

BOOK REVIEW

## Sex Ecologies

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At a time when Indigenous scholars are cautioning against the erasure of the longstanding Indigenous epistemology of ecology and relational ontology, while simultaneously challenging the purported novelty of New Materialism's critique of anthropocentrism, Stefanie Hessler's timely anthology, titled *Sex Ecologies*, reinforces the acknowledgment of Indigenous and non-Euromerican centric perspectives on the interconnectedness between humans and the environment. This transdisciplinary anthology transcends boundaries across disciplines, geography, the nature–culture divide, human–non-human hierarchies, and life–death antagonism, delving into the intricate interplay between ecology, colonialism, and the power of erotics within the context of ecological crises and environmental challenges.

Emerging from a collaborative research consortium, “The Seed Box: An Environmental Humanities Collaboratory (2015–2022),” and an art exhibition by nine artists at Kunsthall Trondheim, this cutting-edge anthology exemplifies a departure from Euromerican Enlightenment and challenges prevailing race and sex-based impositions of heteronormativity, white supremacy, and neo-imperial capitalist enterprise to envision a sustainable future. Moreover, the anthology underscores the necessity of interweaving justice, sustainability, and peace to avert ecological catastrophe, aligning with ecofeminist Vandana Shiva's perspective (2007).

The anthology explores botany, zoology, microbiology, and ethology through a humanities lens, prompting readers to recognize diverse eros in ecology that have been historically devalued as bestial and feminine. It foregrounds stories of multiplicity of love and diverse forms of reproduction and birth beyond human experience. Importantly, the anthology does not shy away from addressing the discourse of poisonous contamination, racial and chemical toxicity, alteration of endocrine systems, chronic illness, disability, cancerous embodiment, and the danger of species extinction. These challenging discussions are treated as evidence of and connections to the legacy of colonialism and slavery, the perpetuation of racial capitalism in the prison–industrial complex, and the extraction of labor from Black, Brown, Indigenous, and poor bodies.

The engagement with these issues is vividly presented through photographs, visionary essays, conversations, songs, poetry, and an innovative glossary at the end of the book, explicitly unpacking terms such as “pleasure activism,” “erotophobia,” “reproductive futurism,” “carnophallocentric,” and “altéricide.”

Observing the fluidity among genres, disciplines, methodologies, theories, and activism in *Sex Ecologies*, I am acutely aware of the imperative to unsettle academic imperialism, particularly from the standpoint of grassroots feminist praxis and lived experiences in the Global South. Given my own long-standing engagement with decolonization of Cartesian ego politics embedded in academic fundamentalism but invisible from the vantage point of Euromerican epistemic privilege, I appreciate how *Sex Ecologies* brings together new and existing voices from diverse geographical locations to resist hierarchization of knowledge. In reference to my recent article proposing a quilted epistemology based on various paths to knowledge formation (activism, performance, visual, communal, experiential, dialogical, and musical) that “includes knowledge gained within and beyond institutional engagement, non-privatized Indigenous knowledge, and knowledge that emerges from marginalized standpoints” (Das 2023, 251), I see the anthology exemplifies quilted epistemology in practice. Quilted epistemology “resists propagating national and state agendas while facilitating epistemic disobedience, unfixing possessions, and considering borders permeable” (254). The anthology noteworthy exemplifies epistemic disobedience as discussed by contributors like Serubiri Moses who analyzes the politics and ethics of planting Kenyan mugumo trees and holistic sustainable Karura reforestation activism conducted by the Nobel Peace Prize laureate Wangari Maathai. Mathai’s activism happening outside academia is an incubator of feminist knowledge formation born out of conflicts and tensions. Therefore, *Sex Ecologies*’ quilted epistemology and its structural fluidity noteworthy complements the methodological retort in addressing the complex ecological challenges. This is well argued by Katja Aglert and Victoria Wibeck in the opening chapter as they discuss how the practice of disciplinary boundaries is performative and situational.

