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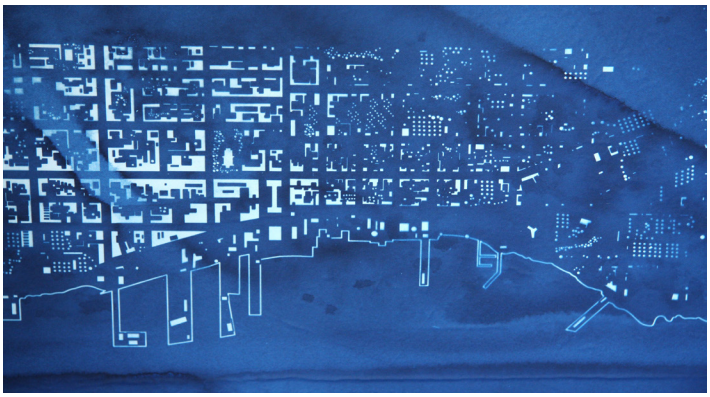
from queer/nature to queer ecologies

celebrating 20 years of scholarship and creativity



Queer Ecologies Roundtable Discussion

Part 1: From Queer/Nature to Queer Ecologies

GORDON BRENT BROCHU-INGRAM, PETER HOBBS & CATRIONA SANDILANDS

On September 11, 2014 members of the *UnderCurrents* editorial collective sat down with Gordon Brent Brochu-Ingram, Peter Hobbs, and Catriona Sandilands—scholars working within the field of queer ecologies—to talk about the successes, challenges, and possibilities of queer ecological scholarship. We began by asking Gordon, Peter, and Catriona to reflect on the contribution that "Queer/Nature," Volume 6 of *UnderCurrents,* made to discussions at the intersection of queerness and environmentalism and invited them to reflect on how queer ecologies has changed in the twenty years since that volume's publication. With an interest in the future of the field, we asked the roundtable participants to tell us how they understood queer ecologies in the present moment and to suggest some of their favourite scholarly, activist, and artistic examples of queer ecological work.

The generous conversation that took place around Catriona's dining room table, with Brent joining on Skype from Salt Spring Island, British Columbia, opened up avenues through which we might trace the history and sketch the futures of queer ecologies. We have transcribed the conversation and included four parts of it in this volume. These fragments of the roundtable are scattered throughout in an effort to put them into conversation with the scholarly and creative contributions that comprise Volume 19. Edited for clarity and flow, the pieces are intentionally incomplete, reminding us that any conversation about queer ecologies must remain open to new associations, trajectories, and challenges.

In addition to our transcriptions, and in order to capture the unique conversational nuance and energy of the roundtable itself, members of the *UnderCurrents* editorial collective recorded the roundtable discussion. As part of *UnderCurrents*' commitment to both creative and collaborative scholarly practice, we've teamed up with the *CoHearence* co-producers to create a podcast episode, available publicly on the UnderCurrents website and through the CoHearence iTunes feed. The podcast offers a fuller record of the roundtable discussion and is an ideal way to give readers auditory access to the voices of the discussants and to allow us to imagine UnderCurrents beyond the page or the computer screen.

We sincerely thank Gordon, Peter, and Catriona for participating in this conversation and for generously agreeing to allow us to share it with you here.

UnderCurrents: Shauna O'Donnell's editorial for *UnderCurrents* Volume 6, "Queer/Nature," points, in the end, to the question of affect and signals the political and creative possibilities of introducing what we might call a concept-practice of persistent love into the investigation of queer nature. O'Donnell writes:

> Queer is, for the most part, defined from a position of "affectional preference." And nature is, in the dominant paradigm, "that which is not human." To love, in both of these instances, is to jar up against confining categories of being in this space, and this time, on earth. What is required in this act, as [Caffyn] Kelly [one of the contributors to that volume] reminds us, is persistence. (3)

What has persisted in your own scholarly and personal relationship, maybe even your own loving relationship, with practices, ideas, politics, and methods of investigating queer natures and, eventually, queer ecologies?

