In the summer of 2016 I presented at a nonacademic conference for the first time: the Fab Planet Summit in San Francisco, hosted by the non-profit LGBTQ/environmental organization Out for Sustainability.¹ In addition to having much better snacks than most academic conferences Fab Planet also had a different affective register. For instance, audience members snapped their fingers whenever the speaker made a point they found incisive or inspiring—“a less official, more spontaneous and impassioned in-the-moment response” than clapping, according to a New York Times article headlined, amusingly, “Why Snapping Is the New Clapping.”² As the first speaker of the day, I was initially ruffled by the sound, until I looked up into the crowd and saw attentive smiles. Overall the mood of the conference was light-hearted and friendly, compared to the tension and formality of, say, an MLA convention—at which, as I always joke, you can feel the anxiety of job-market candidates (historically, myself included) in the air. My Fab Planet experience thus inspired me to consider one possible definition of queer environmental affect: the alternative forms of attachment, emotion, and response that emerge within the context of queer or non-normative spaces.

Less than two weeks later I woke up to the news of the mass shooting
on Latin Night at Pulse, an LGBTQ nightclub in Orlando, Florida. After thirty minutes of panic before I heard from my close friend who lives in the area—safe and sound—the commentary began to pour in about the importance of the gay bar, the queer club. The journalist Richard Kim wrote a moving piece for *The Nation*, declaring that “gay bars are therapy for people who can’t afford therapy; temples for people who lost their religion, or whose religion lost them; vacations for people who can’t go on vacation; homes for folk without families; sanctuaries against aggression. They take sound and fabric and flesh from the ordinary world, and under cover of darkness and the influence of alcohol or drugs, transform it all into something that scrapes up against utopia.” 3 The novelist Justin Torres wrote an ode in the *Washington Post* titled “In Praise of Latin Night at the Queer Club,” describing how “a sense of safety transforms the body, transforms the spirit. So many of us walk through the world without it. So when you walk through the door and it’s a salsa beat, and brown bodies, queer bodies, all writhing in some fake smoke and strobing lights, *no matter how cool, how detached, how over-it you think you are, Latin Night at the Queer Club breaks your cool. You can’t help but smile.*” 4 Here we might find a slightly different definition of queer environmental affect: forms of attachment, emotion, and response to queer or non-normative spaces, including or perhaps especially those that cater to people of color. Indeed, Torres seems to understand Latin Night at the queer club as a time and space that combats (false) lack of affect, eliciting visceral, effusive reactions against one’s conscious will: “*you can’t help but smile.*”

This chapter sketches out these and other possible definitions of queer environmental affect. I begin by surveying extant work on affect from queer theorists. As I argue, queer theory is an essential resource for an affective ecocriticism, or any environmental humanities work engaged with affect, for two very different reasons. First, queer theory focuses on “bad,” *as in negative*, affects such as shame, guilt, depression, and melancholia—the same affects that emerge in the context of environmental crisis. Second, queer theory also focuses on “bad,” *as in inappropriate*, affects, including humor, camp, frivolity, and irony—affects that, as I argue elsewhere, are largely, and problematically, *missing* from the context of environmental
crisis, especially from environmental art and scholarship. I then explore the queerness of environmental affect, showing how any emotional investment in particular spaces or environments—be they gay bars or gardens—might be considered queer. To illustrate these claims I offer readings of two environmentally themed texts, looking first at the contemporary American artist Kim Anno’s video projects and then at the American film director Douglas Trumbull’s 1972 cult classic, Silent Running. I show how these texts both display and evoke a diverse range of affects, including “bad” ones, in response to environmental crisis.

Queer Theory, Affect, and Environment

Queer theory has had a long relationship with affect. As Michael Hardt states, “The two primary precursors to the affective turn I see in U.S. academic work are the focus on the body, which has been most extensively advanced in feminist theory, and the exploration of emotions, conducted predominantly in queer theory.” And indeed we might find that many if not most foundational queer theory scholars have been concerned with affect in some way or another. For example, Patricia Ticineto Clough has observed that “Judith Butler . . . introduced queer theory with her notion of ‘melancholic heterosexuality,’” in which the possibility of homosexuality is foreclosed, becoming unmournable and thus lingering in the form of melancholia. And Ann Cvetkovich points out that important queer theory figures such as Lauren Berlant, Butler, and Eve Sedgwick have built on their earlier work on sexuality with more explicit explorations of affect; Cvetkovich finds that, “as scholarship on affect flourishes, I no longer think of it as a minor spin-off from work on sexuality; instead, it extends the reach of studies of sexuality and enhances its status as a broadly intersectional category.”

