

# Tales From Camp Wilde: Queer(y)ing Environmental Education Research

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## **Abstract**

*This paper questions the relative silence of queer theory and theorizing in environmental education research. We explore some possibilities for queer-ing environmental education research by fabricating (and inviting colleagues to fabricate) stories of Camp Wilde, a fictional location that helps us to expose the facticity of the field's heteronormative constructedness. These stories suggest alternative ways of (re)presenting and (re)producing both the subjects/objects of our inquiries and our identities as researchers. The contributors draw on a variety of theoretical resources from art history, deconstruction, ecofeminism, literary criticism, popular cultural studies, and feminist poststructuralism to perform an orientation to environmental education research that we hope will never be arrested by its categorization as a "new genre."*

## **Résumé**

*L'article questionne le silence relatif de la théorie et de la théorisation queer dans le domaine de la recherche en ERE. Nous explorons certaines possibilités d'ouvrir la voie à cette dimension dans la recherche en ERE en inventant (et en proposant à nos collègues d'inventer) les récits du Camp Wilde, lieu fictif qui nous permet d'exposer la facticité propre à la constructivité hétéronormative de ce domaine de recherche. Ces récits suggèrent de nouvelles méthodes pour (re)présenter et (re)produire le sujet et l'objet de notre questionnement ainsi que nos identités en tant que chercheurs. Les collaborateurs font appel à une variété de ressources théoriques, notamment l'histoire de l'art, la déconstruction, l'écoféminisme, la critique littéraire, les études culturelles populaires et le post-structuralisme féministe, afin de créer une orientation nouvelle dans le domaine de la recherche en ERE qui, souhaitons-le, ne sera jamais interrompue parce que reléguée dans la catégorie des « nouveaux genres ».*

## The Importance of Queering Earnestness

In recent years, our poststructuralist methodological dispositions (which include attending to whatever is disregarded, muted, repressed, and/or marginalized by dominant cultural discourses and practices) have led us to

lament the relative absence of queer theory and theorizing in environmental education research. We agree with Constance Russell, Tema Sarick, and Jacqueline Kennelly (2002) that “queer pedagogy can enrich environmental education theory and practice” (p. 61) and this essay both affirms their initiative and expands upon it. Our complementary argument is that queer theorizing can enrich environmental education *research*.<sup>1</sup>

We were initially attracted to queer theorizing by its invitation to question the heteronormative desires that animate much educational research, including desires for prediction, control, and “mastery.” Like David Jardine (1992), we suspect that technical-scientific discourses limit our capacities to ask questions that do not already presume the possibility of final solutions:

The language it [technical-scientific discourse] offers is *already foreclosed* (or, at least, it longs for such foreclosure). It longs for the last word; it longs for . . . a world in which the droning silence of objective presentability finally holds sway over human life. The difficult nature of human life will be solved. We will finally have the curriculum “right” once and for all . . . Nothing more will need to be said. Obviously, no educational theorist or practitioner would actually claim to want this. But the hesitancy to make such a claim occurs in the same breath that we hear about “having solved just one piece of the puzzle, just one part of the picture. Further research always needs to be done.” Such talk, even in its admirable hesitancy . . . does not disrupt the fundamental belief that human life is an objective picture that, however complex, is objectively “there” to be rendered presentable, piece by relentless piece. (p. 118, emphasis in original)

We recalled Jardine’s characterization of educational researchers relentlessly pursuing “objective presentability” when we read Rita Felski’s description of nineteenth-century scientists studying human sexual diversity and “deviations” as “earnest Victorian scholars labouring over lists of sexual perversions with the taxonomical zeal of an entomologist examining insects” (quoted in Russell, Sarick, & Kennelly, 2002, p. 56). In our experience, many reports of environmental education research similarly conjure images of “droning . . . objective presentability” and “taxonomical zeal.”<sup>2</sup>