Gordon Brent Brochu-Ingram: In reflecting on my own 1994 article in "Queer/Nature," on spatial contextualization of queerness—which is an awkward term that I'd never use now—I was mostly relying on Foucault's methods for sketching the development and destabilization of institutions of nature,

on one hand, and sexuality, on the other hand; perspectives that had historically been repro-centric and heteronormative. So to talk about queer nature twenty years ago was really to approach a frontier.

Today, my 1994 *UnderCurrents* essay feels a bit naive and over-personalized. From [my current] vantage point, the value of the "Queer/Nature" conversation was in the crude attempts to try on notions of social space as habitat within an ecosystem. . . . Methodologically, I was adapting interdisciplinary methods from environmental studies to queer populations that in 1994 had still only been defined through sociology and epidemiology (especially in relation to AIDS) and literature (in relation to early queer theory). So, a lot of these rich possibilities in 1994 for interdisciplinary investigations have been more recently appropriated and cordoned by cultural geography, a subfield that is too often adverse to recognition of complex biological contexts and mixing qualitative markers with quantitative methods.

From the standpoint of research methods, that 1994 queer natures moment was quite promising in bringing sexuality into environmental studies. But the research that has followed has been less creative, with many interdisciplinary research and methods still underutilized. Forgive me if I'm being a little adversarial. . . . I think that there were a lot more possibilities that the 1994 discussion opened up that haven't been pursued [by] very many researchers. In my mind, the most promising line was the cluster that Cate [Sandilands] has nurtured at York that has led to the queer ecologies discussion. But that's largely a York animal and when I get out into the broader world of queer studies and queer theory, a lot of the possibilities that we glimpsed twenty years ago have barely been explored and applied.

Catriona Sandilands: I think you might go to the wrong conferences Brent . . . [laughter] I would almost say the opposite. Certainly in the last three or four years . . . there's [been] a proliferation of works that are trying to stage a conversation between queer and ecology, and specifically to take up some of the threads that were raised in the "Queer/Nature" volume, about thinking about queer beyond the subject positions of LGBT individuals.

What I might argue is the point that came up in the "Queer/Nature" [volume] that hasn't been returned to in quite so robust a manner is the relationship between that sort of ontological/epistemological queering and on-the-ground political activism. If I see a gap, that's kind of what it looks like for me. . . . I think that queer ecology is naming an increasingly diverse set of scholarly and creative practices but I'm not quite sure how it is being manifest in activism.

Peter Hobbs: It's hard for me to talk about twenty years of queer ecologies/natures . . . but looking back at the "Queer/Nature" issue today, I was struck—and maybe this is echoing some [of the] sentiment that Brent is expressing—[that] I could identify certain tropes, concerns, and sentiments that were expressed in the issue [and that] are still being expressed today. So there is sort of a lag, a proliferation of queer ecology or queer materialism, there is a real interest in using the methods and not so much the theory. . . . I guess queer theory had to end. It couldn't continue troubling theory where queer ecologies can continue. I see the similarities in the stuff that [was] taken up in [the 1994] issue is still being taken up today. So I was quite impressed when I went back and looked.

Darren Patrick: Cate you're nodding . . .

Catriona Sandilands: I was nodding because it's still a very impressive document. And hats off to Shauna [O'Donnell] for dreaming it up and for bringing together a very interesting collection of approaches. It was a bit of a stab in the dark because we had no idea what we were doing. Even the piece that I wrote is a collage piece; there is no coherent sense of what the relationship was going to be between queer and nature, and it is interesting to look back at the piece and see what directions I followed, that I'm continuing to follow, and what directions have gone by the wayside . . . either dying a good death or [seeing the] things that I may need to look at again.

One of the things I do realize that I am still quite committed to is understanding queer as a mode of politicized estrangement of the familiar. So Jack Halberstam talks about queer theory and queer politics as essentially any version of politics that does not have the white heterosexual couple at the centre of it. And I think that that kind of estrangement is the kind of work that I do and that Peter, Brent, Nicole Seymour, Robert Azzarello, and that Darren do—calling into question some of the comfortable habits of ecological and environmentalist thought that align with this understanding of the couple. So, for example, one of the figures from queer theory who has emerged into the queer ecological universe is Lee Edelman. His book, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, [explores] the notion of reproductive futurity and the ways in which this is an imaginative and psychic structure for capitalist societies. It is also very much part of a certain kind of environmentalist narrative—and several people have used him as a way of calling into question the heteronormativity of much contemporary environmental discourse.