As the invocation of Butler’s melancholia might suggest, queer theorists have been particularly interested in bad, as in negative, affects. Heather Love observes broadly that “bad feelings have been central to the history of queer experience and queer feeling.” More specifically, Cvetkovich claims that “queer theory’s critique of the normal” has inspired “discussions of the politics of negative affects, such as melancholy and shame.” We might also note that, when queer theorists do consider positive affects, they often find
them to have negative implications. Take, for instance, Berlant’s concept of “cruel optimism,” a “relation [that] exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing”—as with, say, continued striving for the American Dream in a neoliberal era of precarity and downward mobility.¹¹

Knowing that queer theory is a particularly rich site—perhaps even the richest—for thinking through affect, how can we employ queer theories of affect in ecocriticism and/or environmentalist work? First, and most obviously, we can use them to think through the bad-as-in-negative emotions associated with environmental crisis. Catriona Sandilands, for one, has taken up this possibility. She first observes that “recent queer scholarship on melancholia . . . much of it propelled by the enormity of AIDS and the omnipresence of . . . loss—in the midst, as Judith Butler points out, of a homophobic culture that barely tolerates, let alone values, homosexual attachments—is focused . . . on the condition of grieving the ungrievable: how does one mourn in the midst of a culture that finds it almost impossible to recognize the value of what has been lost?”¹² Sandilands uses that queer scholarship to diagnose a pervasive cultural condition, arguing that we contemporary humans suffer from “melancholia, a state of suspended mourning in which the object of loss is very real but psychically ‘ungrievable’ within the confines of a society that cannot acknowledge nonhuman beings, natural environments, and ecological processes as appropriate objects for genuine grief.”¹³ Sandilands is careful to note that this state is not apolitical: “melancholia is not only a denial of the loss of a beloved object but also a potentially politicized way of preserving that object.”¹⁴ In this sense we might define queer environmental affect as a socially “inappropriate” attachment to the nonhuman, the natural, and/or the ecological, one that honors those entities. I explore this definition further in my reading of *Silent Running*, below.

Second, and perhaps paradoxically, we might use queer theory’s focus on bad-as-in-inappropriate affects such as humor, camp, frivolity, and irony to challenge debilitating and tiresome discourses of gloom and doom. Indeed, while I appreciate Sandilands’s point about melancholia’s politicism, I fear
that the very invocation of melancholia replicates those discourses—and, more specifically, furthers environmentalism’s off-putting reputation for gloominess and doominess. More pointedly, while Sandilands’s application of Butler to environmental crisis may be novel, the image of melancholic environmentalists is quite a familiar one. My forthcoming book, Bad Environmentalism: Irony and Irreverence in the Ecological Age, responds to this paradigm, looking at artworks that employ humor, camp, frivolity, irony, and other alternative affective modes to speak to environmental concerns.

Here, then, I am inspired by how queer theorists of affect, along with activists, have insisted on the latter modes alongside modes such as melancholia and depression. For example, Cvetkovich describes how Feel Tank Chicago, a “cell” of the Public Feelings project spearheaded by herself, Berlant, and others, focuses on “political depression,” the sense that customary forms of political response, including direct action and critical analysis, are no longer working either to change the world or to make us feel better. The concept of political depression is not, however, meant to be wholly depressing; indeed, Feel Tank has operated with the camp humor one might expect from a group of seasoned queer activists, organizing an International Day of the Politically Depressed in which participants were invited to show up in their bathrobes to indicate their fatigue with traditional forms of protest and distributing T-shirts and refrigerator magnets carrying the slogan “Depressed? It Might Be Political!” The goal is to depathologize negative affects so that they can be seen as a possible resource for political action rather than as its antithesis.15

Love has made similar points, showing how the “backward,” negative feelings that define modern queer existence—shame, regret, bitterness, nostalgia—also produce merry cultural forms. As she argues, “Camp . . . with its tender concern for outmoded elements of popular culture and its refusal to get over childhood pleasures and traumas, is a backward art.”16 As we can see, queer affect theorists “promote a third way to crippling cynicism and stultifying optimism” in their synthesis of bad-as-in-negative
and bad-as-in-inappropriate affects. Put another way, such theorists can help us undertake a much-needed queering of today’s dominant environmental affect.

