



Introduction

Locating Queer Ecologies

[E]nvironmentalism and queer politics seldom seem to intersect. This dislocation rests on a narrow association of ecology with visible landscapes and sexuality with visible bodies bounded by skin. In the pages of journals, as in popular culture, attractions may range far afield, but the field itself merely offers a place to suffer or to frolic, a simple backdrop for the playing out of sexual politics.

—Kath Weston, “A Political Ecology of ‘Unnatural Offences’”

The task of a queer ecology is to probe the intersections of sex and nature with an eye to developing a sexual politics that more clearly includes considerations of the natural world and its biosocial constitution, and an environmental politics that demonstrates an understanding of the ways in which sexual relations organize and influence both the material world of nature and our perceptions, experiences, and constitutions of that world.

—Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson,
Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire

Strange Natures identifies a tradition of queer environmentalism in contemporary fictions: I find that novels and films generally categorized as queer—including Leslie Feinberg’s *Stone Butch Blues* (1993), Todd Haynes’s *Safe* (1995), Ang Lee’s *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), and Shelley Jackson’s *Half Life* (2006)—explicitly link the queer to the natural world through an empathetic, ethical imagination. These works understand oppressed humans (including working-class individuals and people of color, in addition to queers) and oppressed non-humans (degraded landscapes, threatened natural resources, and other flora and fauna) to be deeply interconnected, and they promote politicized advocacy on behalf of both. My focus on contemporary work from the Americas is crucial to my intervention in the emerging paradigm known as “queer ecology”: I maintain that the ecological stances

of the works I treat here are striking precisely because of the contexts from which they emerge—including postmodernism, poststructuralism, and the “post-identity” era—and *precisely because they are so self-consciously queer*. That is to say, these works manage to conceive of concrete, sincere environmental politics even while remaining, to varying degrees, skeptical, ironic, and self-reflexive. And they do so even while, as I detail below, queer fictions and theory are known for their cynicism, apoliticism, and negativity, such that “queer environmentalism” sounds like an oxymoron.

My readings thus make a unique contribution to the queer-ecology paradigm, while taking up what Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson define in the second epigraph of this chapter as its general task. More broadly, these readings perform what David Mazel calls poststructuralist *ecocriticism*: “a way of reading environmental literature and canonical landscapes . . . that attends concurrently to the discursive construction of both . . . environment and . . . subjectivity” and that analyzes environment “as a powerful site for naturalizing constructs of race, class, nationality, and gender” (*American Literary Environmentalism* xxi). In rereading contemporary queer literature and film as environmental literature and film, I add “sexuality” and “gender identity” to Mazel’s list of dominant identity constructs. And I show that the environment can function as a site not just for establishing such constructs, but for challenging them.

This book draws on the insights and methodologies of queer theory and ecocriticism—as well as on critical race theory, environmental and social-justice studies, feminist theory, transgender studies, and areas of philosophy such as environmental ethics. Mine is not an arbitrary attempt to join together the already diverse and already interdisciplinary fields of queer theory and ecocriticism: these fields are known for focusing on the concept of nature. But they have historically done so in very different ways, ways that suggest that the “naturalness” of a category such as heterosexuality is largely unrelated to the “naturalness” of a category such as wilderness. “Natural” has actually become something of a dirty word in queer theory, as I outline below, though one that it seems unable to do without. One of *Strange Natures*’s major projects is challenging this conceptual disconnect. I show that contemporary queer fictions ask the question, “What counts as ‘natural’—and why?” in regard to both gender/sexuality and environment—as well as race, immigration status, health status, ability, and class—and that they do so in a way that illuminates the imbrication of those categories. In what follows, I offer a genealogy of this book’s iteration of queer ecology. I specify how I intervene in, and draw on, queer theory and ecocriticism—thereby suggesting that queer ecology exists not only to provide a new lens,

but to make use of the gaps in and overlaps among existing lenses. I also specify what *Strange Natures* offers more broadly as a scholarly work: not just a reconceptualization of the human relationship to the non-human natural world, but a reassessment of how we draw critical-theoretical boundaries.

Queer Theory and Ecocriticism: An Unnatural Union?

Queer Theory

Queer theory and its (arguable) precursor, gay and lesbian studies, have long wrestled with the concept of the natural. Jeffrey Weeks's *Against Nature: Essays on History, Sexuality, and Identity* (1991) is a prominent early example, and one worth considering here in some depth. Weeks nicely summarizes the stalemate at which nature-versus-nurture debates arrive, noting that "the textbooks used to tell us that homosexuality was unnatural. Lesbians and gay men, on the contrary, assert that homosexuality is natural. Who is to tell us which of these two 'truths' is true?" (88). He seeks to step out of the stalemate by historicizing sexuality, as have other theorists, such as Michel Foucault and Eve K. Sedgwick. First, Weeks declares that "sexuality in general, and homosexuality in particular, has been shaped in a complex, and ever changing history over the past hundred years. At the centre of that history has been the making of sexual identities—identities we so readily take for granted now as rooted in nature, but which in fact have a variety of determinable sources and points of origin" (vii). He then goes on to maintain that "lesbian and gay history has led the way in challenging the conventional view that sex is a private, unchanging, 'natural' phenomenon" (89, my emphasis); that "what we should use history for is to . . . try to see whether what we assume is natural is not in fact social and historical" (91, my emphasis); and that "identity is not inborn, pre-given, or 'natural'" (94, my emphasis).

Some curious things have happened to "nature" in these discussions. For one, the concept of nature itself, rather than the dehistoricizing and discriminatory processes of naturalization, has come under fire. "Nature" thus starts to look like something that can function only oppressively—or, at best, naively; it is rendered monolithic even as it is decried for being farcical. For another, Weeks makes strange bedfellows of an anti-discriminatory, anti-essentialist, historicist position, and a discriminatory, homophobic one; both positions agree that queerness is "against nature." Of course, they agree for different reasons. And, of course, Weeks has nothing like anti-gay discrimination as his goal. But we might object to the undertheorization and

underhistoricization of “nature,” in comparison to the theorization and historicization of “sex.” We might object, further, to how Weeks’s foundational work speaks from a poststructuralist stance to create an antipathy between “the queer” and “the natural” that potentially exacerbates the antipathy already engendered by the dominant culture. (And all this despite the fact that, as Weeks acknowledges, “lesbians and gay men” have deployed the concept of nature to combat oppression.) We might then say that “nature” occupies a particularly strange position within queer theory: both abhorred and needed, as a kind of conceptual whipping boy.

It is in fact striking how regularly queer scholarship targets designations of “nature” and the “natural” while failing to theorize or contextualize the terms themselves; to acknowledge that the terms have multiple meanings, not all of which apply to the human or the social; or to acknowledge what the rejection thereof might mean for nature qua the non-human world. Indeed, at times “nature” or “natural” function in queer theory as synonyms for heteronormativity or political conservatism, while at other times they are benign synonyms for something like “character” or “status.” Consider, for example, that one of Weeks’s other stated aims is “to show that sexual identities are historical in nature” (viii, my emphasis)—while, above, “historical” was his antonym for “natural.” Weeks’s work is not unique in this regard; consider José Esteban Muñoz’s reference to “the relational and contingent nature of sexuality” (“Thinking Beyond” 825, my emphasis). To be fair, both theorists seem to mean something like “status” here. Moreover, “nature” is one of the most elastic words in the English language; one could make the case that if such theorists sometimes mean “nature” as in “essence” at some points, and “nature” as in “status” at others, then they might very well talk about nature in respect to the human without implying, or being expected to imply, anything about nature in respect to the non-human. But what I show throughout this book is that such divisions are disingenuous, as the two are always co-implicated. If “nature” is the foundational point of departure for queer theory, then, it is a departure that has left much to be resolved.

The texts in my archive, and this book itself, heed this call. Rather than simply ignoring the fact that the same concept that applies to human sexualities and gender identities also applies to the non-human world, they approach that overlapping application head-on. But they refuse to collapse “nature” qua the threatened natural world into “nature” qua the threats of heteronormativity and homophobia. Instead, these texts and this book consider that queerness might be progressively articulated through “the natural” more broadly, or the non-human world more specifically. For in-

stance, in Chapter 4 I show how *Brokeback Mountain* frames wilderness and the queer human as equally threatened by capitalist domestication, and develops in response a portrait of anti-domestic, non-urban queer living. Through such depictions, the texts in my archive imply that it is a mistake, rather than a radical provocation, for queers to embrace the charge of “unnaturalness” and align themselves with culture, against nature. And they suggest that it is a tragedy to allow queer criticism of “the natural” to render us silent, or even scornful, about the natural qua the non-human world.

This is not to suggest that the texts in my archive embrace “nature” or “the natural” unreservedly. They interrogate these concepts, but they do so very carefully. And with good reason: there is much more at risk for queers than for heterosexuals and other dominant groups in calling into question the naturalness of sexual, gender, or other types of identity. While these texts agree that ideas of nature are constructed, they take aim less at “nature” than at the processes of construction.¹ They suggest that, while it may not be possible to escape altogether the construction of some things as natural and some as unnatural, it might at least be possible to combat the kinds of naturalizations and denaturalizations that enable exploitation and discrimination, or that deny the complexities of humans and non-humans. My archive thus engages, as does this book on the whole, with the question posed by Mei Mei Evans: “When it is said that women are ‘by nature’ maternal . . . or that it is ‘unnatural’ for people of the same gender to be sexually attracted to one another”—or, I would add, when queer theorists say that sexual and gender identities are not “natural”—“what role is being assigned to [non-human] nature? . . . What is at stake for these groups of human beings, and what is at stake for nature [the non-human] itself?” (184).

