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Robert Azzarello, *Queer Environmentality: Ecology, Evolution, and Sexuality in American Literature* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012), 159 pp.

Robert Azzarello's *Queer Environmentality: Ecology, Evolution, and Sexuality in American Literature* does important work in applying the still-emerging critical frame of queer ecocriticism. While considerable work has been done to establish the theoretical implications, debates, and boundaries of queer ecologies, little attention has been paid to the utilization of the theory as a critical angle. Azzarello's study does this, taking four "American Romantic and post-Romantic" authors—Thoreau, Melville, Cather, and Djuna Barnes—and presses their works through the synthesis of both queer theory and ecocriticism. The most effective part of the book is Azzarello's introduction. The introduction gives an overview of influential work by queer theorists, literary theorists, ecocritics and philosophers—Bergson, Sedgwick, Butler, Berlant, Cate Sandilands, Karen J. Warren, Greta Gaard, amongst others. Each chapter, in fact, includes some such overview for the respective authors, and Azzarello is rigorous in laying out the views of previous critics in order to demonstrate the necessity for such new, revisionary readings. From there, Azzarello claims both aesthetic and political consequences of these readings, but at its root, a queer environmentality challenges notions of essential heterosexuality and forms creative matrices for the intersection of the meaning of "naturalness" and sexuality. Ecocriticism's interpretation of all things nature-related along with the challenge to conventional notions of homosexuality as somehow "against nature," is the confluence from which queer ecocriticism springs. Queer ecology's starting point is a general questioning of the meaning of the word "natural," both within the queer and the environmental scope, making the "contention between these two project […] structural; it is built into the very fabric of the terminology, and thus unavoidable" (5). Espousing evolutionary theory, Azzarello simultaneously places the human subject at the center of his analyses and questions its primacy. The four authors about whom he writes, though they have their own queer environmentalities, have in common a reconsideration of "the human as a natural being, as a species, or type of being, that occupies a particular niche in the order of things, and, therefore, as subject to the explanatory gestures afforded to other species that also constitute and populate their particular biological kingdom" (4). Azzarello signals that the aim of his book is both ontological and epistemological, and his method follows Sedgwick's "reparative" technique—taking "seriously Riceour's hermeneutics of suspicion; […] it also retains the will to believe, to entertain the apparently impossible, to allow the symbol to give rise to thought, and thus gain a 'second naivete,' a maturity of complexity and queerness" (28).

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This precludes "paranoid" readings, and Azzarello thus exposes methodologies that foreclose the rigorous possibilities and vulnerabilities present in queer ecocritical readings.

This method opens up the ontological and epistemological challenges in which Azzarello is interested, and it appears to be writ large in the readings of the individual authors. In works like *Walden*, Thoreau's project, according to Azzarello, "becomes one of retooling human consciousness to consider large processes of Being, to be simple and naked" (45). Thoreau "denaturalizes" the epistemological pressures of being "human," and he "can then clear the way for a specifically human ethics that frees itself from ostensibly natural pressures in many realms, including that of the sexual" (55). Melville's "queer nature," in *Moby Dick* and *The Encantadas*, is different from Thoreau's perspective on queer environmentality because it welcomes paradox and is in some ways "more" queer than Azzarello's reading of Thoreau, in my opinion. This opening of interpretation is many ways more productive for a queer ecological reading because it widens the confluence of interpretation. This queer nature concerns animals and humans alike and "Melville dramatizes a conjoined disruption and ontological revision of the strange matrix between the human, the natural, and the sexual" (65). With these two authors, Azzarello establishes a firm foundation on which to not only ground his readings of the next two authors but also ascertain one version of a critical frame to understand their influence over current environmental thought.

To my mind, the chapters on Willa Cather "Onto-Theology of *Oikos*" and Djuna Barnes's "Queerly Nietzschean Nature" contain the strongest critical readings of the entire book. The way notions of naturalness collide with sexuality (and vice versa) in Cather's and Barnes's work is readier for a queer ecocritical reading because, in my opinion, the way the two encounter sexuality is more explicit and couched within the way they imagine environments than in the case of either Melville or Thoreau. Cather's primary mode is represented by "a habit of thought that conceptualizes human beings, other life forms, and their environments as finding pleasure in an exuberant deviation from a *telos* of reproductivity" (83). Azzarello illustrates Cather's refashioning of notions of theology and "oikos," the Greek word for "home" and the etymological root of "ecology," as a way of establishing an ecology that turns teleology on its head. Because of this challenge to teleology, this "nonstructure," Azzarello argues that Cather swings between "optimism and pessimism [...] health and decadence, between success and failure" (91). Cather "fractures" the epistemological notion of ecology, while Barnes "fractures" theories of time and evolution. Primarily in *Nightwood*, Barnes generates a "philosophy of life" in which in "the strange, the excessive, the unnecessary, the abnormal, the absurd, there exists a form of life, a viability, a disruptive change, a creative energy that is productive" but seeks alternative narratives and timings (113).

Where does such a challenging, innovative reading leave us as critics and readers? Since one thing at stake in *Queer Environmentality* is legitimizing this critical axis as a fruitful methodology for reading literature, both past and current, Azzarello works to justify queer environmentality as its own epistemology. While Azzarello does not need to convince me of the value of queer ecocritical readings, I am pleased to note

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that the rigor and thoroughness, both philosophical and critical, present in *Queer Environmentality* does its work to help legitimize this approach. Azzarello's declaration that "[q]ueering is not a rejection, but a layering, a dramatization of exception" offers a view of the hopeful openness through which queer ecology functions (119).

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