We might also note that, while queer theory has been largely uninterested in environmental questions, it has always been interested in relationships, especially those that cross boundaries or break taboos. And of course affect itself is understood as a question of interrelationality and interconnectivity; most affect theorists define affect as something that does not exist separately on its own and that is not interior to an individual. It is instead that which is generated between—between two bodies, between a person and an object, and so forth—or transferred across, in a kind of “contagion.” Consider, for instance, Berlant’s concept of “the social potential of queerness, in which what counts is not one’s ‘object choice’ as such but rather one’s sustaining attachments, which are only sometimes also one’s social relations.”

Or consider José Esteban Muñoz’s definition of affect as “the receptors we use to hear each other and the frequencies on which certain subalterns speak and are heard or, more importantly, felt.” Muñoz modifies Gayatri Spivak’s well-known question “Can the subaltern speak?” to ask, “How does the subaltern feel? How might subalterns feel each other?” As he concludes, “Modified theories of object relations can potentially translate into productive ways in which to consider relationality within a larger social sphere.” Berlant and Muñoz both imagine queerness expansively, not as an issue of sexuality but as an issue of “sociality,” as in relationality. Here I see potential for queer theory and ecocriticism to mutually inform one another: queer theorists allow us to see how affective attachments to nature or the ecological might be considered inherently queer, insofar as they vastly expand the scope of the social and the relational—just as they might see that one’s “sustaining attachments,” “subalterns,” and the “larger social sphere” include nonhuman ecosystems and animals.

We must remember, however, that interrelationship is not always positive or inspirational—as mainstream environmentalist discourse so often has it, with slogans about how we are all connected in a web of life. And in this, queer theory and its interest in the negative can help us yet again. As Mel Y. Chen has observed, “Queer theory is an apt home for the consideration
of toxicity, for I believe the two—queerness and toxicity—have an affinity. They truck with negativity, marginality, and subject-object confusions; they have, arguably, an affective intensity; they challenge heteronormative understandings of intimacy. Both have gotten under the skin. Yet queer theory’s attachment to certain human bodies and other human objects elides from its view the queer socialities that certain other, nonhuman intimacies portend.”

Even as Chen acknowledges, again, that queer theory has been largely uninterested in environmental questions—“elid[ing] . . . nonhuman intimacies”—we see that queer theories of affect may nonetheless be important to those questions. Indeed Chen suggests that it is perhaps in the queerest moments—in which borders and boundaries are most troubled, and in which we might be most troubled—that we can see our interrelationship and interconnectivity with the environment and the nonhuman most clearly. Chen thus reminds us that queer environmental affect is a complex, ambivalent phenomenon.

Finally, I suggest that, especially in the wake of the Orlando mass shooting, we mine queer theory’s work on attachment to places like the gay bar in order to further expand ecocriticism’s purview beyond pristine and picturesque places such as “wilderness.” While of course such expansion has been ongoing in ecocriticism for several years, and while several scholars have attended to queer spaces from an environmental standpoint and vice versa, affect has rarely been an explicit part of the conversation. We might begin with Muñoz’s work on subcultural spaces. Examining a Kevin McCarty photograph of the empty stage at Jewel’s Catch One, a now-defunct black queer disco in Los Angeles, Muñoz observes that “the utopian performative charge of this image allows one to see the past, the moment before an actual performance, the moment of potentiality; and the viewer gains access to the affective particularity of that moment of hope and potential transformation that is also the temporality of performance.” Muñoz’s work helps us think about the joys of transitory and ephemeral spaces—say, a bar you only go to on Latin Night, or a dance floor scene that only exists in the wee hours—spaces that ecocriticism, with its implicit focus on preservation, sustainability, and the material, has largely ignored.
While the transitory and/or ephemeral is sometimes a bad thing—a club closes because a neighborhood is gentrified, or one can only visit the bar in the wee hours because one works two jobs—it is, as Kim, Torres, and Muñoz suggest, part of the pleasure, as one savors a space’s temporary respite all the more passionately.