So we have invented Camp Wilde, an imaginary intellectual space dedicated to alleviating “the irony deficiency that is a hallmark of so many academic texts” (McWilliam, 1999, p. x) by queer(y)ing the earnestness of much environmental education research (and perhaps provoking some subversive laughter). Rather than trying to *represent* queer theory as it might be “applied” to our field, we have tried here to *perform* a queer(y)ing of environmental education research informed by queer theorizing—and both our means of producing this essay and its final textual form are part of that performance. By “queer(y)ing”—a word formed by embedding a “y” (*why?*) in “queering”—we suggest a mode of questioning inspired by queer theorizing but not necessarily constrained by its extant formulations and contestations.<sup>3</sup> We especially reject any attempt to essentialize “queer,” preferring Catherine Mary

Dale's (1999) "alternative view of queer as a term productive of positive difference" (p. 3). Positive difference is not structured by negation but "expresses the immanence of the multiple and the one, rather than the eminence of this over that, of one or many, of identity or chaos . . . There is no essential identity nor loss or lack, only affirmation" (p. 3).

In the spirit of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1987) we have produced this essay as a rhizome—a figuration of knowledge as tangled webs of intersections, nodes, and possible pathways, in contradistinction to "arborescent" (treelike) knowledge configured by finite and hierarchically organized roots and branches. To imagine knowledge as a rhizome is to "work against the constraints of authority, regularity, and common sense, and open thought up to creative constructions" (Lather, 1993, p. 680). In a rhizomatic space, there is no one end to inquiry and speculation, no one way of searching—or researching—its limitless possibilities. In Umberto Eco's (1984) words:

The rhizome is so constructed that every path can be connected with every other one. It has no center, no periphery, no exit, because it is potentially infinite. The space of conjecture is a rhizome space . . . it can be structured but is never structured definitively . . . it is impossible for there to be a story. (p. 57-58)

We invited several friends to share this "space of conjecture"—to enact textual performances of their own devising that complement our disruptive project.<sup>4</sup> They wrote their texts in response to our 300-word outline, which consisted of little more than the paragraph that begins the next section. We believe that they have helped us to resist foreclosure—to construct Camp Wilde as a conjectural space with "no center, no periphery, no exit." Their contributions can also be read as "data" in a narrative experiment that readers can interpret for themselves.

## Welcome to Camp Wilde

Welcome to Camp Wilde. We dedicate this space to the memory of Oscar Wilde because he embodied a mode of subjugated knowledge production that we believe is significant for environmental education research. His works demonstrate that "camp" signifies a more generative mode of being, believing, and behaving than many environmental educators usually associate with the term "camping." In his archaeology of camp posing, Moe Meyer (1994) shows that Wilde undermined the dominant social order of his day not only by being homosexual but also by performing a camp politics and poetics that mocked bourgeois customs, morals, and norms. We suspect that many of his contemporaries were threatened more by his textual inversions and deviations than by his sexual preferences. For example, in "A few maxims for the instruction of the over-educated," Wilde (1989) complains that "the English are always degrading truth into facts . . . . When a truth becomes a fact it loses

all its intellectual value” (p. 1203). Against the then-fashionable approaches to literature and art that sought to replicate Nature and Life faithfully, Wilde argued that artifice was more beautiful and more “real.” Wilde was dangerous because a deep moral seriousness informed his camp posturing: he was serious about refusing to take himself seriously. His languorous flippancy barely cloaked a scathing irony. When asked to describe the “philosophy” behind *The Importance of Being Earnest* (subtitled *A Trivial Comedy for Serious People*), Wilde replied, “We should treat all trivial things very seriously, and all the serious things of life with sincere and studied triviality” (quoted in Glenn, 2000). At Camp Wilde, we explore how such a paradoxical philosophy might constructively inform environmental education research.<sup>5</sup>

You don’t have to be camp (or gay, lesbian, bi-, trans-, or intersexual) to enjoy Camp Wilde, although you might feel more at home here if you didn’t think that this was something you needed to question. Of course, queer studies often focus on queer identity and many queer theorists and researchers explicitly identify themselves as interrogating regimes of normalcy from a “not heterosexual” standpoint. To date, much queer theorizing in education has both interrogated identity and explored relationships between researcher identities and knowledge construction and legitimation (see, e.g., Pinar, 1998). Studies that simultaneously problematize the politics of location and identity, such as Frank Browning’s (1996) *A Queer Geography: Journeys Toward a Sexual Self*, and David Bell and Gill Valentine’s (1995) *Mapping Desire: Geographies of Sexualities*, have special relevance for environmental education research. But queer theorizing also questions the very idea of normalcy and seeks to dismantle, dislocate or relocate the boundaries of identity categories (and we identify with that desire). As Patrick Dilley (1999) points out, queered positions are useful but not exclusive starting points for queer theorizing: “anyone can find a queered position (although some might have a better vantage point than others) . . . such a position is not dependent upon one’s sexual orientation or predilections, but rather upon one’s ability to utilize the (dis)advantages of such a position” (p. 469).