As a feminist and queer of color critique theorist in the fields of bioethics, queer ecology, and environmental-health humanities, I find *Sex Ecologies*, captivating for its commendable fruition. Unlike many disjointed editions, this coherent anthology presents a framework of entanglements between human and non-human sexual ecologies, seamlessly flowing from chapters to poetry, imaginative artwork, photographs, and visionary essays. The editor articulates six broad thematic areas in the introduction and explains how these themes are addressed through various methodological innovations, such as contextualizing Audre Lorde’s 43-year-old groundbreaking text as the fulcrum for the project, quilting several collective annotations around the text as a gesture toward feminist legacy and solidarity. Another such methodological novelty is that the visionary fictions, poetry, and conversations are interjected by radical art such as sensual corporeal unifications of human bodies with fruits, animals, and insects, as depicted by artist Laure Prouvost’s paintings. Interestingly, the anthology defies clear-cut thematic structures in its contents, aiming to capture the fluidity of chapters and visual narratives.

Given the urgency of addressing the climate crisis in curricula across diverse disciplines, this volume is valuable for courses related to ecofeminism, queer ecology, environmental health humanities, Indigenous sustainability, ecosexuality and environmental ethics and justice, and climate medicine. The anthology is a great pedagogical tool to challenge culturally loaded Eurocentric terms such as “eroticism,” “sexuality,”

and “reproduction,” as exemplified by Filipa Ramos’ dismantling of biological determinism and anthropocentric heteronormativity by referring to asexual cellular reproduction, kinship, tribalism, and interspecies care politics. Elvia Wilk’s discussion on non-reproductive penetration, erotic pleasure, pansexual desires surrounding multiple corporeal orifices (nose, ear, skin, and anal), reproduction as interactionism between toxic chemicals and cellular structures causing mutated ecology, and even fertilization between imagination and writing, enrich our understanding by preventing homoerotophobia and the objectification or othering of Nature as a subject of scientific surveillance and control.

A significant contribution to environmental justice in this anthology is Marie Pereira’s chapter on the fluidity of water as a gestational force between mammals, birds, reptiles, fish, insects, plant life, fungi, bacteria, and how this healing aquatic power is contaminated due to oil spills, petrochemical, and hydrospheric climate change. Margrethe Pettersen’s bodily intimacy with water while studying vessoámmál, Astrida Neimanis “toxic love” and somatic longing for the Indigenous land transformed into debris, and marine life photographs on queer love and non-heterosexual practices of sea slugs, octopuses, and starfish as captured in Anne Duk Hee Jordan’s visual essay, problematize our understanding of nature, morality, and social belief systems. These chapters in classroom pedagogy will probe the idea of sex ecology as a method and will facilitate interrogations surrounding the faulty tendency to homogenize heterosexuality as healthy and hygienic.

A crucial area of discussion this anthology addresses is the essentialization and freezing of queer studies as anthropocentric and Eurocentric. Marginalized LGTBQI communities across the globe may seek this book as a sanctuary of recognition with deep emotional investment. Contrarily, this collection unsettles homonormativity based on dominant social orders and pushes readers to understand ecology and life beyond the borders of normalization. For example, insightful conversations with contributors like TallBear and her resistance to settler-colonial imposition of queer categories when Indigeneity is already queer, and discussions on “Queer Microbiopolitics” and its intervention through antibiotics by Tarsh Bates explain that queer politics is not about sustaining the politics of representational inclusion and the ongoing legacies of colonial practices.

A noteworthy critical lens that merits detailed discussion in this anthology is elaborating and expanding the meaning of “queerness” beyond sexuality. Queerness is about radical openness, indeterminacy, and mutating organisms enfolding into multiple forms, rather than allowing dominant cultural logics of normalcy (Barad 2012). Therefore, the anthology captures radical queerness in various forms: from Catriona Sandilands’s discussion of human–plant bonding to Halberstam’s analysis of the birth of wilderness through nature–culture sonic component, to Mel Chen’s argument about the heterotopic grave as a space of reproduction where “microcellular drama and rampant animacy” (216) mocks humanity’s attempt to personalize burial plots, to expression of queer environmentalism in Jessie Kleemann and Leanne Simpson’s appeal to read the signs of birds or Leanne Simpson’s engagement with caged animals. Thus, the devastating legacies of colonialism that successfully dispossessed Indigenous communities with diverse corporeal and sexual practices from their Native lands should be the crux of queer studies and its relation to environmentalism.