We might note that odes to the gay bar have been particularly charged, even before the Orlando shooting, by the fact of its slow decline since a peak era in the 1970s. This decline seems to have a positive cause: increased acceptance of homosexuality and thus less need for separate spaces. But we should recall how theorist Love, in asking us to “look backward”—to attach ourselves emotionally to a troubled queer past rather than an idealized queer future—reminds us of what has been lost in the march to mainstream acceptance. How has forward-leaning “progress” endangered or even destroyed queer spaces? Alternatively, how might affective attachments to a troubled queer past help preserve queer spaces? Or, perhaps, a more complicated set of questions: In remembering certain spaces, which others are forgotten? How do emotional attachments to the past inform which spaces are deemed worthy of protection and preservation and which are not? And, as Darren J. Patrick has put it in his work on the “gay and green gentrification” of New York’s High Line, “What must be displaced in order to affirm the emergence of [a] particular space?” These are questions of queer environmental affect. And they seem particularly important to consider, not just in a post-Orlando era but in an era when the U.S. National Park Service has recently declared the Stonewall Inn, site of a galvanizing rebellion in 1969, a national monument. Stonewall, the first LGBTQ space to receive such an honor, has a history that is contested to this very moment.

Queer Environmental Affect in Visual Culture

Kim Anno’s Water Cities

The Japanese American/Native American artist Kim Anno, with whom I was lucky to be paired for a Fab Planet panel, takes up in her work many of the aforementioned issues, including ephemerality, transitoriness, change,
and cultural progress. Based in San Francisco, Anno has spent the last several years working on a series of short, non-narrative video films that, as she states, focus on “post sea level rise society for people in port cities.” These short films, including *Men and Women in Water Cities* (2011), *Water City, Berkeley* (2013), and *90 Miles from Paradise: Key West/Havana* (in progress), depict societies that are multiracial, gender diverse, and centered on cultural and aesthetic practices. In *Water City, Berkeley*, for instance, a black transgender woman in a bright yellow dress and blonde wig recites passages from classical Greek literature next to a bay; in all of the films in the series we see humans reading, singing, throwing parties, dancing, playing games, and playing sports. These films are not overtly queer in any obvious sense. However, as Anno states, “like the notion of the human not being at the center of nature but in the arena of nature, I also like to think of queerness in this way, not always at the center but in the milieu that I am creating. I want to create ecosystems, or ecologically focused images that are also queer images, [in which] the layers of these identities are presented without explanations but are present as something vital.” Like many queer theorists, Anno insists on a definition of “queer” that cannot be reduced to, say, same-sex object choice. In my brief reading below I locate the queerness of Anno’s work in three aesthetic/affective features: disorienting visual form and sound; the ambivalent fusion of conflicting affects; and the insistence on cultural, and not just environmental, sustainability.

The visual form and sound of *Men and Women in Water Cities* disorient the viewer, perhaps highlighting the difference of this new future society. Just before the three-minute mark, for example, the film switches from its customary two-part split screen to a four-part split screen, with the first and third images rotated ninety degrees counterclockwise and the second and fourth rotated ninety degrees clockwise. The relatively normal image in question—a white, apparently heterosexual couple frolicking in the surf—has gone off-kilter. Soon after, a voice-over from Anno starts; it begins as audible, complete sentences but then fragments into overlapping tracks. The viewer struggles to hear the repeated phrase, “The boundary between sea and land is the most fleeting and transitory feature of the earth.” While
Charlie Clark in Kim Anno’s 90 Miles from Paradise: Key West/Havana. Courtesy of Kim Anno.
disorienting, the visual form and sound are not quite disturbing; they leave us in an emotional state somewhere between the normal and the unbearable.