Deborah Britzman (1998) argues that queer theory questions the grounds of identity *and* theory:

Queer Theory occupies a difficult space between the signifier and the signified, where something queer happens to the signified—to history and bodies—and something queer happens to the signifier—to language and to representation . . . But the “queer,” like the “theory,” in Queer Theory does not depend on the identity of the theorist or the one who engages with it. Rather, the queer in queer theory anticipates the precariousness of the signified: the limits within its conventions and rules, and the ways these various conventions and rules incite subversive performances, citations, and inconveniences. (p. 213)

So here at Camp Wilde we want to queer the “normal” signifieds of environmental education research, such as nature-as-an-object-of-knowledge, ecology, body/landscape relations, and the relationships among bodies of

knowledges, teachers, and learners. We also want to queer the “normal” signifiers of environmental education research, including the languages and representations with/in which we speak and write environmental education into existence. For example, we suggest that taken-for-granted formulations of purpose such as “the recovery of the ecological imperative” (Bowers, 1993) and formulaic research designs such as those that measure learners’ orientations to the Dominant Social Paradigm and the New Ecological Paradigm (Dunlap, Van Liere, Mertig, & Jones, 2000) are not as straightforward as many environmental educators and researchers assume. To put this another way, we want to probe the ways in which heteronormativity configures ignorance in environmental education research. Jon Wagner (1993) usefully disaggregates *ignorance* into “blank spots” and “blind spots”: what we know enough to question but not answer are our blank spots; what we do not know well enough to ask about or care about are our blind spots—areas in which existing theories, methods, and perceptions actually keep us from seeing or imagining objects or phenomena that provoke the curiosity that initiates research (see also Noel Gough, 2002).

Our first guest, Mary Aswell Doll, offers a subversive performance of what she describes elsewhere as “the greening of the imagination” (Doll, 2000), and in so doing strengthens our conviction that Camp Wilde is most aptly named.

## Horrible Sympathy: Nature Turned Inside Out

Mary Aswell Doll

Those who go beneath the surface do so at their own peril. (Wilde, 1890)

If I were to take the ecological imperative seriously I might do more listening, digging, and sloshing in the mud. Instead of talk of imperatives, with that imperious-sounding intention of classical urgency, I might go in another direction. The alchemists had a saying for how one deepens imagination about lofty, leafy matters. *Opus contra naturam* was the expression they used to mean going in a direction contrary to growth. The gold of material substance is wrought, they wrote, out of their personal dross. Imagine! By concentrating on the nigredo of their own psychic material, these early ecologists saw parallels between the laboratory and the self. They saw that what matters most was not knowledges out there but matter in here, the material of the imagination. It occurred to them that the “gold” of transformation is really found within, and that changing inner patterns would have precious outer effects. The growth model with its hefty upward bound to health, happiness, and development needs revisiting, redirecting, bending, turning back, turning around, queering. Just there, in the dirt, lies another system, hidden perhaps but not Not there.

I speak of a vegetable imagination. Planter societies knew what centering downward entailed. It means going not outward, like the hunter societies

with their aim and kill approach, but downward, tending soil in such ways as watering, cutting, pruning, pinching, digging, sniffing, and watching. What the earth gives forth is the flesh of the earth blooming in the vine substance of which we all partake. What the older societies taught was a watching and learning from the natural cycle of life-death-life. This is conservation of a different order.

I have slept under the stars on an air mattress and a sleeping bag and I have cooked bacon over a campfire, but here I want to suggest what camping in another sense might entail.

It might take itself less seriously, for one. With dreadful seriousness we have literalized our stance on earth matters. And so we talk of “dominant paradigms” and “power/knowledge relationships,” as if knowledge is the key issue and dominating is a new ideology.