In addition to queer theory’s general disdain for the “natural,” its so-called negative turn—including the “anti-social thesis”—has worked against the development of queer ecological stances. A 2005 PMLA roundtable article on the anti-social thesis paints a picture of a hostile climate for queer ecology—and, ironically, of the need for just such a perspective. The MLA panel that prompted the PMLA article traced the anti-social thesis to Leo Bersani, who has outlined a concept of queer sexuality as “self-shattering” in essays such as “Is the Rectum a Grave?” and argued that “homo-ness” represents “a potentially revolutionary inaptitude—perhaps inherent in gay desire—for sociality as it is known” (as quoted by Caserio 819). Theorists such as Edelman and Michael Warner have extended Bersani’s ideas in order to critique mainstream gay bids at respectability, such as same-sex marriage, and in order to highlight queer forms of existence that do not seek to reproduce the dominant social order. Similar to Weeks’s ironic embrace of

the “against nature” designation, these theorists have celebrated the charge of anti-sociality and reclaimed concepts such as “failure” and “shame.”² However, like the aforementioned embrace, these recent moves leave the queer at a curious impasse: as Tim Dean argues in the PMLA article, “the antisocial thesis originates not in queer theory but in right-wing fantasies about how ‘the homosexual agenda’ undermines the social fabric” (826). Again, though the motive of the queer theorist and the right-winger may differ, their messages and potential effects are troublingly similar.

One could imagine, however, that these concepts of self-shattering and anti-sociality might open out onto something else entirely, such as queer interest in the natural world. After all, a measure of self-renunciation and anti-sociality is central to many if not most forms of environmentalism, including ecocriticism; the renunciation of anthropocentrism and the adoption of bio-centric or ecocentric viewpoints are veritable prerequisites for participation in either. In fact, as I discuss in Chapter 3, some radical environmentalists, such as those associated with deep ecology and ecoanarchism, abhor humanism and humans themselves. I take serious issue with ecological misanthropy in that chapter, and I believe, along with ecophilosopher Patrick Curry, that humanism can be rehabilitated for ecological purposes—as he argues, “humanism . . . has strong roots in Montaigne, and later Voltaire, Bentham and Mill, for whom it implied almost the opposite of its modern meaning: the need to be humane, including but extending beyond humanity, in order to be fully human” (54). But the point nonetheless remains: if queerness is anti-social, might radical environmentalists’ targeting of society as we know it—say, through tree-sitting, tree-spiking, or destroying fast-food restaurants—not be the anti-social move *de résistance*? And if even mainstream environmentalist groups ask us to put the ecosystem ahead of individual human desires, might environmentalism as an impulse then be queer at its very core? At the very least, if queer theorists are interested in “[a]pproaching the humanities without any need to preserve the subject of humanism” (Edelman, “Antagonism” 822), might they not find something in common with figures such as author/environmental activist Edward Abbey, who lamented the fact that “in the classicist view only the human is regarded as significant or even recognized as real” (as quoted in McKibben 177)? But such elaborations of the anti-social thesis have not happened. Many who promulgate it have, arguably, devolved into nihilism, or, at least, “cast[ing] material political concerns as crude and pedestrian” (Halberstam, “The Politics of Negativity” 824).³ Among other things, such thinkers thereby leave the health and future of the planet looking like a frivolous concern.⁴

The anti-social thesis has also led some queer theorists to critique futurity, which just so happens to be a fundamental rhetoric of environmentalism at large. Edelman's *No Future* is now (in)famous for its takedown of "reproductive futurism," which entails the staging of politics and reality itself through the figure of "the Child." In the PMLA roundtable on the anti-social thesis, Edelman observed that one question dominated the roundtable discussion: "do our narratives of political efficacy, historicist analysis, and pedagogical practice naturalize what *No Future* designates as reproductive futurism, thus compelling us all, regardless of political affiliation or critical method, to prostrate ourselves at the altar of what I call the Futurch?" (821, my emphasis). Aside from the fact that Edelman hereby shows an attunement to the processes that determine what counts as natural, his question leaves no room for any consideration of futurity qua the planet and its resources.⁵ Again, a deep suspicion of all that is deemed natural abides.

This is not to say that Edelman's critique of reproductive futurism cannot be put to ecological use. For one thing, it certainly has the potential to spark objections to environmental agendas grounded in heterosexist, pro-reproductive rhetoric. In a recent course I taught on queer theory and ecocriticism, I juxtaposed images targeted in *No Future*—Tiny Tim in Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*, for one—with images from the many environmental campaigns that use the image of the child. The latter included the Environment Illinois ad cited in my preface and the logo of the World Health Organization Europe, which features a feminized figure atop a globe, holding the hand of a childlike figure, with the heading "The Future for Our Children." Such sentimentalized rhetoric, as my students and I discussed, suggests that concern for the future qua the planet *can only emerge*, or *emerges most effectively*, from white, heterosexual, familial reproductivity. Moreover, it potentially privatizes issues of environmental health by locating them within that domestic framework, rather than tracing them to larger structures such as racism and classism, which make for unequal distributions of risk.⁶

But despite this potential of the queer critique of futurism and futurity to function for anti-racist, anti-classist, anti-sexist environmentalist ends, it still proves problematic on many levels. For one thing, while Edelman critiques capitalism in his PMLA comments, he fails to acknowledge that, more often than not, it is corporate and governmental *disregard* for the future that enables the (paradoxical) reproduction of capital, and, more specifically, environmental degradation and destruction in the name of capital accumulation. Indeed, anyone who has seen a "Drill Offshore Now" bumper sticker, or heard the chants of "Drill, Baby, Drill" during the John McCain–Sarah Palin

campaign, would be suspicious of the idea that concern for future generations, or for the future more broadly, is a sacred tenet of the conservative Right.

Similarly, recent work on “queer time” characterizes concern for the future as a normative impulse—again, in effect maligning environmentalist values and quashing queer ecological thought. For instance, Halberstam observes that “Western cultures . . . pathologize modes of living that show little or no concern for longevity” (*In a Queer Time and Place* 4). Halberstam’s 2005 book goes on to consider modes of queer cultural production that challenge this pathologization by championing ephemerality and refusing legacy as imagined in heterosexist, patriarchal terms. While I do not want to suggest that “queer time” is anti-environmentalist per se, the fact remains that a mindset that connotes “concern for longevity” as heteronormative leaves environmental concerns floundering. Indeed, while Halberstam’s point about longevity is spot-on in terms of social norms and the logic of capital accumulation, it is off-base in conservationist, environmentalist, and even certain economic terms. The planned obsolescence of so many consumer goods, and environmental catastrophes such as the 2010 British Petroleum oil spill—the result of shortsighted cost cutting and inadequate testing⁷—attest to that fact. Perhaps more prominently, George H. Bush’s declaration at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in 1992 that “we cannot permit the extreme in the environmental movement to shut down the United States”⁸—echoed by George W. Bush several years later—illustrates the dominance of “modes of living that show little or no concern for longevity.” It seems, then, that many queer theorists have reached a point at which they cannot imagine a queer futurity and, by extension, where they cannot imagine environmentalism, much less a queer one.

These shortcomings are particularly troubling from both an anti-racist and an environmental-justice standpoint. Both of those movements have long been concerned with the future—as well as with present injustices and suffering—but not in the white-supremacist, heteronormative way that many queer theorists would imagine. (Indeed, the queer critique of futurity threatens to make us look at such advocacy as a normative or even conservative phenomenon.) Consider, for instance, how indigenous activist Winona LaDuke sees futurity as a necessary mindset: “Dump dioxin into the river, and you will inevitably eat or drink it. Assent to acceptable levels of radioactive emissions, and sooner or later, those sensitive cells in the human body will likely respond” (*All Our Relations* 197, my emphasis). Environmental-justice advocates have long told us that such “inevitable” outcomes have a disproportionately greater impact on the poor and people of color. Perhaps less dismally, LaDuke also reminds us that “[one] teaching of the Six Nations Iroquois Confederacy

recognizes the importance of future generations. ‘In each deliberation, we must consider the impact on the seventh generation from now,’ they say; that is, undertake conservative [conservationist] thinking and use careful deliberation. Such consideration would have preempted thousands of decisions made by the U.S. government” (198). Clearly, the Iroquois’s and LaDuke’s perspective complicates the understanding of futurity—even heterosexual reproductive futurity—as an oppressive, hegemonic orientation. This is not, in other words, the territory of Lauren Berlant’s “cruel optimism,” in which we find that future-thinking and “fantasy isn’t a plan. It calibrates nothing about how to live. It is the action of living . . . [a] way of passing time, not trying to make something of [oneself] in a system of exploitation and exchange” (9, emphasis original).⁹ For LaDuke, future-thinking and optimism are the means of changing that system. Now, of course, many readers will recognize “seventh generation” not from Iroquois teachings or LaDuke’s book, but from the massive marketing campaign launched by the (unrelated) eponymous corporation in 2010. A queer ecological perspective attuned to issues of social justice—which I model here—could, among other things, discern between a progressive invocation of futurity that benefits the seventh generation and a superficial one that benefits Seventh Generation, Inc. Chapter 2, for instance, details how Shani Mootoo’s novel *Cereus Blooms at Night* contrasts the loving act of raising plants for the sake of their eventual blooming with the act of seizing them for the sake of immediate profit.