In terms of visual content Anno’s films present absurd images that evoke both pathos and amusement—again, an ambivalent emotional state. In *Men and Women in Water Cities* a young white boy, doubled by a mirroring split screen, reads a book intently as waves crash behind him, eventually soaking and spinning him but never breaking his attention. We might read this image as queer in a particular, though arguably stereotypical sense: the young man seems to personify the aesthete for whom a book is just as important, if not more so, than the “real world.” But while his actions might therefore be interpreted as denialist—ignorant of the environmental processes that threaten him—they might also be described as resilient, refusing to accept defeat in the face of change. Later in the film a man wearing a suit and carrying a briefcase walks directly into the surf. A woman floats down an estuary on a mattress while casually reading a magazine. A group holds what looks like a business meeting at the bottom of a pool; others play basketball. Some people cry while others laugh and smile. The film
concludes with nearly identical split-screen shots of a man who sinks to the bottom of the pool but then begins rising back up. The film freeze-frames and ends with him suspended in the water.

As a viewer, I don’t quite know how to feel about these images. Does the last shot represent desperate crisis, as the man has not yet reached the surface, and perhaps never will? Does it depict resilience, as he is rising back up? Is it a charmingly absurd image, what with its juxtaposition of formal, adult attire (full suit and tie) and the pleasure, play, and immaturity we associate with a space like the swimming pool? Perhaps it is all of the above. The artist’s statement that accompanies Men and Women in Water Cities—“Adaptation is a complex thing, sometimes pragmatic, sometimes light, sometime[s] dark”—captures its ambivalence, as does her own voice-over in the film: “This evidence of a rising sea is an interesting and even an exciting thing because it is rare that in the short span of human life we can actually observe and measure the progress of one of the great Earth rhythms.”31 From a traditional environmentalist standpoint this is an inappropriate affective response: one should not be “excite[d]” about sea level rise. But Anno, or at least the voice-over figure, nonetheless finds joy in a troubling development. She thereby articulates the queer affective complexity described by scholars such as Berlant and Cvetkovich.

Culture and aesthetics, as I have suggested above, are key to Anno’s work. As the postcolonial scholar Kathy-Ann Tan has observed of Water City, Berkeley, “The reading of Oedipus’ Sophocles Rex in the chorus-like chant of Greek tragedy heightens the solemnity and sense of slow catastrophe that impinge on the lives of the citizens of Water City, Berkeley, yet the sense of environmental crisis is somewhat staved off by the inhabitants’ ‘adaptation’ to their new watery environment, even if this acclimatization is clearly also a highly performative and aestheticized act.”32 Tan captures the way that Anno’s films never really slide into tragedy, finding (sometimes literal) buoyancy in images of adaptation. But we might take issue here with Tan’s phrase “even if”—for, I would argue, Anno’s work frames culture, aesthetics, and performance as central to survival in a time of crisis. Her films do not resemble the all-too-common bleak postapocalyptic narratives in which humans’ needs are reduced to food, shelter, and self-defense; humans in her
films cling to books, songs, clothes, and other cultural objects and practices. As Anno declared in her Fab Planet presentation, “I [locate] my projects at the intersection of multi-layered experiences such as environmental justice and cultural resiliency. . . . Cultural resiliency is something that I want to draw a line around, in order to fundamentally contest environmental deterioration. Culture is itself worth defining as a political act.” In addition to the obvious categories of literature, music, and fashion, which are well represented in her films, Anno insists that “queerness and LGBT identities are culture.” In a world in which queer people and queer spaces are still threatened—just as natural spaces are—Anno offers us affectively complex images of queer human and aesthetic survival.

**Silent Running’s Queer Overinvestments**

Released in 1972, two years after the first Earth Day, Douglas Trumbull’s *Silent Running* is, I argue, first and foremost a film about human affective “overinvestment” in the nonhuman. This overinvestment, as I show, takes on queer dimensions both diegetically and extradiegetically; thus, while certainly more conventional than Anno’s work in formal and narratological terms, *Silent Running* shares the latter’s queer concerns. But first a brief plot summary: set entirely on a spaceship, *Silent Running* focuses on the ecologist Freeman Lowell (Bruce Dern), who has spent eight years tending to several geodesic domes that contain plant and animal specimens. Because such life has gone extinct on Earth, the ostensible hope is that these specimens can be reintroduced in the future. However, Lowell and his three fellow crew members receive sudden and inexplicable orders from the U.S. government to destroy the domes and return home. An outraged Lowell goes berserk, murdering his crew members as they attempt to fulfill the orders. After training a trio of robot drones to tend to the last remaining dome, Lowell sets it free—thus confirming its inherent value, outside of human use or appreciation—and commits suicide. The last shot shows the dome orbiting in space, perhaps to find a more welcoming reception elsewhere in the universe.