For me, even if the kinds of modes of estrangement, the places where I'm thinking about estrangement, the particular things that I'm trying to make strange have changed, I'm still quite attached to that understanding of queer as an actively anti-heteronormative mode of questioning. Which is actually pretty portable, it goes a lot of interesting places.

Conversation continues on page 27.

Queer Ecologies Roundtable Discussion

Part 2: Examining Heteronormativity, Reprocentricity, and Ecology

GORDON BRENT BROCHU-INGRAM, PETER HOBBS & CATRIONA SANDILANDS

UnderCurrents: There [were] a lot of really interesting knots in that first round of things. One of those knots touches on something that Peter said about the relationship between queer theory as a kind of academic enterprise and queer ecology as this ostensibly more mobile enterprise that can travel. In queer politics, in general, the process of engaging with heteronormativity, the process of engaging with reprocentricitiy is, in some sense, what makes it queer. As ecology helps the queer travel in different universes and attaches it to different kinds of things, how do heteronormativity and reprocentricity act as centres for what queer ecologies is doing? Do you think that the insistence on queer ecology or queer theory as an anti-reprocentric or anti-heteronormative enterprise changes when we start to pay more attention to ecology as a mode of doing the work?

Gordon Brent Brochu-Ingram: I have a kind of a strong response. . . . The queer ecologies framework for me has been pretty easy to graft onto a whole body of decolonial and Indigenous theory around environment. You know, it's hard sometimes, and I say this as somebody who is very a highly assimilated mixed-race Indigenous person. My mother's family is Metis with deep roots in three regions in northern Canada, boreal Canada. I grew up as part of an Indian Reserve community in Southern Vancouver Island, but [I was], you know, pretty middle class. So like many of us, it has taken me much of my life to process that and I often do it through colonial theory. Now I think that there is a very direct relationship between some of our queer ecologies methods because there is a deeper critique of science. Science as we know was largely a Euro-centric, decolonial, imperial project. . . . The queer ecologies conversation gives me a kind of decolonial bridge between white-neocolonial environmentalism on one-hand, which I see all over this region—Salt Spring Island and Southern Vancouver Island—but also the remnants of Indigenous ecological knowledge on the other hand, which has seen a huge resurgence not only just because of this year's [2014] Supreme Court of Canada decisions [regarding Tsilhqot'in First Nation] but a huge sort of cultural resurgence both in Indigenous populations and in the broader population around here. So it's on everybody's minds out on the west coast. So there are some other bridges and possibilities that the queer ecologies conversations—we'll call them doors, you know—doors that lead to bridges that sometimes people want to walk along.

Peter Hobbs: Brent do you have an example of a good bridge?