This dreadful seriousness is deadly. It sees only a human face in the waters of reflection, whereas the cosmos contains so many other life forms in such wide variation. The problem with seriousness is its literalism, unable to think, for instance, as the Buddha thinks when he compares types of people to rocks, sand, or water. Those who are like letters written in running water, he writes, are more evolved not because they are firm in their beliefs or hold solid convictions or believe in pyramid systems, but because they listen more and observe what isn't there in the come and go of natural patterns.

Camping in another sense considers the wild more Wildely. The pun, once considered the lowest form of humour, nevertheless can be profound because it sounds two things, two entities, two words, two worlds simultaneously. Wilde's work is punningly serious, as in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. The novel is about artistry and surfaces. But it also is about the desire for monstrous laws that work as an *opus contra naturam*. Acting as a constant metaphor in the novel is the mythic story of Narcissus, the youth in love with his beauty, which he sees echoed back to him in the surface waters of a pool. Wilde could be talking about his own infatuation with beautiful youths. Or he could be describing the love of images: what one sees beneath surfaces, what lies in the waters of imagination. Instead of an up/down order of things, where fantasies of domination and power swirl, this suggests a different kind of move that privileges smallness and invisibility. Even Darwin is reputed to have added a footnote to a book: Never say higher or lower. He wanted to turn hierarchies around, to study the lowly earthworm—no recourse here to the progress myth. Here is comedy that hears undertones, reverberations and echoes as a kind of *opus contra naturam*.

Scandalous work, such as Wilde's, disfigures cherished ideals and so compels revision. When ecologists today talk of conservation and conserving traditions, perhaps that is just another cherished ideal that needs contradicting. Perhaps the revision that is needed is not the powerful ideals of yore but a more humble—and humourous—meditation on earth's humus. As Wilde (1890) puts it, “if the caveman had known how to laugh, history would have been very different” (p. 30).

## Camp Wilde's Moot Court Finds Institute for Earth Education Chairman Guilty of Breach of Earth Charter!

(Authors' note: Camp Wilde's residents and guests frequently use its Moot Court facilities to amuse themselves by simulating "criminal" trials and civil actions. We obtained the following report from Camp Wilde's archives at [www.worldwildeweb.net/mootcourt.html](http://www.worldwildeweb.net/mootcourt.html).)

Camp Wilde's Moot Court erupted in cheers and laughter today when the jury in the simulated trial of Steve Van Matre handed down its guilty verdict. The founder and self-described "chairman" of The Institute for Earth Education had been charged in absentia with breaching Principle 1.1 of The Earth Charter, which requires humans to "respect Earth and life in all its diversity" (Earth Charter International Secretariat, 2001, p. 42). Prosecutors argued that Van Matre had failed to comply with this principle by willfully and deliberately limiting the Earth's subject position to that of a heterosexual female, effectively denying Earth's civil rights to freely express its diversity.

The prosecuting team, led by Deakin University law student Kate Allgreen, built its case on Van Matre's own words, citing his editorial contributions to *The Earth Speaks* (Van Matre, 1983a) as evidence that he assumed sexualized identities for both himself and the earth:

Have you listened to the earth?

Yes, the earth speaks, but only to those who can hear with their hearts. It speaks in a thousand, thousand small ways, but like our lovers and families and friends, it often sends its messages without words. For you see, the earth speaks in the language of love. Its voice is in the shape of a new leaf, the feel of a water-worn stone, the color of evening sky, the smell of summer rain, the sound of the night wind. The earth's whispers are everywhere, but only those who have slept with it can respond readily to its call.

. . . falling in love with the earth is one of life's great adventures. It is an affair of the heart like no other; a rapturous experience that remains endlessly repeatable throughout life. This is no fleeting romance, it's an uncommon affair. (p. 3-4)

An expert witness for the prosecution, Dr. Sue Curry Jansen, professor of communication studies at Muhlenberg College, testified that on this evidence, Van Matre's standpoint towards the earth was similar to Francis Bacon's, in whose works a nurturing "mother" nature was metaphorically transformed into a more sexualized object—a "bride," "mistress," or "common harlot" (Jansen, 1990, p. 239).