The queer failure to conceptualize a viable environmentalism is troubling in a different sense when it comes to environmental justice. As Andil Gosine points out, “[i]n Euroamerican-dominant cultural contexts, two kinds of sex have been (are) said to be toxic to nature: reproductive sex between non-white people, and sex between men” (149, my emphasis). He finds, further, that “overpopulation propaganda [in the name of environmental protection] and its material offshoots . . . and the criminalization and policing of sexual acts between men” are not “distinct phenomena, [but] intimately interwoven through the projects of colonialism, development, and nation building” (150). Homophobia, in other words, has been allowed to flourish where racism, classism, and colonialism have held great sway—and vice versa. But perhaps more importantly, we can see from Gosine’s comments that environmental protection is often the guise under which both environmental destruction and forms of social oppression, such as homophobia, operate. Thus this book insists that there must be a way to bring together mainstream environmentalism and its concerns with ecological relationships and sustainability; environmental justice and its concerns with racism, classism, and colonialism; and queer theory and its concerns with

homophobia and the regimes of normativity. And I insist that there must be a way to question “nature” and “environmentalism” while still caring for the non-human natural environment.

But this book doesn’t just take issue with queer-theoretical ideas; it attempts to adapt some and put them to use in the framework of an anti-racist, -classist, and -sexist queer ecology. For example, I am taken with how Muñoz calls anti-utopianism and anti-relationality “failures of imagination” (“Thinking Beyond” 825), and with how he suggests that we might use the past and the future to combat the kind of here-and-now logic that allows capitalism, among other things, to flourish. I would insist that there are ways of thinking about the here and now that are, in fact, crucial: the belief that environmental devastation is a possibility, rather than a current and impending reality, or that we have to clean up the planet for future generations, rather than for present ones, allows for the kind of complacency that authorizes such degradation in the first place. But Muñoz’s idea of queer utopianism, outlined more extensively in his recent book-length study *Cruising Utopia* (2010), could inspire environmentalist agendas that seek to achieve positive ends without resorting to heterosexist, homophobic, or pro-reproductive ideologies. Similarly, Tim Dean theorizes queer utopia by noting that the “plung[e] into an experience of the nonrelational represents but the first step in Bersani’s account of relationality. The second, correlative step is to trace new forms of sociability, new ways of being together, that are not grounded in imaginary identity or the struggle for intersubjective recognition” (827). Dean is talking about new ways of humans being together, whereas ecologists, and of course this book, talk about humans and the non-human world. But the novels and films I look at in *Strange Natures* employ these same understandings of ontology and “being together”: they show how humans might interact with non-humans in empathetic and ethical ways despite their irresolvable differences.

Muñoz’s phrase, “failures of imagination,” is also particularly pertinent to this book. I argue that the texts in my archive represent remarkable achievements of imagination, achievements that have much to offer to both queer theory and ecocriticism, as well as to gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (GLBTQI) politics, and environmentalism more broadly. They allow us to think beyond the stalemates and impasses described above, suggesting that there are ways to care about the natural, ways to expand the social, and ways to think about the future, that are not heteronormative. Indeed, this book suggests that, with a queer ecological perspective attuned to social justice, we can learn to care about the future of the planet in a way that is perhaps more radical than any we have seen

previously: acting in the interests of nameless, faceless individuals to which one has no biological, familial, or economic ties whatsoever. This kind of action operates without any reward, without any guarantee of success, and without any proof that potential future inhabitants of the planet might be similar to the individual acting in the present—in terms of social identity, morality, or even species, if some doomsday predictions are to be believed. It is invested in the ends (survival of the non-human alongside the human) but emphasizes the means (caring for the non-human alongside the human). Chapter 2, for instance, highlights how the characters in Mootoo's novel focus on the present and ongoing well-being of a night-blooming cereus plant and a late-blooming transgender character—rather than on the specific end results of their transformations.

Queer theorist Michael Snediker's concept of "queer optimism," proffered in his recent book of the same name, is also inspirational to me here. While Snediker turns to lyric poetry to rethink heteronormative futurity, I have, of course, turned to contemporary queer novels and films that engage with the natural world. But his concept speaks directly to the understandings of time and care that my archive puts forth; as he declares, "[q]ueer optimism . . . is not promissory. It doesn't ask that some future time make good on its own hopes. Rather, queer optimism asks that optimism, embedded in its own immanent present, might be *interesting*" (2). I take Snediker's term "interesting" to mean both something that draws one's attention ("interesting" as in "fascinating") and something that inspires care ("interesting" as in "provoking interest or investment"). Queer optimism, then, is definitely not valuable because one can gain something by it. But it's also not valuable "in and of itself," because there is no such thing as value without a valuer. Rather, its value is determined by the communal and empathetic process of valuing. That is precisely the kind of ethical model that the texts in my archive offer for our encounters with the non-human.

We might test these claims about queer empathy and optimism by considering a recent survey by *Echelon* magazine that found that "two-thirds (66 percent) of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender adults say that it is important to support environmental causes, compared with 56 percent of non-LGBT adults. Three-quarters (75 percent) of LGBT adults (compared with 53 percent of heterosexuals) believe global warming is happening right now" (as quoted by Connell). At least one media report on the survey mentioned the idea that this "[g]ay concern about protecting the environment for future generations is especially admirable given the fewer numbers of gay parents" (Bolcer), while another noted "the moral implication of continued dependence on carbon energy to fuel our lives and economy," arguing that

“[t]here is also another moral struggle going on by which this generation will be judged[:] . . . the continuing dehumanization, discrimination, hate and violence directed at LGBT people” (Connell).

All this might sound well and good from a queer ecological standpoint. But the claim that gay concern for the environment is “especially admirable” because of the relative dearth of gay parents reveals a problematic lack of empathetic imagination. As I have noted, “imagination” is a key term in this book, and one that has great resonance for queer ecology: since humans cannot always see the consequences of their actions on the environment immediately, nor the intricate interrelationships among all components in an ecosystem, they must be able to *imagine* them in order to act empathetically and ethically. Indeed, empathy is by definition a largely imaginative act, a point I stress throughout *Strange Natures*. Thus, while being concerned about the environment despite not having children may be “especially admirable” to some, the texts I consider insist that it should simply be the status quo.

The aforementioned reports also fail to explain how awareness of the “continuing dehumanization” of GLBTQI people could allow for, rather than prevent, concern for the non-human. Critiques of “dehumanization” often, though not always, rest upon liberal humanist values around the importance of the individual—values that are not particularly ecocentric. The texts I consider in this book propose that environmentalism might involve a decentering of anthropocentrism, such that the dehumanization of queers and other populations would not be considered wrong in and of itself—because the non-human is not worthless—but dehumanization as a justification for violence would be. After all, environmental exploitation is often justified by the non-human status of “nature.” The texts I consider imagine that queers might empathize with the likewise non-human, instead of (just) fighting for human status, or fighting for it on unethical terms.

In sum, *Strange Natures* hopes to redress queer theory’s more glaring blind spots, such as anti-futurity, while extending its more dynamic ideas, including self-shattering, optimism, and utopianism. I agree that the value set of normative, reproductive heterosexuality establishes strict, moralized limits to futurity, but I refuse the idea that it has a monopoly on futurity, or on environmental ethics rooted in futurity. I propose, in fact, that any kind of environmentalism that does not operate within those limits—that is, that does not operate out of immediate or extended self-interest—is “queer.” As I detail in my last chapter, on Shelley Jackson’s novel *Half Life*, such points can be conveyed with good humor, rather than defensiveness or despair. In that spirit, I offer in closing the “Deep Thought” from *Saturday Night Live*’s Jack Handey series that I show to my queer theory/ecocriticism students each

semester: “I believe in making the world safe for our children, but not our children’s children, because I don’t think children should be having sex.”

Ecocriticism

Comparatively speaking, there has been less conceptual resistance to queer ecology or queer ecocriticism from the field of ecocriticism, as compared to queer theory. (Work in queer ecology tends to emerge from ecocritical rather than queer-theoretical scholarly backgrounds, though that is certainly not predictive of the kind of work that might emerge in the future.) That said, the relationship between the natural and the queer is still a new area of focus for those in environmental activism and literary studies, one that has not yet infiltrated all quarters of those fields. As of this writing, a search for the term “queer” in *ISLE*, the journal of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment, and the most prominent journal of its kind, returns twenty-five hits—at least five of which include the term as a synonym for “strange,” not as a reference to issues of gender and sexuality. (We might compare this statistic to the one hit that *GLQ*, the most prominent GLBTQI studies journal, returns for “ecocriticism,”¹⁰ the sparse handful of hits for “ecology” that refer to the non-human natural world, and the one hit for the term “environmentalism”—which finds Kath Weston lamenting that “environmentalism and queer politics seldom seem to intersect” [231].) The majority of ecocritical monographs and edited collections give queer issues, and sexuality more broadly, no mention. Some, such as Lawrence Buell’s *The Future of Environmental Criticism* (2005), acknowledge the importance of sexual orientation in critical considerations of the natural world but do not treat it in depth. For example, he opines that “Skittishness at modernization’s aggressive, accelerating, inequitable transformation of ‘natural’ into constructed space . . . giv[es] ecocriticism . . . its edge of critique. This is ecocriticism’s equivalent as it were to queer studies, which some environmental writers and critics have in fact begun to affiliate (see Sandilands 1999): to unsettle normative thinking about environmental status quos” (24). Buell’s comment glosses over a glaring paradox: queer theory actually *underwrites*, rather than resists, the move from the natural to the constructed. That is, it seeks to show that heterosexuality, the association of male biology with masculine gender, et cetera are social constructs rather than natural phenomena.