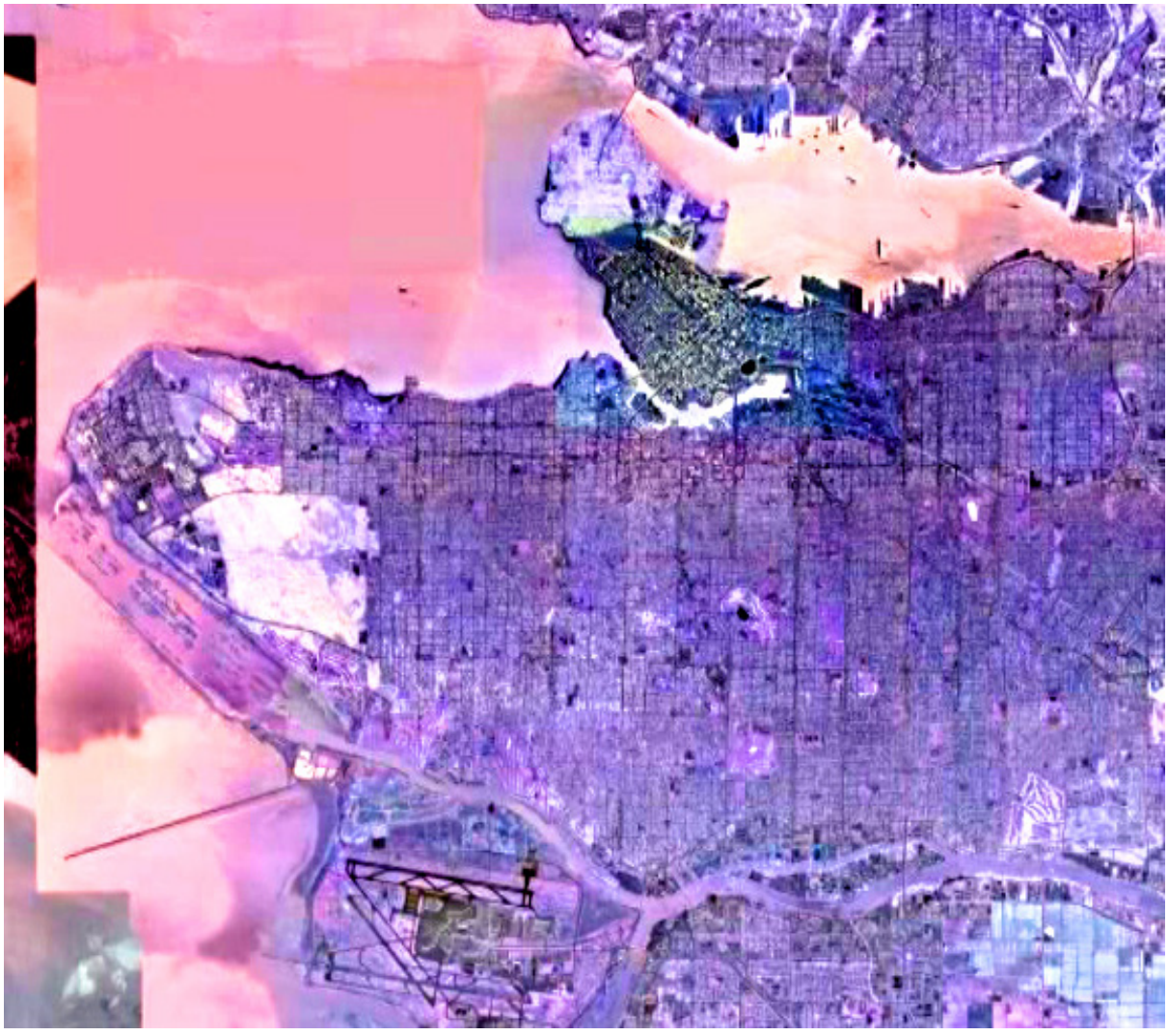
Gordon Brent Brochu-Ingram: Yeah! . . . If you're serious about calling into question the reprocentricity and heteronormativity of modern science and modern ecology, then you start to open the door to a range of other narratives and experiences and investigations of our environments. It's everything from traditional environmental knowledge to the kind of cultural narrative that we see in environmentalism. But ecology as a science as we've known it is up for reconsideration. It's not necessarily undermined, but it's broadened. And I think we've all been doing that. On one level we've been trying to shore up the importance of ecology and environmental studies. At the same time, especially with the queer work, we're calling some of the earlier assumptions, such as reprocentricity and heteronormativity into correct question. We're demolishing part of modern science, ecological science, and we're trying to find substitutes.

Catriona Sandilands: I think you could also argue that there is a trajectory of queering in some versions of ecological science, even though the folks doing it probably—actually, defi-

nitely—wouldn't call it that. So moving away from, for example, some of the more reductionist genetically driven accounts of evolutionary biology that focus on the idea of the adaptive trait being carried by an individual through the process of sexual selection. Moving away from an understanding of that as the central model of inheritance—in some ways Lamark ends up being somewhat vindicated—we're able to look at the ways in which environmental conditions trigger genetic change and mutation. There's one understanding in evolutionary biology that difference in a species is only produced through sexual relationship, but in fact, it is increasingly obvious that that's not the case. So it's no longer the case that you have to have the heterosexual coupling at the centre of questions of change and genetic inheritance. There are . . . epigenetic forces. There are ways in which we can now look at life in much queerer ways, and that queering is coming from the humanities, the arts, the social sciences. I would argue that it's appearing in the sciences as well. I'll just end it there, end of thought.