As a body studies theorist, I value the potent political foundation of the anthology, particularly in its efforts to reintroduce embodied knowledge. This is crucial because, despite the considerable scholarship in the domains of corporeal feminism and environmental feminism, there is a noticeable dearth of intersectional exploration of the

convergences between these two fields. As noted by Stacy Alaimo (2008), “most feminist analyses of the body, in particular, sever their topic from the topos of ‘nature’ ... fueled by rigid commitments to social constructionism and the determination to rout out all vestiges of essentialism” (Material feminism 237). Against this backdrop of a contentious history, Anna The’s synesthetic work featuring the equatorial fruit safou as an exoticized, fetishized immigrant body in the capitalist labor market, powerfully underscores the structural determinants of bodily categories that strip away agency from black, brown, and queer bodies.

In contrast to this systemic violence and corporeal hierarchy, Sami Schalk and adrienne maree brown’s celebration of large bodies with disabilities, aiming to reclaim desire and embrace crip pleasure, contributes to a feminist praxis centered on kindness, rest, and the restoration of agency. Likewise, the conversation involving nilas helander, Katja Aglert, and Stefanie Hessler on the eroticism of swimming and the explosion of corporeal energy into aquatic spacelessness, chaos, and anarchy necessitates a complex analysis of the entanglements between material, natural, cultural, and biological possibilities. On a different note, the dialogic conversation addressing the liminality of the cancerous body and its entanglement with queer love and death, as articulated by Nina Lykke and Camila Marambio, serves as a powerful elucidation of why we should not take the body for granted. Instead of perpetuating discrimination among bodies, there is an imperative to look forward to intercorporeal generosity (Diprose 2002) and foster empathy between human and non-human bodies on this planet to resist Anthropocene necropolitics and capitalist extractivism.

However, my reservation about the anthology lies in the absence of a thoroughly articulated premise elucidating the cognizance of consent and the corporeal agency of marginalized bodies of color subjected to extractivism as found in Ibrahim Fazlic’s project on microplastics penetration of organic bodies. This conspicuous tension surrounding open-ended intra-active bodily agency becomes complex in connection to the advocacy for averting individualized bodily enclosure, as articulated in TallBear’s discourse on dissolving the proprietorship of the self and the lover in polyamory, extending to the privatized enclosure of land, air, and water. In the pedagogical context of teaching feminist new materialism concerning the corporeal openness, I observe a tendency among students to misconstrue anxiously the notion that the openness of the body/land, devoid of boundaries and individualism, may potentially invite sexual violence and intrusion into a personalized sphere. While the anthology manifests a profound political commitment, a nuanced examination of this fear and anxiety of bodies and lands without boundaries would have enhanced its scholarly depth. In the introduction, the editor could have clarified that the inseparability of the corporeal from the ecology comes from respecting the inherent agential realism of matter, both organic and inorganic, as always already entangled with the environment. This bodily/ material agency cannot be subjected to forceful coercion, enforcement, and exploitation as manipulated in social constructions of bodily or land proprietorships for capitalist exploitation.

My further apprehension regarding the anthology pertains to the inherent tension between its encouragement of transdisciplinary inquiry into environmental concerns and the notable absence of an explicit consideration for comprehensive applied humanities-oriented structural remedies and the ethical underpinnings associated with environmental intervention. Criticism has been directed toward humanists for their purported reluctance to extend their expertise beyond the confines of academic discourse and engage directly with environmental challenges. Environmental

humanities as a field, transcends the mere interrogation of ecological crises and the posing of uncomfortable questions; it proactively contributes to potential solutions, particularly in instances where climate catastrophes are rooted in human avarice and the collective behaviors of privileged communities. In the realm of climate mitigation strategies, the anthology could have dedicated a section elucidating how the humanities might offer viable solutions by seeking to redefine fundamental concepts such as freedom, individualism, consumption, and community, among others. Furthermore, environmental humanities could grapple with the formidable task of infusing ethical principles into ecological policymaking, arguably one of the most challenging aspects of devising comprehensive solutions.

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