Another witness, semiotician Leon Patrick, testified that elsewhere in *The Earth Speaks* Van Matre (1983b) uses images for the earth that traditionally have passive and/or female connotations, including "vessel" and "ship of life" (p. 61), and that the young people targeted by Earth Education programs would almost certainly interpret terms such as "lovers," "affair," and "romance" to signify conventional (i.e., heterosexual) relationships. Professor Patrick argued that Van Matre's standpoint towards the earth was offensively patronizing and

patriarchal, even if his surface rhetoric was that of the new-age “sensitive man.” Against Van Matre’s romantic claim that “only those who have slept with [the earth] can respond readily to its call,” Patrick quoted eminent feminist scholar Donna Haraway’s pithy put-down: “I would rather go to bed with a cyborg than a sensitive man . . . Sensitive men worry me” (quoted in Penley & Ross, 1991, p. 18). Patrick added: “If the earth really could speak, s/he/it might well agree.”

Cross-examining this witness, defending counsel Simon Wolfson pointed out that all but four of the authors of the roughly 75 items of prose and poetry in *The Earth Speaks* are male. Since Van Matre (1983c) chose these writings “because each in some way speaks for the earth” (p. vi), does this not imply, asked Wolfson, that he actually positions the earth as male? This suggestion was quickly ridiculed by a number of students from York University who began chanting “stop reading straight!” until brought to order by Judge Russell Hart. Professor Patrick pointed out that Van Matre made matters worse by suggesting that the earth could “speak” only through chiefly male interpreters—or ventriloquists—and was thus positioned not only as passive and female but also as dumb.

Summing up for the defence, Mr. Wolfson argued that Van Matre was guilty only of good intentions, and that positioning the earth as an object of romantic love was no worse than assertions of familial relationship and love, such as Susan Griffin’s (1989) declaration that “the earth is my sister, I love her daily grace . . . and how loved I am” (p. 105).

In Ms. Allgreen’s final address to the jury, she argued that interpreting the Earth Charter principles at Camp Wilde meant queering the anthropomorphic image of the earth as an object of love and affection—especially if that image is implicitly identified with women, who have historically been oppressed, exploited, and ignored. The feminization of the earth by straight talking men and women, she said, limits the subjective positions available to both individual humans *and* “nature” to those determined by the binary logic of heteronormativity.

The jury took only a few minutes to reach its unanimous guilty verdict. Judge Hart imposed a Community Service Order requiring Van Matre to attend gender equity counselling and to undertake a minimum of 500 hours service as a volunteer guide with Queer(y)ing Nature, an outdoor recreational group in Fredericton, New Brunswick, that is “open to all, yet directed at a queer audience.”<sup>6</sup>

### Trouble at Camp Wilde

Although we have had a little fun at Steve Van Matre’s expense, we hope that readers will appreciate our serious purpose. Once upon a time, we were members of The Institute for Earth Education (IEE) and are on record as seeing merit in its programs (e.g., Noel Gough, 1987; Annette Greenall Gough, 1990). Our disenchantment with IEE began at about the same time that we engaged with Donna Haraway’s (1989b, 1991) work on primates and cyborgs,

which we read as an invitation to proliferate a shifting multiplicity of standpoints from which to situate our knowledge claims and to question “normal” and “natural” relations of knowledge and power (see, e.g., Annette Gough, 1994; Noel Gough, 1993a, 1993c). Both cyborg and queer subjectivities and corporealities question the normative use of gender-nature affinities (goddess, mother, sister, lover) in producing human relations with nature. Both cultivate suspicion of straight readings of the subjects/objects of environmental education research, because discourses of kinship and community in environmental politics and environmental education often promote principles of care, compassion, and love, which in turn reproduce implicit heteronormative assumptions about identity and relationships. As Catriona Sandilands (1997) writes, “Queers and cyborgs are not easily gendered or natured, and thus represent a new kind of character to inhabit the shifts and fissures of identities in collision or collusion” (p. 19).