Peter Hobbs: The only thing that I would add to that is that it's not new. You know, science has always been interested in an experimentation and wonderment. It thrives, it should thrive on, experimentation and wonderment. That's what the best science does. That's what science is supposed to do . . . it productively mangels and entangles. And I would add, and it might be a trope that I use way too much, but it's that the world is always already queer . . . I think that's one of the main points of queer ecologies—seeking out the queerness in everyday life and reminding people that, of course, science is constructed following certain restrictions and certain disciplines, but it is also the performance of matter. Yeah. And then I'll end there.

Conversation continues on page 46.



VANCOUVER FROM GOOGLE EARTH 4 2008. Gordon Brent Brochu-Ingram.

Queer Ecologies Roundtable Discussion

Part 3: Politics, Resistance, Alliances, and Imbroglios

GORDON BRENT BROCHU-INGRAM, PETER HOBBS & CATRIONA SANDILANDS

UnderCurrents: In preparing for tonight's roundtable, we went back to Andil Gosine's contribution to the *Queer Ecologies* book, "Non-white Reproduction and Same-Sex Eroticism: Queer Acts Against Nature," in which he raises three powerful concerns/questions about the formation of queer ecologies. The first regards the "*political geography of queer ecology*: Is the production of 'queer ecology' a decidedly Euroamerican project?" (166, emphasis in original). Building on this, the second is "a concern about *race-racism*: If queer ecology is to maintain a primary gaze on the production of nature in Euroamerican contexts—which, despite my reservations is, I think, a legitimate and viable option—what becomes of race-racism?" (166, emphasis in original). Finally, "*a concern about the political resistance*" by way of articulating a mode of politics that goes beyond alliances in its "refusal of race-racism [as] not separate from the refusal of heteropatriarchy," Gosine finally asks, "Might queer ecology be better served, for example, by the kind of model of political resistance that has been articulated by black lesbian feminists such as Audre Lorde, M. Jacqui Alexander, and Dionne Brand, where its work is not merely to attend to the 'sexuality' part of oppression, but to recognize and work with its full, complex rendering?" (167–168, emphasis in original).

So, in light of Gosine's questions, what might it look like if queer ecologies were to strengthen its engagements with other self-forming fields and to other modes not only of resistance but also of research?

Gordon Brent Brochu-Ingram: [O]ne thing I've been thinking about is how important these queer nature and ecology conversations have been for creatively coming up with more resources, more theoretical ammunition. To challenge retrogresses and increasingly 'neoliberal' . . . conceptualizations of both ecology and LGBT communities. So, for example, I've been recently moved by the new work . . . on critiques of homonationalism, like Jasbir K. Puar's *Terrorist Assemblages*. But also what's really been useful this year is Christina Hanhardt's 2013 *Safe Space: Gay Neighbourhoods History and the Politics of Violence*, which is really about missed opportunities for coalition building. I see a lot of potential, and I go to some meetings where people recognize the potential. But in my world out here—and maybe not at York University—it's still been in its very formative stages [of seeing] how these new forms of queer ecologies investigation and analysis can help us build bridges that lead to new kinds of coalitions.

Catriona Sandilands: To tentatively stick a finger into that huge pie . . . there's one work, one text that, for me, perfectly encapsulates what I think is the potential of queer ecologies. And that's Shani Mootoo's novel *Cereus Blooms at Night*.

One of the reasons that I've been, in recent years, so incredibly drawn to works of art and literature is that they are able to stage and perform those complicated articulations and cross-penetrations . . . in incredibly accessible and powerful ways, that works that call themselves 'theory' do not necessarily need to do, because theories are attempting to universalize and literary texts are showing the dense particularities of certain kinds of relationships.

