

Queer Ecology and the Politics of Non-Normative Nature: Readings in Contemporary LGBTQ+ Anglophone Fiction

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Abstract

Queer ecology the field that examines the intersection of queer theory and environmental criticism has established itself as a productive theoretical formation in Euro-American scholarship, with Nicole Seymour, Catriona Sandilands, and Bruce Erickson's foundational collections defining its conceptual terrain. Yet the application of queer ecology to contemporary Anglophone LGBTQ+ fiction from postcolonial and Global South contexts remains an almost entirely unexplored critical territory. This paper addresses that gap by examining how contemporary Anglophone LGBTQ+ fiction from India, South Africa, and the Caribbean represents the relationship between sexual dissidence and ecological space: how queerness is mapped onto non-normative landscapes, how LGBTQ+ characters inhabit, flee, seek refuge in, and are constituted by environments that resist developmental monoculture. The analysis draws on Nicole Seymour's concept of strange natures, Stacy Alaimo's trans-corporeality, and postcolonial queer theory as developed by Gloria Wekker and Rahul Rao, arguing that postcolonial Anglophone LGBTQ+ fiction develops a distinctly southern queer ecology one in which the non-normative landscape functions as both a figure for sexual dissidence and a site of resistance to colonial and postcolonial developmental heteronormativity. The findings call for a significant expansion of queer ecology's geographic imaginary and for the development of a postcolonial queer ecocriticism as a distinct scholarly formation.

Keywords: *queer ecology, LGBTQ+ fiction, postcolonial queer theory, ecofeminism, Anglophone literature, southern queer ecocriticism, trans-corporeality, sexual dissidence*

I. INTRODUCTION

Since Nicole Seymour's *Strange Natures: Futurity, Empathy, and the Queer Ecological Imagination in Contemporary Literature* (2013) and the landmark collection *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire* (2010) edited by Catriona Sandilands and Bruce Erickson, queer ecology has emerged as one of the most generative interdisciplinary formations in literary and environmental humanities scholarship [1][2]. By challenging both heteronormativity's naturalisation in discourses of nature and ecocriticism's failure to account for queer experiences of the environment, queer ecology has opened important questions about the politics of what counts as natural, who is included in or excluded from ecological community, and how sexual dissidence and ecological dissidence are related.

Yet queer ecology has developed primarily through readings of Euro-American literary and cultural texts. Its founding gestures the denaturalisation of heteronormativity, the rehabilitation of the unnatural, the queering of reproductive futurism are productively provocative in North Atlantic contexts where the equation of nature with heterosexual reproduction has long served as an ideological pillar of social conservatism. But these same gestures look significantly different when transposed to postcolonial contexts where the heteronormativity of the national-natural is inseparable from colonial impositions, where laws criminalising homosexuality are in many cases colonial legacies, and where the relationship between queerness and landscape carries different historical, spiritual, and political valences.

This paper proposes that contemporary Anglophone LGBTQ+ fiction from postcolonial contexts specifically from India, South Africa, and the Caribbean develops a distinctly postcolonial queer ecology: a mode of relating sexual dissidence to ecological space that both extends and significantly complicates the Euro-American queer ecology tradition. Three connected arguments are developed. First, that postcolonial Anglophone LGBTQ+ fiction uses non-normative landscapes as figurative and affective spaces for the inhabitation of sexual identities that are officially criminalized or socially marginalised. Second, that these texts theorise a specifically southern trans-corporeality a mode of bodily being-in-the-world that challenges both developmental heteronormativity and the colonial mapping of deviant sexuality onto primitive nature. Third, that the field of queer ecology requires a significant geographic expansion if it is to account for the full range of ways in which queerness and ecology are related across the Anglophone literary world.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 *Queer Ecology: Foundations and Developments*

The foundational gesture of queer ecology is to denaturalise the natural, exposing the ideological work done by appeals to nature in the policing of sexuality, reproduction, and gender identity. Sandilands and Erickson's collection [2] demonstrated that the categories of nature and the natural have historically been deployed to pathologise homosexuality, while simultaneously showing that the same natural world that heteronormative ideology recruits to its own ends is in fact far more varied, polymorphous, and queer than those ideological deployments allow. Seymour's study [1] extended this analysis to literary representation, showing how American fiction from Edith Wharton to Michael Cunningham mobilises the ecological imagination in the service of queer futurity and empathy.

Subsequent work has developed queer ecology in several directions: Timothy Morton's dark ecology and mesh theory [3], Stacy Alaimo's trans-corporeality [4] the understanding of the body as always already in porous interchange with its environments Sarah Ensor's work on queer environmental history, and the emerging field of queer environmental justice. What these developments share is a commitment to reading the relationship between sexuality, embodiment, and environment in terms of their mutual constitution and their shared resistance to normative ordering.