We might also note that Buell *parallels* the two paradigms—“ecocriticism’s equivalent . . . to queer studies”—rather than gesturing toward their intersections. Similarly, while David Mazel draws on the work of Judith Butler to inform his poststructuralist ecocriticism, he ends up drawing an *analogy* between poststructuralist feminist/queer theory and a poststructuralist

ecocriticism: he proposes to “treat the wilderness landscape the way Butler treats the ‘naturally’ sexed human body” (*American Literary Environmentalism* xvii, my emphasis)—“‘not as a site or surface, but as a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to product the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface we call matter’” (*American Literary Environmentalism* xvii, emphasis original). Buell and Mazel do not admit the possibility of a paradigm that would draw on all of the aforementioned schools of thought at once, and that would show us that dominant beliefs about the “‘naturally’ sexed,” and sexual, human body are inextricable from beliefs about the non-human natural world. However, in putting poststructuralist ideas into conversation with more traditional ecocritical approaches to nature, they have undeniably paved the way for queer ecological scholarship such as this book.

One strong historical barrier to the emergence of queer ecology from ecocritical quarters has been the existence of some strains of environmentalism and ecocriticism that are hostile to “special interest” concerns. For example, as I discuss in Chapter 3, many radical environmentalists have taken anti-anthropocentrism to such an extreme that they fail to consider that there might be anything like problems among humans, or humans who actually suffer. Moreover, many prominent idols of ecocriticism happen to be privileged, straight white men whose disregard for problems of social inequality might be confidently termed racist, sexist, classist, and homophobic.¹¹ We can surmise that such idolizing has turned at least a few queer, non-white, and/or working-class people away from ecocriticism and environmentalism.

Relatedly, ecocriticism has long been characterized by essentialisms of various kinds—which stand at odds with queer theory’s staunch anti-essentialism and anti-identitarianism. This has been true even when the goal has been the liberation, rather than oppression, of “special interest” groups. For one thing, as Timothy Morton observes, “[e]cofeminism . . . arose out of feminist separatism, wedded to a biological essentialism that, strategic or not, is grounded on binary difference and thus unhelpful for the kinds of difference multiplication that is queer theory’s brilliance” (274). The models for care that have emerged from ecofeminist quarters have therefore often been based in essentialist beliefs—say, that women, being sensitive creatures, are uniquely equipped to care for animals.¹² In the same way, masculinist brands of ecocriticism have upheld fundamentalist beliefs about maleness.¹³ And it likely goes without saying at this point that nature is essentialized in much ecocriticism, posited as pristine, primal, or at least self-evident. We can see this when, for instance, ecocritic Karl Kroeber claims that “no one old enough to remember life before antibiotics will march under the new historicist banner ‘There is no nature.’ Nor should anyone who has encoun-

tered a forest fire . . . or been out in a middle-western thunderstorm” (42). Morton catalogues the popularity of such “common-sense,” experience-based responses to poststructuralist and social-constructionist scholars of all stripes, including feminists and Marxists. We may be disturbed by the anti-intellectualism such responses display, and by their unwillingness to listen to the actual claim at hand. (After all, no one who ever said gender was constructed said gender didn’t exist.) But these responses also indicate a real failing on the part of poststructuralist frameworks such as queer theory to make their ideas comprehensible to people who may have more challenging and more visceral lived experiences of gender, sexuality, race, or nature.

As I demonstrate throughout *Strange Natures*, my texts both speak to those kinds of people and are influenced by the postmodern, poststructuralist insights of fields such as queer theory, post-Second Wave feminism, critical race studies, and New Historicism; they are skeptical of identity and question the natural bases of sexuality, gender, and race. This fact points toward another potential antagonism between queer theory/politics and ecocriticism/ environmentalism—and, in turn, toward yet another reason why the texts in my archive have not been widely recognized as ecologically minded. As Simon Estok observes, “what has popularized and expanded the hermeneutic range of ecocriticism”—an activist, direct-action orientation, among other things—“has in some ways also made ecocriticism seem immune to the challenges presented by so much of poststructuralism” (203). Estok points to Peter Quigley, who declares that “the academic environmental community in the USA has done a poor job of responding to the challenge of poststructuralism,” noting, “after poststructuralism, it is impossible to take a term like ‘nature’ at face value; it is impossible not to see the fissures of contradiction and the fault-lines of history that criss-cross the term” (205). Ecocriticism’s historical lack of a poststructuralist position, or even something like a strategic essentialism—wherein, just as Gayatri Spivak has suggested that ethnic minorities might identify collectively to achieve certain goals, we might act as if there really is a simple, self-evident thing called “nature,” to the extent that the non-human world might be defended¹⁴—has made queer ecocriticism and queer ecology all but impossible until recently.

Many ecocritics, in fact, actively object to anything that looks like theory. This resistance is perhaps best exemplified by S. K. Robisch, who declares that theory—which he calls the “sleazy uncle of poststructuralism and cultural criticism”—is “regularly ecophobic” and that it “regularly indicts itself as a participant in the destruction of biospheric health by promoting a thought process that renders the biosphere an immaterial idea subject to

the laboratory of abstraction” (702). Robisch thereby sabotages his own sentiment: his statement is aligned exactly with ecologically minded theorists (or theory-minded ecologists) who have taught us that our ideas about nature have authorized environmental destruction. At the same time, his statement gives most, if not all, of the credit for environmental destruction to abstract “thought process[es]”—not consumers, corporations, or even human beings. And he thereby focuses even less on the “real world” than have self-described poststructuralist ecocritics such as Mazel.¹⁵

Poststructuralist ecocriticism is just one example of the broader shifts that have been taking place in the field of ecocriticism; others include the interest in dissolving the nature–culture boundary, or registering its already-extant dissolution, and the interest in attending to social problems such as racism and poverty, in part through increased attention to minority texts and viewpoints. Just as queer theory needs to see “nature” in a context other than the social and the human, ecocritics have come to see “nature” and “the environment” in contexts other than the organic and the non-human. This “second wave” of ecocriticism,¹⁶ I argue, has been instrumental in making queer ecology possible. In attending to environmental injustice as it plays out through homophobia and transphobia, in addition to racism, classism, sexism, and xenophobia, and in tracing in how the queer has been framed in opposition to the natural, *Strange Natures* builds on the insights of this second wave and, as I discuss further below, on previous queer ecology scholarship more specifically.

Resistant Reception; or, “Why Should I Care?”

Since this book presumes that the persisting gaps between queer theory and ecocriticism need to be bridged, and that we should both embrace and build upon queer ecological thought, I will offer a few answers to that dreaded question so often asked of critical theorists: “Why should I care?” Someone like Robisch might say that the solution to theory’s potential hindrance to the environmentalist agenda would be to simply ignore theory. But that would mean, as I have intimated in my preface, dismissing the anti-homophobia and anti-transphobia of queer theory, among its other insights, as well as the anti-misogyny and anti-racism of paradigms such as feminist theory and critical race studies. It would also mean brushing aside the momentous question asked by Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson: “What does it mean that ideas, spaces, and practices designated as ‘nature’ are often so vigorously defended against queers in a society in which that very nature is increasingly degraded and exploited?” (5) Finally, it would mean ignoring the

fact that so many literary and filmic texts influenced by poststructuralism and postmodernism actually take “nature” *qua* the non-human quite seriously. In short, without a perspective that is at once ecological and queer, we cannot intervene in some of the most pressing intellectual and political conflicts of the contemporary era; we cannot adequately address oppression, especially interrelated oppressions; and we cannot effectively interpret a great deal of the cultural and artistic output of the past several decades.

We must note that ecocritics and environmentalists on the one hand, and queer theorists and activists on the other, have formulated very different versions of the “Why should I care?” question. The ecocriticism/environmentalism camp has formulated this question in terms of the “sinking ship hypothesis”—asking, essentially, why we should prioritize the queer in queer ecology, when the environment is at such dire risk. As Peter Barry summarizes:

“Seeking to contribute to rectifying injustices in the areas of gender, race and class is a praiseworthy aim for critics and theorists to have, but it isn’t sensible to ignore the fact that making a difference in these presupposes that we can manage to avoid environmental catastrophe. Otherwise, it might seem like working . . . to secure improved working-conditions for the crew as the Titanic speeds towards the iceberg” (248).