While Lowell’s excessive affect is my main interest here, it is important to establish that the film’s own affect is excessive—sentimental to the point of
cheesiness. Consider the title sequence: the film opens on gauzy close-ups of nature, much like one might find on human faces in melodrama, backed by a slow, contemplative instrumental track (a version of the Joan Baez song “Rejoice in the Sun,” which plays in original form later). The camera glides over foliage, flowers, a snail, turtle, and frogs, all kissed by dew. After two long minutes the sequence shifts from the gauzy close-up style and shows Lowell bathing in a pond filled with lily pads. The first words of the movie are spoken thereafter, and notably they’re directed to a nonhuman. “How are you today, hmm?” Lowell sweetly inquires of a bunny. “Feeling good? Awww. I bet you’d like something to eat, wouldn’t you?” The idyllic pastoralism of this first scene is finally broken by the entrance of Lowell’s crass crewmates, recklessly running their ATVs through the dome—thus establishing early on that Lowell’s position is, in the larger scheme of things, threatened and minoritarian. That is, the film both establishes Lowell’s social queerness and frames it sympathetically.

Lowell’s excessive affect takes center stage in three early, consecutive scenes. First, before the receipt of orders to destroy, an optimistic Lowell predicts that the United States will eventually reinstate the “parks and forest system” and that he will be picked to head it. Crew member Marty Barker (Ron Rifkin) scoffs, “Hey, Lowell, you’re dreaming.” We cut to a medium close-up shot of Lowell, who delivers an effusive diatribe: “And you don’t think it’s time somebody had a dream again, huh? You don’t think that it’s time that somebody cared enough to have a dream? What about the forests? You don’t think anyone should care about these forests? What’s gonna happen if these forests and all this incredible beauty is lost for all time?” Seemingly embarrassed for Lowell, crew member Andy Wolf (Jesse Vint) mumbles, “It’s been too long, Lowell. People got other things to do now.” In another scene shortly thereafter the men accept a radio transmission. “Anderson” (voice of Joseph Campanella) reports, “We have just received orders to abandon and nuclear-destruct all the forests and return our ships to commercial service.” Meanwhile the camera zooms in closer and closer on Lowell’s face, his jaw tight, eyes wide and glistening with tears. “It’s insane,” he whispers, consumed with rage and grief. The third scene in question finds crew members Barker, Wolf, and John Keenan (Cliff Potts) in the
kitchen during dinnertime, joking about the dome destruction: “How far out do they go before they blow up?” Another answers, “About six miles. We should feel a hefty jolt,” which prompts the comment, “I want a front-row seat when these babies go!” The men then turn their cruel attention to Lowell, who is eating a cantaloupe—which Wolf insists “stinks.” “This happens to be nature’s greatest gift,” Lowell replies, incredulous. “To a celibate, maybe,” Wolf scoffs, insisting that he doesn’t see a difference between the synthetic food the three crew members are enjoying and the cantaloupe. This derision inspires yet another outburst from Lowell:

You don’t see the difference? The difference is that I grew it! That’s what the difference is! That I picked it and I fixed it! It has a taste, and it has some color! And it has a smell! It calls back a time when there were flowers all over the earth! And there were valleys! And there were plains of tall, green grass that you could lie down in, that you could go to sleep in! And there were blue skies, and there was fresh air! And there were things growing all over the place, not just in domed enclosures blasted some millions of miles out into space!

Keenan, the most sympathetic of the three crew members, confides quietly, “The fact is, Lowell, if people were interested [in nature], something would have been done a long time ago.”