But Mootoo's novel stages—I can't talk about it in all its glorious complexity—but it stages a relationship among gender, sexuality, species, race, colony, and [ableism]. And I particularly love it because it does so through plants. [I]t's an extraordinary representation of the dense ways in which all of these different relationships are articulated. Does it offer up a politics? No, it doesn't. That's not the work that it attempts to do. Does it draw our attention to the ways in which these power relationships are densely interwoven and actually inseparable? You know, you cannot name a single source of oppression as primary in that text. . . . It offers this incredibly

ELK RADIO. Peter Hobbs.

powerful articulation and you end up, after having read the novel, with an incredibly deepened understanding of each one of those different sets of relationships. If you ask me for a single queer ecological text to read, that's the one I will give you.

The other thing I would say is that . . . the way in which queer theory is going to come back into the queer ecological conversation is through queer people of colour theory. And we've already seen that with Mel Chen's book *Animacies* and I think that there are ways in which some of this more recent theoretical work is seemingly asking different kinds of queer theoretical questions.

So, Foucault was incredibly influential, Lee Edelman has been incredibly influential, enabling us to ask different kinds of questions. I think that precisely works [by] . . . Puar, Chen, and also . . . Katherine McKittrick [are] asking us to re-think what it means to ask a queer question.

Peter Hobbs: Yeah, I was going to mention Mel Chen's book as my pick. . . . Mel Chen's book is amazing because it does all this work—and that's the whole point of the book—that's what makes it so good, because [Chen] formats the book so that [the] methodology matches . . . what [they're] doing. There's a mirroring going on there, right? [Chen] talks about messy imbroglios and [is] creating messy imbroglios, and that's important to what queer ecologies is.

Conversation continues on page 60.

Queer Ecologies Roundtable Discussion

Part 4: Queer Ecologies at the Limits

GORDON BRENT BROCHU-INGRAM, PETER HOBBS & CATRIONA SANDILANDS

UnderCurrents: As we engage in this extended discussion tonight, what about an inversion of the first question: When do we reach a limit after which the work we're doing is *not* queer ecological work anymore? It's a sort of goofy contingent question to pose, but it was something that came up in our editorial process this year.

Gordon Brent Brochu-Ingram: Well, I have a visceral response.

Darren Patrick: Oh, good, we need your viscerality!

Gordon Brent Brochu-Ingram: That is, that we are living in a time of environmental crisis which affects everybody, including queer identified people, [which] often has huge implications for sexual practices. And, I have to say that what's going to drive the notion of queer ecology in the long term is this very queer dynamic between survival quests—quests for survival—whether its protection from violence or recognition of marriage rights or recognition of the right to live outside of any kind of accepted norm, there's going to be this drive or a kind of queer survival or a larger kind of queer space, on the one hand, and I think, we've alluded to it, I'm thinking of that book [*Cruising Utopia*] by the now sadly deceased José Esteban Muñoz. [All the works we discussed are] struggling with notions of the queer imagination as . . . somehow related to our research and our scholarship and our lives. And it's not easy—we've got these two poles—for many of us it is quite painful to try to figure out how to respond to both of those imperatives in our lives and in our scholarship.

Catriona Sandilands: I think that one of the things that I have struggled with in the midst of some of the more recent scholarship that has called itself queer ecology, for example, Tim Morton's editorial in the *Pacific Modern Life Association (PMLA)* journal, which a lot of people quote, and he's arguing that queer, that queerness is sort of a fundamental principle of the universe and we all kind of share it. And, in this, he ends up equating queerness with relationality. He has since changed his mind, in his more recent work on hyperobjects, he has become less interested in relations and more interested in objects, but, that's OK. And he gets quoted a lot. . . . A more sophisticated version of this is Karen Barad's work on queer performativity. In which she's also arguing that queer is somehow a basic principle of life. So, on both of those accounts, there is no limit to queer ecology, because ecology is always already queer. I start wondering, "Well, if everything is queer, than nothing is queer." Because we lose, I think we lose the specificity, we lose the politics, we lose the sense that—Peter is shaking his head, we've disagreed on this publicly before . . .