Or, as David Orton quips more succinctly: “There can be no social justice on a dead planet.”¹⁷ Some environmentalists take an even more extreme view, suggesting that attending to factors such as race, class, gender, and sexuality actually *keeps us* from fighting environmental degradation. But this view, I argue, represents a failure of imagination. Not only am I unclear as to why we can’t attend to both social and environmental concerns, I’m not convinced that the two are separate. Social ecologist Murray Bookchin is likewise unconvinced; he argues that, “based on considerable anthropological evidence, [we can see] that the modern view of nature as a hostile . . . ‘other’ grows historically out of a projection of warped, hierarchical social relations onto the rest of the natural world” (57, my emphasis). Even if such evidence were lacking, the fact remains that a considerable number of individuals do not have the luxury of choosing environmental concerns over social concerns. Further, the suggestion that one should confront environmental problems in a “gender-blind” or “color-blind” way is highly problematic, even offensive: it asks that we all be more like the white, straight, privileged men who have, historically, been at the forefront of environmental destruction in the first place.

Conversely, queer theorists and activists have, though much less directly, asked why we should prioritize the ecology in queer ecology. Consider Halberstam’s contribution to a GLQ roundtable on “Queer Temporalities”:

I am in a drag king club at 2:00 a.m. and the performances are really bad, and some kid comes onstage and just rips an amazing performance of Elvis or Eminem or Michael Jackson and the people in the club recognize why they are here, in this place at this time, engaged in activities that probably seem pointless to people stranded in hetero temporalities. . . . Queer time for me is the dark nightclub, the perverse turn away from the narrative coherence of adolescence—early adulthood—marriage—reproduction—child rearing—retirement—death, the embrace of late childhood in place of early adulthood or immaturity in place of responsibility. (“Theorizing Queer Temporalities” 181–82)

Like the queer embrace of the “unnatural” and the anti-social, the queer embrace of a “live in the now” attitude draws on familiar stereotypes of queers as preoccupied with the frivolous, and with meaningless and fleeting pleasures. More to the point, this embrace resonates poorly in an environmental framework; it allows for a dismissal that runs something like, “Why should I care about the environment? If the world falls apart in the future, I’m not going to be there to see it.” Such dismissals also happen to inform “Drill, baby, drill”—style politics—and the contemporary political climate, in which environmental regulation has been (falsely) positioned as a contributing factor to financial crisis.¹⁸

To be fair, long-term environmental problems would quite understandably be a low priority for many of the queer “kid[s]” whose only refuge is the “dark nightclub.” And of course, my claims are extrapolative; Halberstam’s version of queer time does not seem intent upon articulating any relationship, positive or negative, to the environment or nature as such, and Halberstam has been a prominent critic of queer-theoretical elisions of racial, class, and gender inequality. But perhaps all of the above is to the point. The texts I treat in *Strange Natures* tell us that failures of queer ecological empathy—in the dismissal I’ve cited above, the failure to imagine someone or something to whom environmental destruction *would*, and *does*, matter—can have disastrous results not just for the environment, but for those individuals who fail. It produces a devastating isolation, a disconnection from human and non-human others alike. And it prevents those individuals from recognizing how their everyday experiences of oppression might be bound up with ecological destruction. My texts, in response, ask a galvanizing set of questions around empathy: What if we could imagine that environmental catastrophe *does* matter, even, or perhaps especially, if we are not going to witness its effects? How might that imagination function as a form of queer survival? How could we develop, and strengthen, that imagination? I argue that a concept of queer time that is attuned to

environmentalism's focus on futurity—on the long- and short-term effects of policies and products; on health outcomes for humans and non-humans alike; on sustainable practices—is one place to start.

Building Queer Ecology

Popular and Political Challenges

It may go without saying at this point that the disconnect between “the queer” and “the natural” is not confined to the academic paradigms of queer theory and ecocriticism. Indeed, this disconnect is pervasive in contemporary Western culture, and oftentimes in very concrete, not just conceptual, ways; its pervasiveness provides a larger explanation for why scholars have not considered the queer alongside the ecological until quite recently.¹⁹ In briefly outlining this disconnect here, I further indicate the “real-world” purchase of this book, and the alternative ways of thinking and feeling that it proposes. To begin with, the concept of “nature” has been used in religious, political, and other public discourses to invalidate queerness and, in turn, validate heterosexuality. To take a prominent example, George W. Bush addressed the nation in 2004 in support of a constitutional amendment to ban same-sex marriage, declaring, “Marriage cannot be severed from its cultural, religious and natural roots without weakening the good influence of society” (my emphasis).²⁰ Bush hereby collapses human nature and the natural world—not to indicate their interconnection, but instead to discriminate against an instance of the former by rhetorically exploiting the latter. (So far as we know, plants have no vested interest in whether or not Adam and Steve marry.) Likewise, one of the most common arguments against same-sex marriage has rested upon the inability of two men or two women to “naturally” reproduce, like other humans, and like other mammals. These examples indicate not just that the battle over queer acceptance has been waged largely along “nature-versus-nurture” lines, but that that battle actually constructs and calcifies the two categories—with “nature” the “right” answer to the “wrong” one of “nurture,” and the two conceptually separate. Scientists have been laboring against this fallacious separation for the past several decades.

Queers also have a vexed relationship with “nature” in a different sense: popular media and news media have largely associated them with urbanity or “unnatural” spaces, despite realities to the contrary. As Katie Hogan points out, queers “are presumed to be located in decadent cities, as having no place in rural landscape” (“Detecting” 251). Catriona Sandilands has argued, further, that this “lack of a strong representation of queer rurality

impoverishes both ecological and GLBTQI culture and reinforces an articulation of queer-urban-artifice against straight-rural-nature" ("Sexual Politics" 122). In recent years, a few projects have worked to overturn this assumption, from Will Fellows's memoir collection *Farm Boys: Lives of Gay Men from the Rural Midwest* (2001) to the documentary *Small Town Gay Bar* (2006). But the ameliorative character of much of these projects suggests that the connection of queerness and urbanity is predominant, even in media produced by GLBTQI people.

When popular media and news media do associate queers with the non-urban, those associations are often admonitory, or even damning. Take, for example, the rape and murder of transgender man Brandon Teena in rural Nebraska, captured in Aphrodite Jones's sensationalist true-crime account *All She [sic] Wanted* and the acclaimed 1999 film *Boys Don't Cry*. Such depictions have served as cautionary tales of queer unsafety in rural areas, although research suggests that urban and suburban areas may have much higher incidence of hate crimes.²¹ Perhaps more disturbingly—or laughably—religious conservatives such as Pat Robertson have linked queers to destructive acts of nature. Robertson once warned his television audience, "When you see the rise of blatant open homosexuality and lesbianism, what you also know is God has given a society up . . . and we're at the mercy of the elements."²² After Orlando, Florida, city officials flew gay pride flags during Disney World's "Gay Days" in 1998, Robertson declared that "earthquakes, tornadoes and possibly a meteor" would follow.²³ Of course, it brought none of the above. But interestingly enough, even a satirical response to Robertson, which drew on meteorological data to show that more natural disasters strike areas populated by straight Protestants, featured the title "Do Unnatural Acts Cause Natural Disasters?"²⁴—thus maintaining the association of queerness with "unnaturalness."

Lest Robertson's seem like a fringe opinion, Noël Sturgeon has recently noted that popular children's texts such as *Captain Planet*, *The Lion King*, *Pocahontas*, and *White Fang* 2 regularly feature "an association . . . between homosexuality, evil, and environmental destruction, coupled with . . . anxiety about the successful reproduction of the white, middle-class, nuclear family form[, which] is presented as 'normal' and 'natural' without any critique of its complicity in the overconsumption of corporate products in an environmentally destructive system in which the toxins, waste, pollution and radiation produced are visited on the poor, the people of color, and the tribal peoples of the world" ("The Power Is Yours" 263). Not to mention, I would add, that those who preach concern for the natural along with homophobia are rarely concerned for the natural in practice; despite his

appeals to “natural roots,” George W. Bush has been widely recognized as the most destructive president in U.S. history when it comes to the environment.²⁵ Among other things, he bears the distinction of having received an “F” on his environmental “Report Card” from the bipartisan League of Conservation Voters.

Against this political and pop-cultural background, the works I consider in *Strange Natures* explicitly link queerness to the environment and the natural world. But they concentrate less on the shocking juxtaposition of the queer and the natural, and more on the importance of positively staging the relationship thereof. With the exception of the thoroughly self-conscious and -reflexive postmodern novel *Half Life*, the rest of the texts in my archive are likewise modest about their meaningful endeavors; they presume that environmentalist and environmental-justice work are logical extensions of queer approaches.

State of the Field:

Whence, and Whither, Queer Ecology?