For nearly three decades, ecofeminists have been troubling<sup>7</sup> the normative binaries that associate men with culture, reason, and superiority and women with nature, emotion, and subordination. For example, Greta Gaard (1997) argues that “conceptual, symbolic, empirical, and historical linkages between women and nature as they are constructed in Western culture require feminists and environmentalists to address these liberatory efforts together if we are to be successful” (p. 115; see also Plant, 1989; Plumwood, 1993; Warren, 1997a). Haraway’s cyborg manifesto has clearly inspired many ecofeminist writers (e.g., Alaimo, 1994; Diamond & Orenstein, 1990; Merchant, 1996; Sandilands, 1997; Warren, 1994), so we initially thought that ecofeminists would feel at home in Camp Wilde, with its focus on queering the normal (read “male”) signifieds of environmental education research. But this has not necessarily been the case.

In fact, some of our ecofeminist colleagues are not at all happy with our construction of Camp Wilde, because they see it as a white masculinist project, albeit queer. For example, the provenance of ecofeminism has expanded recently from its earlier concerns with ecological feminism to encompass a recognition “that there are important connections between how one treats women, people of color, and the underclass on one hand and how one treats the nonhuman natural environment on the other” (Warren, 1997a, p. xi). Ellen O’Loughlin (1993) encapsulates this changed orientation when she writes: “We have to examine how racism, heterosexism, classism, ageism, and sexism are all related to naturism” (p. 148).

Although O’Loughlin mentions heterosexism, sexuality has been a silence in ecofeminism until recently, just as it has been in the environmental and environmental education movements. Thus the “master” of nature in Plumwood’s (1993) *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* is an unmarked category: the heterosexual male. Sandilands’ (1997) work is particularly relevant here, especially her arguments for deconstructing assumptions about identity, politics, and their interrelationships if ecofeminism is to continue as a viable and political social movement. In this regard, some feminist scholars, including Sandra Harding (1991) argue that feminist standpoint epistemologies

should include a distinctive lesbian feminist position, as well as a heterosexual one, because there is no “essential or typical or preferred ‘woman,’ from whose typical life feminist standpoint theory require us to start” (p. 250).

This leads us to another group of women who are troubling Camp Wilde. Although some ecofeminists are comfortable with the idea of “queer ecofeminism” (Gaard, 1997; Sandilands, 1997, 1999), an emerging body of lesbian literature troubles “queer politics” by arguing that the strong lesbian feminist political movement which distinguished itself from gay male politics in the 1970s has been submerged by a gay male agenda in the 1990s (Jeffreys, 2003). According to such views, the queer political agenda is damaging to lesbians’ interests, to women in general, and to marginalized and vulnerable constituencies of gay men—and, indeed, we should look to lesbians as the vanguard of social change because they are committed to equality and relationships and sex as the basis of social transformation. Thus, Sheila Jeffreys argues that “the word ‘queer’ is abhorrent to lesbian feminists because it connotes a ‘cult of masculinity’ especially when linked with the word ‘politics’” and that “queer” is “a generic term meaning men and lesbians had to fit into it” (quoted in Myton, 2003, p. 18). The women for whom Jeffreys speaks might be especially troubled by Sandilands’ assertion that “queers . . . are not easily gendered.” It remains to be seen how such critiques as these might be taken up within queer ecofeminism, but they clearly constitute a further queer(y)ing of environmental education research.

Within ecofeminism we can also discern various shifts of focus. For example, Sandilands (1999) writes of ecofeminism as a quest for democracy rather than for the essentialist woman-based knowledges pursued by some earlier ecofeminist writers. Sandilands’ arguments are:

based on a notion of political subjectivity in which the subject is imperfectly constituted in discourse through the taking-up of multiple subject positions, discursive spaces describing shifting moments of symbolic representation derived from a temporary common understanding. The categories “women” and “nature,” in this formulation, appear as common (and possibly ironic) representations through which democratic politics can progress, rather than as statements about an inherent, oppositional identity. (p. xx)

Harding (1993) shares this quest for a more democratic future by arguing that “democratic values, ones that prioritize seeking out criticisms of dominant belief from the perspective of the lives of the least advantaged groups, tend to increase the objectivity of the results of the research” (p. 18).