2.2 *Postcolonial Queer Theory and Its Ecocritical Potential*

Postcolonial queer theory, as developed by scholars including Rahul Rao, Gloria Wekker, Neville Hoad, and Anjali Arondekar, has made the colonial genealogy of sexual normativity central to its analysis. Rao's *Out of Time: The Queer Politics of Postcoloniality* (2020) [5] is particularly important here, arguing that the politics of queer visibility in postcolonial contexts cannot be read through Euro-American frameworks of rights and recognition without significant distortion. Wekker's *White Innocence* (2016) [6] has shown how racial and sexual normativity are co-produced in colonial and postcolonial formations.

The ecocritical potential of postcolonial queer theory has been largely unrealised. There is no established field of postcolonial queer ecocriticism; no systematic body of scholarship that brings postcolonial queer theory into dialogue with the environmental humanities in relation to literary texts. This paper argues that contemporary

Anglophone LGBTQ+ fiction from postcolonial contexts provides the literary archive through which such a field can begin to be constructed [7].

2.3 The Research Gap

The gap addressed by this paper is threefold: queer ecology has not been systematically applied to postcolonial Anglophone literary texts; postcolonial queer theory has not been brought into productive dialogue with environmental criticism; and contemporary LGBTQ+ fiction from India, South Africa, and the Caribbean has not been read through an ecocritical lens. This paper is the first to propose a framework postcolonial queer ecocriticism adequate to all three of these related absences [1][2][5].

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: POSTCOLONIAL QUEER ECOCRITICISM

Postcolonial queer ecocriticism, as proposed here, designates the critical practice of reading literary representations of the intersection of sexual dissidence and ecological space through frameworks attentive to both the colonial genealogy of sexual normativity and the environmental humanities' account of the relationship between human and non-human worlds. It draws on four theoretical resources.

The first is Seymour's [1] concept of queer ecological imagination: the capacity of literary texts to envision relationships between human sexuality and non-human nature that resist heteronormative reproductive teleologies. In postcolonial contexts, this concept requires extension to account for the ways in which colonial discourses of primitive/civilised, natural/unnatural mapped racial and sexual deviance onto each other and for the ways in which postcolonial LGBTQ+ subjects navigate and contest this double mapping.

The second is Alaimo's [4] trans-corporeality: the understanding of the human body as a site of exchange with the non-human environment, permeable, responsive, and co-constituted by ecological conditions. In postcolonial LGBTQ+ fiction, trans-corporeality takes on specific valences: the body marked as deviant by colonial sexual law is also the body most vulnerable to developmental environmental violence, inhabiting marginal ecological spaces that are both threatening and liberatory.

The third resource is Rob Nixon's [8] slow violence, adapted for the analysis of how developmental heteronormativity exerts its violence on queer ecologies: the gradual, often invisible destruction of the non-normative landscapes the forest, the shoreline, the marginal urban space that postcolonial LGBTQ+ fiction figures as sites of refuge and alternative community.

The fourth resource is what I term colonial heteronature: the historical process by which colonial administrations mapped sexual and reproductive normativity onto landscapes, designating certain environments as civilised and productive (the agricultural plantation, the colonial city) and others as wild, unproductive, and associated with sexual deviance. Postcolonial queer fiction contests this mapping, rehabilitating the non-normative landscape as a space of queer life and ecological community.

IV. ANALYSIS

4.1 The Indian Queer Forest: Ecological Refuge and Sexual Dissidence

In a cluster of contemporary Indian Anglophone LGBTQ+ fiction, the forest a landscape with deep cultural significance in the Indian literary and philosophical tradition, but also one shaped by colonial forest policies and postcolonial developmental clearance figures as a space of queer refuge and ecological belonging. The forest in these texts is precisely non-normative: outside the developmental economy of the productive agricultural landscape, excluded from both nationalist nature ideology and colonial civilising discourse, it becomes the landscape through which queer characters inhabit sexualities that have no official place in the normative social order.

This use of the forest resonates with, but significantly complicates, Seymour's [1] account of the American wilderness as a site of queer ecological imagination. In the Indian context, the forest is not primarily a space of

Euro-American sublime and recreational wilderness; it is a space contested between tribal communities, state forest departments, development corporations, and the memory of colonial forest policies that dispossessed millions. The queer ecological imagination in Indian LGBTQ+ fiction is thus always also a postcolonial ecological imagination one that understands the forest's non-normativity in terms of its position in colonial and postcolonial histories of land use, community, and dispossession.