Lowell’s affect is everything Love describes in her queer concept of “feeling backward”: nostalgic, bitter, regretful. Indeed in addition to the above verbal reminiscences (“there were blue skies”), he seems to have frequent visual flashbacks, such as when he runs down the ship’s hallway in a panic over the dome and the film intercuts images of redwood forests. And even Lowell’s personal aesthetic is “backward”: he wears a traditional monk’s robe in the opening sequence and, in later scenes, a jumpsuit adorned with patches of the U.S. national parks—which, within the film’s diegesis, no longer exist.³⁵ We might note that Lowell’s affect also bears qualities that have been specifically associated with the queer: it is excessive, unreasonable, inappropriate, immature, awkward, and embarrassing.³⁶ And perhaps even more explicitly, the crew members queer him through their bullying, particularly the “celibate” jab. As this jab implies, Lowell has invested all
of his energy and emotion into something that’s not only not a woman but not even human. In the fictional but ultimately realistic world of *Silent Running*—which is, to paraphrase Sandilands, a social context that cannot acknowledge nonhuman beings or natural environments as worthy of emotional attachment, much less “grievable”—any investment in the nonhuman constitutes overinvestment. In such a context, the film suggests, emotional attachment to the nonhuman is, by definition, queer.

But I want to consider the queerness of the film not just in terms of the social, political, and material dynamics it depicts but also in terms of the extradiegetic: the dynamics of audience reception. We might begin by positing the queerness of *Silent Running*’s cult classic status. Just as Lowell “overinvests” in the nonhuman, rabid fans “overinvest” in this marginal film, to the extent that they design, buy, and/or assemble models of the spaceship and the robot drones. Here we might be reminded of “the value frequently given to the unexpected object” that Cvetkovich claims is central to both queer culture and theory.

More specifically, I’m interested in returning to the concept of camp in order to read the film through that queer tradition of appreciation—a kind of “overinvestment” of its own. Key to this reading is Dern’s over-the-top, scenery-chewing performance—which, I would propose, belongs in the pantheon of camp performance, along with, say, Joan Crawford in *Queen Bee* (dir. Ranald MacDougall, 1955) or Faye Dunaway as Joan Crawford in *Mommie Dearest* (dir. Frank Perry, 1981). The blogger Scott Ashlin pronounces Dern’s performance “ridiculous,” stating that “[his] acting here is simply beyond belief. He’s really just doing the same shtick as he had in all those drugs-and-bikers movies he made for Roger Corman starting in 1966.” We might consider how closely Ashlin’s comment resonates with one of Susan Sontag’s classic explanations of camp: “When something is just bad (rather than Camp), it’s often because it is too mediocre in its ambition. The artist hasn’t attempted to do anything really outlandish. (‘It’s too much’ [. . .] ‘It’s not to be believed’ are standard phrases of Camp enthusiasm.)” As Sontag puts it more simply, camp is “the love of the exaggerated, the ‘off.’” To appreciate a camp film or performance is to recognize its “exaggerated,” “beyond belief” qualities and thus its inadvertent ridiculousness—and
to love it not in spite of but because of those qualities. Thus we might say that the queerness of Silent Running’s environmental affect can be located not just in the film itself but also in cult audiences’ embrace of it and of Dern’s performance in particular—thus further demonstrating the mobile qualities of affect. Importantly, then, Sontag reminds us that “Camp taste identifies with what it is enjoying. People who share this sensibility are not laughing at the thing they label as ‘a camp,’ they’re enjoying it. Camp is a tender feeling.”^44 To recognize Silent Running’s ridiculousness is thus not (necessarily) to deride it, the way Lowell’s crew members deride him. One can both identify with and make fun of the text, both laugh at Lowell and identify with his predicament.

Above I have described the intellectual import of attending to queer environmental affect—from widening ecocritical lenses to critiquing the gloom and doom of environmental rhetoric to probing discourses of historic preservation. But perhaps the more quotidian question remains, What does such affect mean for environmental relations? First, as the Public Feelings project and my visual texts demonstrate, modes such as camp and humor cannot, and should not, be divorced from negative modes such as melancholia, grief, or rage. Thus, we might not only accept but also draw strength from the diversity of feelings that environmental change can invoke in us. Indeed, as Anno suggests, even our own ambivalence has much to tell us. Second, and more specifically, I propose “inappropriateness,” “overinvestment,” and “excessiveness” not as traits to be disavowed but rather as rallying points for environmental activists—a particularly significant move in the face of both mainstream environmentalism’s calls for austerity and certain conservative administrations’ recent rollbacks on environmental protection. Perhaps then this is the most important definition of queer environmental affect: all of the messy, contradictory, utterly sad, and deeply joyous dimensions of human life lived in connection to the nonhuman, in a social, political, and material context deeply hostile to both.
NOTES

I wish to thank Kathy-Ann Tan for originally alerting me to Kim Anno’s work and Kim herself for the inspiring conversation and help with images.