Although much ecofeminist literature asserts the need to consider the empirical connections between women, people of colour, children, the poor and nature (e.g., Warren, 1997b), the spaces created by queer(y)ing environmental education research from (eco)feminist perspectives seem to us to be more generative with respect to “pointing out how better understandings of nature result when scientific projects are linked with and incorporate projects

of advancing democracy; [and how] politically regressive societies are likely to produce partial and distorted accounts of the natural and social world” (Harding, 1993, p. ix). Acknowledging the heterosexual basis of Western culture offers us a space for reading nature differently and undertaking more democratic research in environmental education.

Our guest Warren Sellers demonstrates how a queer aesthetic might generate such alternative readings.

### Aubrey Beardsley: Camp Wilde’s Picturer Warren Sellers

Aubrey Beardsley is the picturer<sup>8</sup> I associate with Camp Wilde. His images are among the most flagrantly decadent examples of the irony issuing from the *fin de siècle* that melded organic forms into fashioned *objets d’art nouveau*.

According to Charles Bernheimer (2002), *Salome: A Tragedy in One Act*, brought Beardsley into Wilde’s camp following a pas de deux that saw Beardsley speculating a drawing titled “J’ai baisé ta bouche, Iokanaan” (see Figure 1 [Bernheimer, p. 129]) in the inaugural 1893 issue of *The Studio*, which resulted in Wilde arranging a commission for him to illustrate the 1894 Bodley Head edition, which included “The Climax” (Figure 2 [Bernheimer, p. 131]).



Figure 1. J’ai baisé ta bouche, Iokanaan.



Figure 2. The Climax.

Writing of Salomania's grip over Europe at the *fin de siècle*, Bernheimer (2002) refers to Bram Dijkstra's thesis that:

Salome embodies a male fantasy of woman's inherent perversity. She is a predator whose lust unmans man, a castrating sadist whose victims can best survive her violence by either finding masochistic pleasure in submission or, better, by ridding the world of this purveyor of vice and degeneracy. Misogynist hatred for the Jewish Salome helps prepare the ground, so argues Dijkstra, for the genocidal violence of the twentieth century. (p. 104-105)

Although Bernheimer's project is to unmask Salome's complex roles beyond "male insecurity and anti-feminism" and to show how "she creates overtures to new modes of insight concerning the role of negativity in the psyche and writing" (p. 106), my project is to re-cognize the symbolic relationship between Salome's climactic gaze and Gaia's climatic concern. I suggest that the imagery in Beardsley's illustrations is a complex graphic representation of both the consequences of collapsing consciousness around modern reductionist science and culture, and potentialities for emergent notions of complexity suggested by James Lovelock's "Gaia" thesis. In his autobiography, Lovelock (2000) writes:

We now know enough about living organisms and the Earth System to see that we cannot explain them by reductionist science alone . . . . The deepest error of modern biology is the entrenched belief that organisms interact only with other organisms and merely adapt to their material environment. (p. 390)

My reading of Beardsley's drawings sees a multi-stable figure, a *gestalt* that fluxes through middles of meanings. On the surface there is obsession with desire and dismemberment, analytical separation and examination, and whimsical allusion to sameness and difference. But embodied within, there are also Benoit Mandelbrot's chaotic fractals (Gleick, 1987) (see Figures 3<sup>9</sup> and 3a) and Lynn Margulis and Ricardo Guerrero's (1991) complex spirochetes (see Figures 4 [Lyons, 1991, p. 63] and 4a).

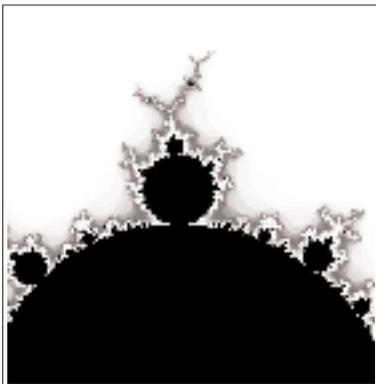


Figure 3. Mandelbrot Set.



Figure 3a. Detail section of Figure 2.

