals.

I'd like to discover more intersectional queer eco-poetic voices – but as yet, they seem lacking. This is, perhaps, a reflection of that same lack in the larger ecological discourse; but if you know of any other queer eco-poets writing from intersectional perspectives, please let me know (see below).

My Queer Eco-poetics in Film

At the moment, I'm remotely collaborating (such are the times) on a poetry film about redesigning the garden, simply titled 'garden', with filmmaker and poet Marius Grose. In this piece, we're playing with ideas of inside/outside-ness, merging the earth from the garden with the body of the speaker and implicating the listener/viewer. The piece is deliberately visceral and playful. A refrain asks questions such as: 'Have you ever had a long hair stuck down your throat?' interrogating the boundaries of the body, while describing the Anthropocene detritus found during landscaping this small, suburban garden. We've been exploring merging a bodily archive of X-rayed throats, with xylem, phloem and other filmed footage from my own and Marius' garden.

Some similar themes of inter-corporeality are emerging through a poetry film collaboration with Sarah Tremlett on my poem 'i swallow', in which the speaker describes cycling along the Bristol-Bath bike path (which I live next to), consuming the insects which fly into his mouth, rather than spitting them out. It's deliberately sensuous and subversively erotic, in inviting the reader/viewer to consider what they put into or eject from their own bodies. Sarah also located some archive of throats and the inner workings of the body, to cut together with footage of flying insects and bicycle-like mechanisms. I think this different filmmakers' take on related themes will strengthen this body of work (!) and the collection in which they'll be appearing.

An emerging collaboration with another filmmaker, Helmie Stil, is around a poem called 'The Zone', in which a caffeine-fuelled and insistent male voice makes repeated demands for coffee from Barista 'Goldilocks' (referencing the Goldilocks Zone in the epigraph). It merges Arctic and Antarctic imagery into these orders, repeatedly demanding, *make it, Goldilocks, make it make it* of our beleaguered planet/barista. For me, 'dragging up' in the voice of patriarchy – in which I'm implicated – feels like 'punching up' at the right target. It's political and ecological, but I hope it's not preachy. We're hoping to use fast-cut macro footage of coffee being made for this collaboration, merging it with satellite imagery of the North and South Poles. Again, exploding binaries of scale here – small/large, individual/planetary – is part of the aesthetic, and I hope that it'll be a film which viewers watch and feel breathless, overwhelmed, but want to watch again to take it all in.

For future projects, I'd like to continue exploring the eco-poetics of domesticity and queer non-human kinships. (Indeed, during these Lockdown times, that's the only option for now.) How to represent the life of black mould? Or give duly serious irony to our massacre of scarlet lily beetles in our garden?

I'm also interested in locating, exploring and subverting ecological tropes in popular film. What can these texts tell us about ideas of Nature or ecology? How does gender and sexuality play its part? Can we borrow, distort and cut-up these texts, without being found out?

Caleb Parkin is a day-glo queero techno eco-poet & facilitator, based in Bristol. He won second prize in the National Poetry Competition 2016, first in the Winchester Poetry Prize 2017, and various other competition shortlists, with poems published widely in journals, including: *The Rialto*, *Poetry Review*, *Under the Radar*, *Butcher's Dog*, *Coast to Coast to Coast*, *Strix*, *Magma*, *Envoi*, *Lighthouse*, *Finished Creatures*, *Tentacular* and *Molly Bloom*. He previously worked in media production for the BBC and as a teacher and Senior Inclusion Worker in schools and Pupil Referral Units.

Bony Orbit, a poetry film he wrote and produced, appeared in the online magazine *Atticus Review*. *The Desktop Metaphor*, his National Poetry Competition second prize-winning poem, was turned into a poetry film featured on *Moving Poems*. It won the Jury Prize at the Weimar Poetry Film Award and was in the official selection of the ZEBRA and Rabbit Heart poetry film festivals 2018. It was also selected for ZEBRA 2019 by Sarah Tremlett of Liberated Words for her presentation on the six best films from the UK in the last five years (see www.LiberatedWords.com and www.MovingPoems.com).

His poetry education work is extensive, and he has tutored for The Poetry Society, Poetry School, First Story and numerous primary and secondary schools; as well as in university, online, science centre, festival and community contexts. In 2019, he completed an MSc in Creative Writing for Therapeutic Purposes (CWTP) through the Metanoia Institute, with a dissertation focused on CWTP in museums and galleries. He was awarded Arts Council DYCP funding to explore queer ecopoetry in his first collection.

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