4.2 South African Queer Ecologies: AIDS, Bodies, and Environmental Justice

South African LGBTQ+ fiction occupies a particularly complex ecological space: a context in which the AIDS epidemic, the politics of queerness in post-apartheid South Africa, and the specific environmental histories of settler colonialism and apartheid spatial engineering converge. In fiction by authors including K. Sello Duiker and Zanele Muholi (whose visual and prose work intersects), the queer body is represented as simultaneously vulnerable to viral, social, and environmental violence as a site of trans-corporeal exchange with both the human and non-human worlds [4][6] in ways that are shaped by the apartheid legacy of differential environmental access.

The concept of slow violence [8] is particularly productive for reading South African queer ecology. The apartheid systematisation of environmental access the relegation of Black communities to ecologically degraded townships, the reservation of pristine environments for white recreational use continues to shape queer South Africans' relationships to ecological space. The most politically incisive South African LGBTQ+ fiction represents this slow environmental violence as inseparable from the violence of sexual normativity: both operate through the same structures of spatial exclusion and bodily dispossession.

4.3 Caribbean Queer Waterscapes: The Sea as Non-Normative Ecological Imagination

In Caribbean LGBTQ+ Anglophone fiction, the sea occupies the position that the forest occupies in Indian and South African queer fiction: it is the non-normative landscape par excellence, associated with both the horrors of the Middle Passage and the liberatory possibilities of a world without fixed territorial borders. For Caribbean queer writers, the sea is a space of dangerous beauty, of colonial violence and postcolonial possibility, and its ecology promiscuous, boundary-crossing, indifferent to the territorial claims of the nation-state rhymes with a queer ecology that refuses the reproductive nationalism of postcolonial heteronormativity [2].

This Caribbean queer waterscape extends and complicates DeLoughrey and Handley's [7] theorisation of the Caribbean ocean in postcolonial ecocriticism. DeLoughrey's account of the sea as a space of tidal routes and colonial exchange is productively queered when read through the lens of LGBTQ+ Caribbean fiction: the sea is not only a colonial and postcolonial historical archive but a specifically queer ecological space, where the instability of marine ecosystems and the colonial violence inscribed in Caribbean waters take on gendered and sexual dimensions.

V. DISCUSSION

The analyses presented above demonstrate the productivity of postcolonial queer ecocriticism as a critical framework while also revealing several theoretical challenges that future scholarship must address. Three points warrant extended discussion.

First, the study confirms that queer ecology as a field requires significant geographic expansion. The frameworks developed through readings of Euro-American texts do not straightforwardly apply to postcolonial contexts where the politics of nature, sexuality, and colonialism intersect in historically specific ways. A postcolonial queer ecocriticism must develop its own theoretical vocabulary including the concepts of colonial heteronature, southern trans-corporeality, and the non-normative landscape as postcolonial queer space rather than simply importing Euro-American queer ecology whole [1][3].

Second, the paper raises important questions about the relationship between queer ecological imagination and environmental justice. In all three geographic contexts examined, the non-normative landscapes that LGBTQ+ fiction figures as spaces of queer refuge are also landscapes under developmental threat: the Indian forest is being cleared, the South African township ecosystem is degraded, the Caribbean sea is warming and acidifying.

Postcolonial queer fiction thus connects queer ecological imagination to environmental justice in ways that demand a critical framework attentive to both [8].

Third, this study contributes to the growing body of scholarship that challenges the universalising tendencies of queer theory by insisting on the specificity of postcolonial queer experience. It aligns with, and extends, the postcolonial queer theory of Rao [5], Wekker [6], and others by bringing that tradition into dialogue with the environmental humanities a dialogue that, as this paper has shown, generates new theoretical resources for both.

VI. CONCLUSION

This paper has proposed postcolonial queer ecocriticism as a new critical formation and demonstrated its analytical utility through readings of the relationship between sexual dissidence and ecological space in contemporary Anglophone LGBTQ+ fiction from India, South Africa, and the Caribbean. The framework it develops drawing on queer ecology [1][2], postcolonial queer theory [5][6], trans-corporeality [4], and slow violence [8] provides resources for reading a body of fiction that has been simultaneously neglected by queer ecology (for its geographic bias toward Euro-American texts) and by postcolonial ecocriticism (for its inadequate engagement with queer theoretical frameworks).

Future research should expand the geographic and linguistic scope of postcolonial queer ecocriticism to include LGBTQ+ fiction from Nigeria, Kenya, Bangladesh, and the Pacific; should develop comparative analyses across these different literary-ecological contexts; and should engage more fully with Indigenous queer ecological thought two-spirit traditions, Hijra community relationships to sacred spaces, and similar formations that offer alternative genealogies for the relationship between sexual dissidence and ecological belonging [7].

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