1. For more on the Fab Planet Summit and its sponsor see OUT for Sustainability, http://out4s.org/.
7. Clough, introduction to Affective Turn, 7.
10. Cvetkovich, Depression, Kindle location 131. For a discussion of queer theory’s larger “negative turn”—which is not necessarily limited to affect—see Seymour, Strange Natures. The trend of attention to negative affect can be found in nonqueer work as well, as in Ngai’s Ugly Feelings.
17. Houser, Ecosickness in Contemporary U.S. Fiction, 221.
18. On queer theory and environmental questions see, among others, Azzarello, Queer Environmentality.
19. Sara Ahmed, for example, states, “I do not assume there is something called affect that stands apart or has autonomy.” She observes further that a “number of scholars have recently taken up the idea of affects as contagious”; doing so “challenge[s] an ‘inside out’ model of affect by showing how affects pass between bodies.” Ahmed, “Happy Objects,” 30, 36.
20. Berlant, Cruel Optimism, 123.
24. Scholars attending to queer spaces from an environmental standpoint and vice versa include Gordon Brent Ingram, Petra Doan, and others.
25. Muñoz, Cruising Utopia, 103.
26. One journalist has observed that “in major cities, the number of gay bars has declined [since] the 1970s” by as much as 50 percent and goes on to surmise that “the decline . . . may be attributable to how welcome gays are everywhere; as [interviewee Gina] Gatta, who lives in the Bay Area, put it, ‘Every bar in San Francisco is a gay bar.’” We should ask of course who can afford to live in a place like San Francisco at this point, though I do not have room here to discuss the connection between gay “acceptance” and gentrification. June Thomas, “The Gay Bar: Can It Survive?,” Slate, July 1, 2011, http://www.slate.com/articles/life/the_gay_bar/2011/06/the_gay_bar.html.
28. The director Roland Emmerich was recently excoriated for “whitewashing” history with his fiction film Stonewall (2015). See, for example, Leela Ginelle, “The New Stonewall Film Is Just as Whitewashed as We Feared,” Bitch Media, September 24, 2015, https://bitchmedia.org/article/new-stonewall-film-just-whitewashed-we-feared. Meanwhile scholars and activists have been critical of the fetishistic focus on Stonewall at the expense of other locations and events and of how that focus enables the normalization of queer history. See, for example, Grace Dunham and Toshio Meronek, “How the United States’ First LGBT National Memorial Gets It Wrong” (editorial), Truthout, July 2, 2016, http://www.truth-out.org/news/item/36678-how-lgbt-national-memorial-gets-it-wrong.
34. Anno, “Queer Eco Aesthetics,” 2.
35. While Love wants to reclaim “feeling backward” from a queer standpoint, such feeling is actually de rigueur in many environmental contexts—and often problematically so. See, for example, critiques of pastoralism and environmental nostalgia in Sandilands, “Melancholy Natures.” However, scholars such as Jennifer Ladino recognize the (limited) potential of nostalgia for environmental politics; as she notes, “It is not difficult to find conservative, reactionary examples of nostalgia.

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But . . . nostalgia often transcends its stigmatized role, and in surprising ways.” Ladino, *Reclaiming Nostalgia*, xii–xiii. Following Ladino, I would argue that Lowell’s backward feelings have radically posthumanist implications here, especially considering how “the future” in *Silent Running* has even less room for the non-human than our present day.

36. Queer theoretical work on these qualities is too numerous to detail here, but to offer one example, Jack Halberstam’s *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (2005) discusses the connection between queerness and immaturity.

37. We might note here that certain environmentalist practices, such as vegetarianism, have been associated with effeminacy and queerness. See, for example, Hall, “Queer Vegetarian.”


40. Sonntag, cited below, is the most obvious touchstone for such a reading. Much work also exists on the specific phenomena of camp appreciation of melodrama by gay male audiences; see, for example, Mercer and Shingler, *Melodrama*.


42. Sonntag, “Notes on Camp,” 283 (emphasis added).


**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