In the past few years, queer ecology has emerged as a burgeoning area of interdisciplinary study. (Depending on the emphasis of study, practitioners and affiliates occasionally use more specific terms, such as “queer eco-criticism,” “queer ecofeminism,” or “queer biology,” if they systematically categorize such work at all.) Several scholars have explicitly or implicitly taken up the queer ecological paradigm in full-length works—including Bruce Bagemihl and Joan Roughgarden, whose respective books *Biological Exuberance* (1999) and *Evolution’s Rainbow* (2004) theorize the evolutionary role of sexual diversity among non-humans, which they claim as widely underreported; Scott Herring, whose *Another Country: Queer Anti-Urbanism* (2010) uncovers a tradition of rural queer life and style in the United States; Noreen Giffney and Myra J. Hird’s *Queering the Non/Human*, a collection of essays that use queer-theoretical interest in fluidity and indeterminacy to demonstrate the unstable distinction between human and non-human; Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson, whose *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire* (2010) offers a complex picture of queer ecology by collecting work from a variety of fields; Rachel Stein, whose edited collection *New Perspectives on Environmental Justice: Gender, Sexuality, and Activism* (2004) asks, “How might our conception of environmental justice be expanded so as to foster alliances and help promote queer ecologies?” (7); and Noël Sturgeon, whose *Environmentalism in Popular Culture: Gender, Race, Sexuality, and the Politics of the Natural* (2009) claims that various media naturalize white heterosexual family life and its attendant ecological

behaviors. Additionally, several articles and book chapters affined with queer ecology have appeared in the past few years, in the wake of Sandilands and Greta Gaard's respective groundbreaking articles "Lavender's Green?: Some Thoughts on Queer(y)ing Environmental Politics" (1994) and "Toward a Queer Ecofeminism" (1997). These include Cynthia Chris's "Animal Sex" chapter in *Watching Wildlife* (2006), which laments the fact that "[h]omosexuality is, within the bounds of wildlife TV, not a natural act to be understood on its own terms, but a phase of foreplay prior to the real reproductive deal" (165), and Jill E. Anderson's "'Warm Blood and Live Semen and Rich Marrow and Wholesome Flesh!': A Queer Ecological Reading of Christopher Isherwood's *A Single Man*," which appeared in the *Journal of Ecocriticism* in 2011.

Strange Natures builds on the spirit and the momentum of this work while making unique contributions to queer ecology, to contemporary literary, filmic, political, and cultural studies more broadly, and to non-academic areas such as social justice and environmental activism. I might begin, then, by clarifying what this book does not seek to do. First, it does not endeavor to analyze rural queer life or the activities of queer environmental activists, as Herring and Sandilands have. Nor does it investigate the queerness of the non-human through a queer science framework, as found in Bagemihl, Roughgarden, or Giffney and Hird's collection. And nor is *Strange Natures* a work of queer geography—a look at queer spaces, or at queer ways of occupying spaces—which David Bell and Gill Valentine and several other scholars have produced.²⁶ Like Giffney and Hird, I probe queer theory itself even as I apply it to the relationship of the human to the non-human—but unlike in their collection, my primary task is not to examine the philosophical and ontological bases of those two categories. (I am concerned, instead, with how literature and film teach us about both the oppressive experiences and ethical implications of the slippage between the two—say, how transgender persons are violently punished for being "less than human," and how such individuals might respond in a biocentric, rather than anthropocentric, manner.) Like Stein, I take up social and environmental justice—but my primary intent is not to expand those paradigms to include (homo)sexuality, as many of the essays in her collection do. (I follow up on the work of that collection by presuming from the very start that queerness is an environmental-justice issue, and vice versa.) And while it offers queer ecological readings of film and literature, as scholars such as Anderson and Alice A. Kuzniar already have, this project is not solely a work of queer ecological textual analysis, or queer ecocriticism. Finally, *Strange Natures* is not, at least primarily, an examination of queer ecology as a field; no book-length publication in this vein

exists yet, though the introduction to Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson's *Queer Ecologies* offers one overview.

Rather, *Strange Natures* is a study of how contemporary queer novels and films from the Americas have imagined empathetic, ethical interrelationships between the queer and the non-human—and, thereby, addressed some of the most abiding cultural, political, and intellectual divides of the postwar period. In conducting this study, of course, I necessarily think about the field of queer ecology itself. But my intention is not to define or even describe it. Rather, I theorize its arrival and point to what it might accomplish. In terms of the former, I show how post-1960s conceptual tendencies have allowed, or not allowed, for the kind of queer ecological empathetic thought that the texts in my archive model. I identify these tendencies as postmodern/poststructuralist skepticism (with which queer theory has been closely associated) on the one hand, and pragmatism and activism (with which ecocriticism has been closely associated) on the other. (Above, I have shown how queer theory and ecocriticism specifically have allowed, or not allowed, for the development of queer ecological thought.) While some queer ecology scholarship has discussed the *why-now* of the paradigm, then, *Strange Natures* also offers a look at the *why-not-before*. And while queer ecological work tends to focus on its social, scientific, and/or political implications—precisely because of theory's abstract tendencies, and thus its frequent disinterest in “real world” problems like environmental degradation—*Strange Natures* insists that we understand the theoretical as well. This book is thus a story of how queer ecological thought emerges out of two very different sets of impulses, to be synthesized in art.

In the first place, then, *Strange Natures* is distinguished by its archive. Certainly there are earlier fictional works, and works from other cultural traditions, that synthesize queer concerns and ecological concerns, and/or to which the application of a queer ecological lens would be productive. Robert Azzarello, for example, has performed an exemplary queer-ecocritical reading of Irish writer Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, published in 1897,²⁷ while Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson recover the queer ecological impulses of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century writers such as Sarah Orne Jewett and André Gide, and of older traditions such as the pastoral. But the twenty years I focus on here have unique implications in terms of queer ecology. For one thing, these texts manage to take seriously the well-being of the environment and the natural world at a time at which the very concept of the natural has been vigorously interrogated, and skeptically framed, in both intellectual and popular circles—and at which technological advancements have prompted some to declare the arrival of the “post-natural” era.²⁸

And they manage to care about the natural world despite being themselves skeptical of “nature.” Indeed, all of my texts demonstrate an awareness of, and affinity for, intellectual traditions that question the construction and naturalization of fundamental categories such as gender and race, and the dehumanization/animalization of poor people and people of color. My work thus concurs with Mazel’s belief that “the constructivist approach need not impede environmental politics; it does not wipe out the possibility of effective political agency, but rather reconfigures such agency” (*American Literary Environmentalism* xvii).

My historical context is important in another sense: as I will briefly sketch out, contemporary environmentalism in the United States (including the so-called second and third waves, stretching from the 1960s to the 2000s²⁹) has been marked by contradictions and combative elements. The paradox-laden texts in my archive are in many ways creatures of these environmentalisms and thus are uniquely suited to comment on them. To begin with, environmental historian Philip Shabecoff observes on the one hand links between environmentalism and the radical countercultural movements of the 1960s, including feminism, antiwar, and civil rights, and on the other environmentalism’s appeal to many moderate, white, middle-class Americans. Understanding themselves as empowered consumers, the latter group saw environmentalism as an opportunity to demand healthy products and clean spaces to live and recreate. In contrast to those members of countercultural movements, then, environmentalism appeared to such individuals as a relatively nonthreatening, even traditionalist pursuit.³⁰ (These different takes on environmentalism just happen to overlap with the different iterations of “gay liberation,” from moderate assimilationism to radical queerness.) Shabecoff also observes that “[e]nvironmentalism is a kind of platypus among social movements—it is not easy to classify. . . . Environmentalism is progressive in that it believes that human society can be changed for the better to curb pollution, husband resources, and protect life. It is conservative because it strives to conserve the natural world” (238–39). Environmental historian Samuel P. Hays looks more broadly to environmentalism’s reception, to find that “[r]egions of lower environmental [political] support tend to be those in which extractive industries, including agriculture, have long played a significant role in the region’s economy,” while “[r]egions of higher environmental [political] support tend to have newer economies in which service, high-technology, and consumer-oriented economic activities dominate” (187). Considering his additional finding that inhabitants of the former areas tend to hold traditional social views, while those of the latter hold nontraditional social views, a larger picture of paradox appears: communities known for understanding

certain behaviors (feminism, homosexuality) as “unnatural” are less likely to demonstrate concern for the non-human natural world—even as they work more closely with it. And, conversely, communities that are known for “unnatural” behaviors voice greater concern for the natural world, yet are further removed from it. Thus the contrarian work performed by my archive—texts that develop conceptions of nature that include “unnatural” queers—and the larger work of queer ecology as a field, emerges from, and responds to, a long history of political paradox.

In historicizing and theorizing the emergence of both queer ecology and that of the works in my archive, I offer several new approaches and concepts. These have purchase for queer ecology specifically and critical theory generally, and, even more broadly, for environmental ethics and other such points at which the sciences and the humanities meet. First, I attempt to model a more thoroughly queer and intersectional reading practice than have previous works in queer ecology. (This type of intersectional consciousness has been largely lacking in the separate fields of queer theory and, to a lesser extent, ecocriticism.³¹) To take just one example, Jill E. Anderson’s recent article on *A Single Man* connects the queer lifestyle preferences of Isherwood’s protagonist to his disapproval of California coastal development but leaves his white male privilege and arguable misogyny untouched. I would argue, in fact, that the novel is as much about the changing racial dynamics of postwar California as it is about its changing landscape. This book, then, insists that a queer ecological focus on sexuality and environment should open out onto other foci, and I therefore take up not just the central queer-theoretical tenets of anti-heteronormativity and anti-essentialism, but also principles of social and environmental justice, anti-racism, -classism, -capitalism, -sexism, -xenophobia, and -colonialism. In each chapter, I show how such concerns intersect. For example, in Chapter 5 I discuss how Shelley Jackson’s *Half Life* indicates that the desert has been framed as a barren, useless, and otherwise “queer” space in part because of racist attitudes toward its indigenous populations.

