

Queer Lasting

Ecologies of Care for a Dying World

By Sarah Ensor

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Queer literature

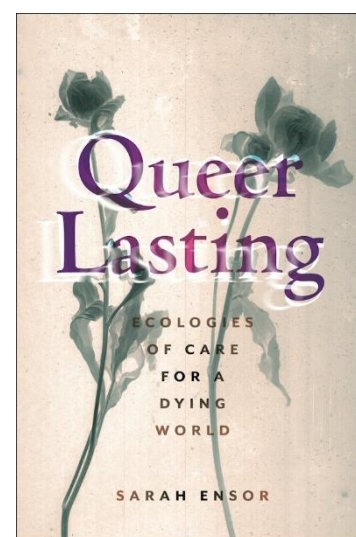
Queer temporality

Ecocriticism

Regionalism

AIDS literature

Formalism



All this belongs to the language of ghosts. There are many other possible kinds of talks in this language. Most of them begin when one person says to another: I wish.

(Paul Auster, *In the Country of Last Things*)

Sarah Ensor's *Queer Lasting: Ecologies of Care for a Dying World* is a poignant and extremely timely intervention in the field of ecological thinking, queer theory, and literary studies.

The volume, divided into an introductory section, four analytical chapters, and a coda (plus epilogue), activates a staggering amount of scholarship across several fields, a somewhat daring but ultimately successful attempt at joining hands across disciplines and criticisms. At the heart of the work is Ensor's exhortation that environmentalist thinking should look to queer theory for ways to approach ecosystem collapse – a claim made all the more interesting by her invitation to reconsider the assumptions on which environmentalist thinking is grounded. Chief among them is her premise: that the environmentalist obsession with *saving*, *preserving*, *safeguarding*, *healing* the planet for future generations – that is, the future-oriented outlook propelling environmental activism and ecocriticism alike – should be complemented by another

way of engaging with environmental collapse, one that does not focus on the future but rather lingers in *the end* and makes it *last* – and count. In other words, Ensor’s starting point is that environmentalist thinking should redirect its attention to the present and, counterintuitively, to the past to learn how to cope with things that might not, despite our best efforts and wishes, be saved. Nevertheless, it is not with resignation that Ensor encourages her reader to shift perspectives, but rather with the hope that remaining with the issue at hand (staying with the trouble, to borrow Haraway’s famous formulation) and accepting that the environment deserves our care even in the face of the inevitability of its collapse might produce new ecologies of care that will *surprise* both the practitioner and receiver with their unpredictable results.

To learn how to care for a world on its deathbed, Ensor *gently* (as she would say, with reason) directs her reader to queer theory and literature, relying on a complex network of thinkers (Coviello, Bersani, Sedgwick, Freeman, Halberstam, Lowe, among many others) to sketch the inextricable relationship between queerness and futurelessness, and identifying the caring practices that emerge within a community that has long learnt how to inhabit the final moments – in other words, how to *last*.

After a beautifully intense introduction where she sets the theoretical coordinates that inweave the following chapters, Ensor turns to literature to show how queer lasting, the practice of inhabiting the (extended) end, is inscribed not only in the narrative but also the formal components of two bodies of fiction, regionalist literature from the 1890s and AIDS literature from the 1980s.

Chapter One, “Terminal Regions: Queer Ecocriticism at Life’s End,” interacts most deeply with Eve Sedgwick’s scholarship on “learning how to die,” how to inhabit these “terminal regions” and still learn “how to live, how to befriend, and how to read” (43). Embracing Sedgwick’s “art of loosing” – a phrase and concept that recurs throughout the volume – Ensor shows that one model to approach terminal unraveling is “not to grip more tightly but to develop affirmative practices of relinquishment” (47). She then shifts her focus to Sara Orne Jewett’s *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896), the first of the two examples of regionalist literature – “a genre of the terminal, by the terminal, written for the sake of those who will remain or survive” (53) – she analyzes. Through an exquisitely detailed reading of the novel, down to the grammatical level and the semantic import of specific words and turns of phrase, Ensor intercepts what she calls an “ethics of temporariness” in the text, as it dwells not on what is needed to preserve and memorialize a historical moment at its twilight, but on “the contours of befriending in and at and through endings” (56). She then draws the connection between “doulaing” – attending to the terminal moments of a (queer) life – and caring for the dying environment, offering an alternative practice, quiet but *present*, to the urgent practices of preservation favored by environmental activism.