Darren Patrick: Let's get it on tape this time. [Laughter] Let's commit it to the global archive.

Catriona Sandilands: I don't think it fundamentally depoliticizes, because it is actually calling into question, it is actually calling to attention certain versions of, certain processes of life that are otherwise not considered publicly, so I think it is actually quite important. I think Barad's article is actually quite important.

Is there some way in which we need to have different ways of talking about queerness in different ontological registers? So, within the biological realm, within the political realm, the social realm, within the affectional or other realms. There seem to be different versions of what queer means. So, I think queer [ecology] is potentially limitless, but what I would actually like to see us do is speak more specifically about some of the particular conjunctions, some of the more particular

articulations that appear between and among these realms. So, that's kind of a non-answer to your question. . . . It's potentially everything, but I don't think that it should be everything. I think it should be a bunch of very particular things.

Peter Hobbs: I totally understand that point that you would lose specificity and you would lose specificity by opening up the notion of queer to include starfish and lead. And the idea that "if everything's queer, then nothing is queer." I understand that. And, this is sort of a minor difference, if it is a difference, because, I think we . . . are pretty much the same person. [Laughter]

Darren Patrick: But let's zoom in on the difference a little bit. All the disclaimers being on the table, let's talk about that difference, even if it is a minor difference.

Peter Hobbs: Well I knew this was going to come up. So I was thinking about this axiom: If everything is queer then nothing is queer. And how it sort of is an axiom.

Catriona Sandilands: As long as it's not a cliché.

Peter Hobbs: [Laughter] Yeah, and of course, if "everything is queer then nothing is queer;" I don't quite follow that. If everything is queer, then everything is queer.

Catriona Sandilands: Both things can be true at the same time.

Peter Hobbs: But, regardless of that—

Catriona Sandilands: Maybe the axiom is: "If everything is queer, then nothing is queer in the way that I want it to be queer." [Laughter]

Peter Hobbs: Yeah, I guess the specificity [is] a specificity for certain stories that haven't been worked over enough that I think that you would be hesitant to lose. . . . A similar criticism is made of the posthuman: that we can't talk about the posthuman because we'd lose out on the stories of all those wonderful and horrible stories of being human... So, I totally understand that, but I think that's maybe the difference between; maybe we haven't talked about the difference between a cultural studies approach to queer ecologies and looking at discourse [analysis] approach. . . .

When materialism has been introduced to queer ecologies and has taken on a role, we're looking to think with and through animals and microbes and plants. That is definitely part of the queer ecology; that's one of the most exciting parts that queer ecology is thinking with and through the animal or the non-human. And you could say the exact same thing: If everything is going to tell us a story then, of course, we're going to lose certain stories.

But I do want to point out that there is this shift away from a cultural studies to more material studies, a notion of performativity, and this call to think with and through non-human. I think [that is] important to queer ecologies.

Catriona Sandilands: I think that we need both things. And the work that most compels me is the work that actually manages to do both things well.

Gordon Brent Brochu-Ingram: Well . . . I haven't read Mel Chen's work, I know of some of [their] earlier work; I'm still stuck on this idea that queer ecologies—through this recognition of a reprocentric and heteronormative biases of 300 years of modern science—has a huge implication for how we view the world. And I thought . . . the back and forth with Peter and Cate is very important, but, for me, it's still fundamental that queer ecologies is part of a greater critique of—and a very profound critique of—much of what we know as biology and ecology. We've just begun to understand what that means for how we view the world and how we identify what's important and what's vulnerable, what we can count on and what is more ephemeral. So, I like the way this conversation is going, but, again, it goes back to a kind of critique of science; colonial science and neo-colonial science, heternormative science, patriarchal science, all the things that we have just begun to challenge. Because, what I hear with the back and forth between Cate and Peter is . . . a lot of philosophical kinds of nuance that I haven't been able to explore . . . and I'll for sure look at Mel Chen's reading.

For bibliographic notes and a podcast of the complete roundtable discussion, please visit www.yorku.ca/currents or download the podcast from CoHearence on iTunes.

"A VERY SEXY WOODSMAN." Photo by William Notman via McCord Museum.