My reading practice is also distinguished by my critique of *homonormativity*. This critique is part of my effort to model an expansive, and thoroughly queer, queer ecology—and to ensure that GLBTQI identities or behaviors do not become overly idealized through queer ecological inquiry. Thus, whereas scholars such as Herring and Sandilands have investigated pagan gay male communities and lesbian-separatist communes, and whereas non-scholarly publications such as *The Advocate* highlight mainstream “gay environmentalists,” I keep my focus on queer iterations of ecology that are anti-essentialist, anti-assimilationist, and heterogeneous. Chapter 4, for instance, rereads *Brokeback Mountain* not as a fantasy of gay separatism, nor as a bourgeois

gay tragedy of failed assimilationism, as have many critics, but rather as a document of class-conscious queer resistance to neoliberalism. Through such critique, I challenge the idea that GLBTQI texts and perspectives are necessarily progressive, environmentally or otherwise.

Environmental justice, and not just environmentalism, is a particularly important paradigm for this reading practice and this book as a whole, especially considering the former's concern with human rights, and how mainstream environmentalism in the United States has often been characterized by, and linked to, discrimination and social inequality.³² Environmental justice, as defined by leaders in the field such as Bunyan Bryant, Robert Bullard, and Ben Chavis, is the view that inequalities of race and class put people of color and poor people at greater ecological risk. For instance, in his groundbreaking *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality* (1990), Bullard demonstrates that dangerous waste sites in southern U.S. communities have been overwhelmingly located in low-income black communities. Bullard and others have thereby expanded the narrow, traditional definition of "environment" that has kept mainstream environmental activism a white movement, at least in name.³³ Thus the "environmentalism" of which I speak throughout this book should be understood as one that goes beyond a general concern for the non-human's well-being, to scrutinize how issues such as racism, classism, homophobia, and transphobia are tied up with that well-being—or, as it were, ill-being. I thus claim that sexuality is a central vector through which humans understand the non-human world, while stressing that that vector cannot be isolated from other concerns.

I offer such reading practices as a means of identifying queer texts that might not otherwise seem environmental but that espouse environmental justice and/or social-justice values; these reading practices could be applied, conversely, to environmental texts that might not otherwise seem queer but that denounce forms of inequality that intersect with transphobia or homophobia. I thereby suggest that "nature writing" and "ecocinema" might be even more expansive categories than ecocritics and other scholars have previously thought: if, as I show, naturalization is a process that operates on both humans and the non-human world, then queer texts that ask what counts as natural in terms of gender and sexuality can help us interrogate what counts as natural in other senses and contexts. I thus follow Katie Hogan's belief that "queer skepticism is good for queers, nature, and environmentalism"—and, I would add, people of color and economically disadvantaged people—"because it questions how all of these terms can be put to use in harmful ways" (*Undoing Nature* 250). The skepticism found in queer fictions toward that which dominant forces deem "natural" could

help us see, to take just one example, the disingenuousness of categorizing Hurricane Katrina as a “natural disaster,” when in fact most of its greatest harms resulted from social inequalities.

In modeling an expansive queer ecological practice of reading, *Strange Natures* also proposes futurity as a queer concept. I track how my texts think in terms of the future well-being of the human and the non-human world—and how those futures are interconnected. Specifically, I show that queer values—caring not (just) about the individual, the family, or one’s descendants, but about the Other species and persons to whom one has no immediate relations—may be the most effective ecological values. This proposal counters the anti-futurist and “negative” strains in queer theory discussed above, ongoing strains that I see as opposing the crucial environmentalist value of sustainability. Thus “futurity” functions in this book in much the same way that “nature” and “environmentalism” do: as a paradigm that has value but that must be reconceptualized from a queer, biocentric standpoint. I show that troubling the views of nature and the future that queer theorists have held, and troubling the views of nature and the environment that eco-critics and mainstream environmentalists have held, may, ironically, be the best path to an effective and inclusive queer ecological practice.

Strange Natures also contributes to queer ecology, and to literary and film studies more broadly, by considering how contemporary fictions represent queer ecological concerns through form and style, in addition to content. I elaborate a theory of queer ecological form and style applicable to both literature and film. For instance, Chapter 3 studies how Todd Haynes’s queer filmic techniques produce a formal commentary on environmental injustice, while Chapter 5 points to the queerness of Shelley Jackson’s ambiguous narrative voice, and the ironic playfulness of her speculative fiction novel *Half Life*, as environmentalist modes. I argue that these queer formal/stylistic techniques are uniquely suited to dealing with environmental issues that cannot otherwise be represented through classical narrative form—such as slow-building toxins or slow-growing cancers, or threats to generations far in the future. Moreover, in the latter chapter, focused on Jackson’s *Half Life*, I claim that the detachment allowed for by irony allows humans to imaginatively occupy the place of the non-human. I thereby counter the idea that a “post-identity” age of ironic detachment is necessarily an apolitical age.

Ironic environmentalism is just one iteration of the complex of imagination, interconnectedness, empathy, and ethics upon which *Strange Natures* focuses—a complex that I see as a crucial foundation for queer ecological thought. Each of my chapters discerns an ethical interconnected ecology in

the work or works in question; I show how, in each context captured by the literary or filmic work, this type of ecology advocates for oppressed humans of various stripes, as well as oppressed non-humans. I thereby go beyond queer theoretical work that sees compassion and optimism as dangerously normative elements in American political life, as well as beyond previous work in ecofeminism that sees such kinds of care as the province primarily of women, or as sufficient unto itself.³⁴ As I suggest, the works in my archive offer a political model that we might extend to the “real world”: one in which imagination and empathy allow humans to build political coalitions across divides such as race and sexuality, and to identify across species in ways that benefit the biosphere rather than the individual, the nation, or the corporation.

Queer Literature as Environmental Literature

The tradition of queer environmentalism I find in my archive entails a consideration of the human relationship to the non-human entities that usually fall under the categories of “nature” or “the environment.” More specifically, it entails the dramatization of problems ranging from air pollution, to the takeover of indigenous lands, to nuclear fallout. In exploring these relationships and problems, the texts I consider rethink “the natural” as it pertains to both gender/sexuality and the environment. They find that, just as “natural” genders/sexualities are social constructs—a finding that marks these texts as queer—so are many of our visions of the natural world. But these novels and films do not stop with that insight: they reveal how dominant constructions of the natural world have allowed for its real-life abjection while, paradoxically, also privileging it as implicitly white and heterosexual. I show how they respond to this oppressive paradox by modeling ethical, queer human relationships to the non-human. Through their uniquely empathetic imaginations, which employ queer experiences and affect to transport the human closer to the non-human, these texts foment urgent environmentalist agendas.

In this book, I employ “queer” as most queer theorists do: to describe that which questions the naturalness, and undermines the stability, of established categories of sex, gender, and sexuality. The texts in my archive are queer in that sense, staging incoherencies among those categories and indicting heterosexist ideals of health, reproductivity, individuality, domesticity, and capital accumulation. They also strike anti-identitarian

stances, focusing on performances and experiences of gender and sexuality rather than on coherent identities based in firm categories of gender and sexuality. Thus *Strange Natures* does not claim that queer individuals necessarily have a particular kind of relationship to the non-human; it focuses primarily on the queer relationships that humans might develop with the non-human, and how environmental ethics might emerge from queer practices and perspectives.

Compared to “queer,” “eco” is a slightly more slippery term. Many scholars have debated the usefulness of the prefix vis-à-vis “environment” or “enviro,” with some believing that the latter are more capacious, and thus more effective.³⁵ But I believe that “eco” as in both “ecological” and “ecocriticism” importantly specifies interrelationships. While the primary OED definition of “ecology” is “[t]he branch of biology that deals with the relationships between living organisms and their environment,” its “extended use” denotes “the interrelationship between any system and its environment”; “eco,” in turn, derives from the ancient Greek for “house,” or “dwelling.” These definitions allow me to understand the relationships between, say, immigrant labor and insular suburban communities, or homophobia and nuclear-irradiated landscapes—not to mention between the human and the non-human, more broadly—as “ecological” concerns.

My archive consists of works that appeared between 1987 and 2006. With the exception of two novels by binational Caribbean-raised authors, these works were produced by American artists. These texts’ diegeses cover the period from before gay liberation in the United States (1950s), to the rise of radical queer politics (1980s), to the “post-gay” period (2000s and forward), a span that also includes the so-called second and third waves of environmentalism. All of my novels and films respond in some way to these historical events, as well as to the often-problematic legacy of first-wave or nineteenth-century environmentalism, including the creation of the National Parks and the National Forest Service. Thus, more explicitly than queer ecological work focused on “pre-environmentalist” eras, this book comments on the imbrication of fiction and real-life environmental politics. My texts also provide critical queer perspectives on other uniquely American concerns, such as the Manhattan Project, Second Wave feminism, the rise of global capitalism, the AIDS crisis, and the widening income gap between whites and non-whites. All such issues are interdependent, they suggest—proving their queer thinking to be truly, extensively, ecological.

My second chapter, “Post-Transsexual Pastoral: Environmental Ethics in the Contemporary Transgender Novel,” offers a definitive example of

ecological thinking in contemporary queer fictions. I read American author Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues* (1992) alongside two narratives set in the Caribbean: Jamaican American Michelle Cliff's *No Telephone to Heaven* (1987) and Trinidadian Canadian Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1998). These novels depict what I call "organic transgenderism": a spontaneous, non-commodified, and self-directed process likened to the life-cycle changes of plants and animals. I claim that they thereby challenge the common view of gender transitioning as an "unnatural" medical intervention.