Chapter Two, “Grammars of the Unrealized: Lost Causes and Subjunctive Possibilities in Willa Cather,” also focuses on a regionalist work, Cather’s *The Professor’s House* (1925), as a site of “these ‘old futures’ that never came to be” (71), a subjunctive grammatical space often inhabited by queer people, whose literature is able to index “the vitality of impossibility itself” (72). This grammar of the unrealized inscribes formally “how a queer present is shaped by all that the past failed to become” (72). Reading *The Professor’s House* loosely juxtaposed to Jack Halberstam’s and Heather Love’s scholarship on queer failure and impossibility, Ensor shows how Cather – herself at the end of regionalism and yet prolonging its existence, making it *last* – manages to convey the affirmative power of the unrealized both grammatically and characterologically. In an impressive feat of hermeneutics, she shows how Cather’s characters are assigned a grammatical tense or mode (the professor living in the past, his beloved student and the professor’s young self both existing in subjunctive mode, his wife stretching toward the future) that allows for a temporal reading of these fictional subjectivities (81).

Chapter Three, “Queer Unliving: Species of Extinction in the Literature of HIV/AIDS,” moves to the 1980s and centers on the endling – the last of a given species – and on extinction more generally. Ensor reads AIDS literature as “an archive of species extinction written from within” (106), complicated by the fact that, whereas extinction presupposes the preexistence of life, queer people have never been normatively alive. Moreover, as a species’ futurity has traditionally been tied to its reproductive capability, Ensor comes to qualify queer people as “a kin(d) defined by being the last” (i.e., a ‘species’ made entirely of endlings) and queerness as an “extant extinctness” (i.e., a state in which becoming and extinction are not opposed) (108). AIDS literature, she purports, deals with queer extinction via the surprising past-oriented practice of etymology, which becomes “a way for writers to navigate [...] temporal, ontological, and ethical questions” by mobilizing queer *unliving* via residual practices, dead languages, and obsolete words (107).

Contrasting ecocritical readings of extinction as something that happens to non-humans and that requires contrastive action for the sake of futurity (e.g., by Heise and by van Dooren), Ensor introduces a number of AIDS-related poems by Melvin Dixon and the short story “Philostorgy, Now Obscure” by Allen Barnett to show how the authors’ attention to etymology becomes “a mode of, or model for, queer kinship and transmission” (129) – for what it means to live and love “at *last sight*” (134, emphasis in the original).

Chapter Four, “Cruising the Planet: The Sexual Ecology of Samuel Delany,” consolidates the quick references to the antisocial vein of queer theory best represented by Leo Bersani’s writings, which appears in passing in the previous chapters. Ensor starts from Bersani’s quip that an ethical model predicated on ascetic practices should be called “an ecological ethics, [...] in which the subject, having willed its own lessness, can live less invasively in the world” (2010,

62) to consider the relationship between cruising and environmental care. As a transient erotic practice and relational mode, she argues, cruising can teach other forms of care than the persistent attendance to the dying world demanded by ecological activism, ones that embrace the often impersonal, fleeting, impersistent intimacies we share with others as we make our way through life (137). Taking as her case study Samuel Delany's *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (1999), Ensor shows how *contact* – casual, spontaneous, pleasant – distils the essence of caring for others without the expectation of durable intimacy, and how such improvised moments of contact can surprise either by *lasting* or *devolving*, with these two terms understood as part of the same sociosexual ecology (144). If fleeting, spontaneous contact is the action through which care is performed, its actor needs to embrace “lessness” as its ontology, one that foregrounds anonymity, partial engagement, impersonality in its relation to the other. The environmental paradigm of “restraint” (consuming less, impacting less) is here extended to the essence of the subject, rather than its mere actions. Far from advocating an elision of differences in order to inspire environmental stewardship, Ensor here advances that distance and difference are necessary for us to accept that our relationship with the environment will never be close, the most important one in our lives, and that nevertheless such distance/difference does not invalidate our caring practices or environmental intimacies. Staying with cruising as inspiration for a different mode of contact, Ensor concludes that perhaps cruising should be “a model of literary reading – and of literary genealogy – that allows the centuries to cross, and cognate texts to fleetingly meet, without codifying or monumentalizing their relation in turn” (140).