In so doing, these texts outline a unique environmental ethics. I show how they view trans people and natural landscapes in the same empathetic light, as threatened biological entities. Their protagonists, in coming to consciousness as trans people, and in grappling with their concomitant status as less-than-human, begin to forge strong bonds with the non-human. These characters also begin to see the connections among various forms of oppression—poverty, pollution, sexual abuse, police brutality—and to view coalition politics as the most effective response.

I link these novels' visions to a major development in GLBTQI politics: the shift in the 1990s from the older sexological model of "transsexuality" to the current community-derived umbrella term of "transgenderism." I argue that, through their depictions of organic transgenderism, these novels stage, and thus help facilitate, this shift. This chapter thereby offers a new contribution to the history of sexuality, as well as to the history of environmental thought: it confirms that new models of gender and sexuality emerge not just out of shifts in areas such as economics and medicine, but out of shifts in ecological consciousness.

Finally, this chapter demonstrates how a queer ecocritical lens can help us trace the transnational circulation of queer ecological thinking. I show how the concept of organic transgenderism has unique purchase for the Third World settings of Cliff and Mootoo's novels, in which voluntary surgery is an unthinkable expense, and where Western medical and technological interventions have framed the culture as "underdeveloped" or "backward." At the same time, I demonstrate that a queer ecocritical lens can illuminate otherwise unrecognized commonalities among diverse texts: despite their differing cultural contexts, Feinberg, Cliff, and Mootoo all use their concern with the well-being of gender/sexual minorities to raise questions about the well-being of the natural world, and vice versa.

Chapter 3, "It's Just Not Turning Up': AIDS, Cinematic Vision, and Environmental Justice in Todd Haynes's *Safe*," examines a very different context in which queer ecological thinking appears. This chapter moves from the rural and urban landscapes of transgender novels to those of American

suburbia, where we meet a white housewife suffering from an ambiguous illness. While many critics read Haynes's 1995 "New Queer Cinema" film as an AIDS allegory, I argue that it also tells a story about environmental injustice: its queer filmic techniques draw our attention away from our privileged protagonist to the film's literally and figuratively marginal figures and the disproportionately large envirohealth risks they face. The film thereby interrogates how we recognize suffering, and how certain types of suffering are framed as "natural" and, therefore, not worthy of public attention.

In arguing for *Safe* as a formal treatise on environmental justice, this chapter accounts for the 1995 film's setting in 1987, at the height not just of the AIDS crisis, but of Reaganomics, the self-help movement, the so-called War on Drugs, and deep-ecology-influenced environmentalism. I draw new attention to the relationship among these contemporaneous paradigms: all are known for championing personal responsibility while dismissing structural violence and institutionalized inequality. For instance, some adherents to deep ecology, which the film explicitly references, insist that ecological well-being can be achieved only when individual humans transform their relationship to the earth.³⁶ I claim that the film works against these ideologies: it highlights the larger forces that oppress the vulnerable—from the medical complex that dismisses women's and gay men's claims to illness, to the systems of immigration and capitalism that put Latina/o and Chicana/o day laborers at risk with little compensation—and exposes how those forces, in turn, blame the individual victim for such oppression.

This chapter indicates how environmental concerns obtain even, or perhaps especially, in spaces construed as *refuges* from the environment, such as the suburban home. It also reminds us that environmental injustice occurs not just in the homes and workplaces of the lower classes, but in the spheres of privilege where those individuals operate. I thereby help to expand basic ecocritical definitions of "environment" and environmental injustice. In showing how queer artistic sensibilities can take us far beyond those definitions, and far beyond issues of gender and sexuality, this chapter illustrates the wide applicability of queer ecological thought.

In Chapter 4, "'Ranch Stiffs' and 'Beach Cowboys' in the Shrinking Public Sphere: Sexual Domestication in *Brokeback Mountain* and *Surf Party*," I look at a text that seems to stand outside the bounds of my argument. Ang Lee's 2005 big-budget Hollywood film is widely perceived as "gay" in content, but not particularly "queer" in outlook; most critics have characterized it as either a simplistic pastoral that romanticizes the American West, or a universal love story in service of gay normalization. I counter these readings by highlighting how the film accounts for its historical setting and by

focusing on how it frames its protagonists in relation to the natural world. I show how it alludes to federal Reclamation efforts in the American West, which entailed the harnessing of natural resources under the imperative of “homemaking.” *Brokeback* places its protagonists in opposition to these developments, detailing Jack and Ennis’s poverty and subsequent exploitation by land developers, and creating in Ennis a character who rejects private domesticity as a solution to public homophobia. More explicitly, through a series of visual and thematic parallels, the film presents the queer as vulnerable to the same capitalist imperatives that threaten the natural landscape.

I argue that the film thus offers the possibility of a queer, anti-capitalist relationship to land and explicates the paradox observed by ecofeminist Greta Gaard: the claim that queer sexualities are “against nature” “[implies that] nature is valued—. . . [while, i]n Western culture, just the contrary is true: nature is devalued just as queers are devalued” (“Toward a Queer Ecofeminism” 120). *Brokeback Mountain* suggests that the charge of queer “unnaturalness” is actually a reaction to *queer resistance to the domestication of nature*, both human and non-human. This chapter, then, explains not just how contemporary queer texts oppose the “queer”/“nature” binary, but how that binary comes into being in the first place. And it identifies a twofold project for queer ecological fiction and scholarship: to both revalue nature where it is unjustly devalued, and challenge “nature” where it becomes the rationalization for injustice.

This chapter also brings new attention to the 1964 film *Surf Party*, which *Brokeback Mountain* briefly excerpts. Through a comparative reading, I show this seemingly frivolous beach romp to be a crucial intertext: like *Brokeback*, it depicts the policing of illicit desire in a natural context. But unlike *Brokeback*, it features delinquent characters who eventually conform, enthusiastically policing their own desires and cleansing natural spaces for the purposes of private ownership. I thus claim the later film as a critical rewriting of the earlier one.

I conclude this chapter by exploring how, through its commentary on access to natural public space, *Brokeback Mountain* critiques the contemporary state of Western and, especially, U.S. gay politics—wherein the fight for private rights in the form of marriage has replaced the fight for an expanded public sphere. Thus, whereas my previous chapters focus on my archive’s resistance to oppressive regimes such as homophobia, transphobia, and racism, this chapter focuses on homonormativity as a target of queer ecological critique.

Chapter 5 deals with the far-reaching implications of queer ecological thought in contemporary fictions. This chapter, “Attack of the Queer Atomic Mutants: The Ironic Environmentalism of Shelley Jackson’s *Half Life*,” ex-

amines the alternate reality of that 2006 novel, wherein the United States has implemented a program of self-bombing to atone for Hiroshima and Nagasaki, thus wreaking havoc on the Nevada desert. This bombing gives rise to a politicized minority of conjoined twins—modeled satirically on, and overlapping with, queer communities—who then serve as emblems of peaceful, post-nuclear coexistence. Jackson thus commemorates the actual history of nuclear testing in the U.S. desert, while framing its ongoing effects on indigenous residents and landscape as a matter of queer concern. Indeed, I claim that the novel highlights how the desert has historically been maligned as queer—and, accordingly, targeted for destruction. In response, *HalfLife* renegotiates, rather than disavows, queer connections to this space.

In examining *HalfLife*'s revision of Atomic Age history, I focus on the queer ecological implications of its narrative form. Our guide for much of the novel is a conjoined lesbian narrator whose madcap quest to separate herself from her twin fails on both a diegetic and an extradiegetic level: as the quest falls apart, it becomes impossible for the reader to differentiate between the narrative contributions of the protagonist and those of her sister. I argue that the novel thereby questions the anti-ecological ideal of the human individual as a sovereign, self-contained unit—an ideal that, in Western culture, has long justified non-human exploitation—and literally voices the kind of empathetic interconnectivity that my other texts have depicted.

But where *HalfLife* diverges sharply from the rest of my archive is in its irreverent affect, which includes humor, satire, grotesquerie, and irony. This chapter studies what I call the novel's ironic environmentalism; in so doing, I build on previous work in environmentalist rhetoric and establish irony as a new topic of inquiry for queer ecology. I show how irony allows *HalfLife* to ridicule Atomic Age rhetorics that frame nuclear fallout as a threat to the white heterosexual body and family,³⁷ and popular rhetorics and representations that frame environmental health and safety as solely heterosexual concerns. But I also claim that Jackson's irony has important implications for activism, for how we do politics: she satirizes everyone from academic theory-heads to GLBTQI activists to tree-hugging hippie mystics, while also taking their importance as a given. Her vision of an ultra-P.C. queer minority born of nuclear fallout thus elicits a kind of laughing-at-while-laughing-with when it comes to queer and ecological politics. This mode of response rejects the tendency of activist movements to poke fun at the enemy while leaving their own foibles unexamined, and it complicates environmentalism's reputation for humorless stridency.

More extravagantly and self-reflexively than the rest of my archive, then, Jackson's novel melds the skepticism of queer theory and other postmodern

and poststructuralist modes with the pragmatism of ecocriticism and environmental activism. This melding lets *Half Life* critique environmentalist tactics without undermining environmentalist convictions, as well as question “nature” even as it defends it. I thereby claim the novel as an instructive political model. It imagines a scenario in which a playful but politicized queerness literally grows out of, and effectively responds to, ecological devastation. Such alternate realities, this book suggests, might just be our own future.