The last chapter, “Persistent Decay: Queer Half-Lives and the Poetics of Fallout,” brings the four preceding sections together. While echoes of Cather's text resonate in the chapter on queer unliving and Jewett is reprised in the one on cruising (and vice versa queer unliving and cruising appear, in hints, in the two chapters on regionalism), it is in this final chapter that Ensor really shows how her hermeneutics holds up to scrutiny. Predicated on the art of loosing mentioned above, propelled forward by a dilation of time that seems to make space for existing precisely within the end, her “poetics of fallout” is “an epistemic and rhetorical model for thinking the dissipation, invisible lasting, and indirect causality” (169) inherent in regionalist literature of the 1890s and AIDS literature of the 1980s, two genres that echo each other beyond linear literary genealogies and rather following “a genealogy of queer thought written in the dispersed lexicon of fallout, centrifugality, and disintegration” (179). Such queer poetics of fallout is offered as a model for environmental thinking, one that responds to Rob Nixon's “centripetal” invocation (in *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*) to *join* forces and find *a center* of gravity to move forward with its own counterintuitive, but by now wholly convincing, “queer praxis of reading and writing that formalizes centrifugal movement,

dissipation, and in-coherence themselves” (175). A poetics of fallout is therefore a poetics that invites to disjoin, to *fall out* (of love, of time), to unbind, to come into contact without demanding persistence, and just as easily learn to let go, and let oneself be surprised by whatever might arise in the aftermath, so that we might, as Ensor muses in the very *last* lines of her epilogue, “continue the collective work of learning how to last” (205).

Ensor’s text is impressive in its ability to weave together different fields of thinking, to introduce counterintuitive questions as apparently little more than curious thought experiments that turn into new epistemological paradigms by the end of her volume. I have tried my best to offer a summary of her approach and core subjects, but these few pages do no justice to the wonderful complexity of her thinking, the gentle touch of her prose, and the depth of her formalist analysis. A book like *Queer Lasting* needs to be read in full, and possibly more than once, to be absorbed and appreciated as it deserves.

Now, a few personal words beyond the strictly academic review format. It is a rare thing indeed to casually cross paths with a book that matches one’s opinions, nebulous ideas, and scholarship this closely. One of a myriad of new volumes to pop up in my inbox daily (a widely shared experience for most academics subscribing to mailing lists, I’m sure), *Queer Lasting: Ecologies of Care for a Dying World* somehow managed to hold in its title virtually all the keywords I would use to describe my *different* research interests. This promise of contact between areas I am familiar with mostly in isolation from each other is what drew me instantly to it, and the reason why I approached it with a mixture of anticipation and dread. I am happy (and *relieved*) to say that this book easily surpassed my already very high expectations.

Understand, if you will, that this is a book about remains and remaining. It is about lingering in the complex moment of an extended end and finding joy, kinship, in being the designated inhabitants of the end. It succeeds in the paradoxical goal of finding things that last at the very last. What a fitting *surprise*, then, that I unconsciously approached this book in the very same spirit, making my reading *last*. I have been taking this book places: it has travelled with me across several countries over almost a year of commutes, research stays, international conferences, work commitments, and holidays. It has at times been buried under a pile of other reading materials as different deadlines took precedence, before I found the time to excavate it and place it back on the top. It has visited every room of my home, and designated areas of my relatives’ and friends’. As I made my way through its sections in moments stolen from teaching and academic commitments, the book *remained* with me and illuminated connections with materials I had not yet encountered, or had long forgotten to have met in previous research quests.

As it always happens when I find something that resonates, I have been talking about it nonstop for months: with colleagues who do and do not work on these topics; in class, as I taught queer futurity via Muñoz (ironically, or perhaps tellingly, the only other academic text I remember lingering on with just as much awe when I first read it in what feels like a different life). Memorably, over dinner with friends (a bunch of merry linguists), who were all too happy to debate at length whether the infinitive mode really has no tense, at least in English (84).

Now, at the end of my reading and rereading this book, its margins are covered with tiny comments: notes on points that I found especially challenging, thoughts that certain passages inspired on totally unrelated projects, question and exclamation marks where Ensor's formalist claims stretched my readerly suspension of disbelief to the point of almost – almost – thinking she had taken her analysis too far, only to feel it morph into incredulous agreement as she showed evidence from her primary sources. And lots of tiny hand-drawn hearts – a graphic relic of my years as an undergraduate student, when awe was the primary feeling I felt towards any and all texts my lecturers assigned, and when awe made me pick this terminal profession among the many others, much more future-oriented but perhaps much less full of life, my degree could have jumpstarted.

As I think back to what could have been from within the terminal region that is academia (and the world) today, and I inhabit the present where Ensor has given me (us) a grammar to talk about it, I hope the author will forgive me if I say, perhaps against her own logic of *loosing*, that this book will last.

Bionote

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