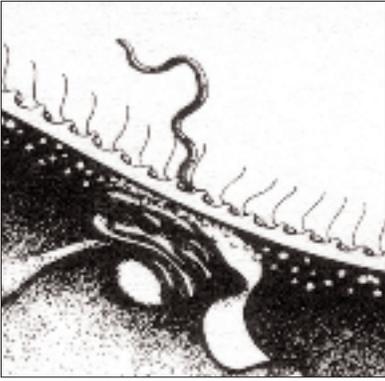


Figure 4. Spirochetes.



Figure 4a. Detail section of Figure 1.

Our challenge at Camp Wilde is to unveil some of the decorative irony, which Victoriana exemplifies, to reveal the deft visualization of emerging scientific and social chaos and complexity—to unwrap paradoxical and portentous images of the potential lifelessness ensuing from an obsessive androcentric desire for prizing the world apart.

My reading of *The Climax* reveals the human species' fatal confusion of devolutionary cloning with evolutionary clading. Salome's climax is the nightmare of the disappearing Y chromosome, the spermatozoa of a species oozing back into the eternal primordial potion that is both poison *and* colostrum. Scientism is *analyzing* humanity from existing. As Mary Midgely puts it:

We have carefully excluded everything non-human from our value system and reduced that system to terms of individual self-interest. We are so mystified—as surely no other set of people would be—about how to recognise the claims of the larger whole that surrounds us—the material world of which we are part. Our moral and physical vocabulary, carefully tailored to the social contract leaves no language in which to recognise the environmental crisis. (quoted in Lovelock, 2000, p. 390)

This paucity of language is why Camp Wilde needs emergent and generative picturings, which also expose the increasingly corrosive and pervasive illusions of the silvery screen as mainly grand “truth” claims designed to captivate human beings. These claims are the fabrications that Wilde attacked in *The Decay of Lying* by arguing that “art finds her own perfection within, and not outside of herself. She is not to be judged by any external standard of resemblance. She is a veil rather than a mirror” (quoted in Bernheimer, 2002, p. 135).

Bernheimer argues that Wilde's “external standard” was nature, an idea which Beardsley “extends into the realm of the arts. The art of the illustrator . . . need not be subservient to the art of the writer; if the writer veils instead of mirroring nature, so the illustrator veils any resemblance his pictures may have to the external verbal world” (p. 135). This notion of seeing through the veils, looking before-beyond-within the illusory surface,

perceiving extensive wholeness, is most revealing—perceiving the need to get over subjectively gazing at the objective, to appreciate becoming whole through complex notions of alluvium, not methods of analysis. The naturally scientific exists *within* picturing being just as well as writing words *about* it.

### Different Ways with Words

The boy scouts are always prepared  
To reject him  
If they can find him  
In their pup-tents  
Behind their crackling fires. (Platizky, 1998)

We share Sellers' distrust of reductionist logocentrism but we also do not want to suggest that verbal modes of representation have any necessary or essential limits. There are many ways of writing other than "straight" prose and although "queer" inscriptions might sometimes appear to be mere affectations we should be alert to their interrogative possibilities. For example, the very title of Bronwyn Davies's (2000) *(In)scribing Body/Landscape Relations* demands that readers attempt to decipher not only its words but also its punctuation: the parentheses and backslash invite readers to be suspicious of (and even to disrupt) "normal" relations among and between words, bodies and landscapes. Davies explores ways in which language—words inscribed in texts and voiced in speech—might trouble (and even collapse) the binaries of landscape and body and their respective "others." For example, she challenges the mind/body binary through collective biography, where participants learn that the mind inhabits not only the brain but the whole body, by writing in a language that recovers the "feeling, poetic body" (p. 168). Her aim is to show bodies in landscape, bodies as landscape (e.g., maternal bodies), and landscapes as extensions of bodies, all being "worked and reworked, scribed and reinscribed" (p. 249). Her writing style seems to be inspired by Hélène Cixous, whose *écriture féminine* inscribes embodied knowledge by using different styles of writing (such as poetry alongside conventional exposition) to fuse experience and subjectivity with analysis.

In a chapter cowritten with Hilary Whitehouse, Davies (2000) re/presents "Australian men talk[ing] about becoming environmentalists" (p. 63) in ways that demonstrate the generativity of poststructuralist approaches to understanding body/landscape relations. Their study explores the take-up of environmental discourses by a small number of men living and working in far north Queensland and analyses the complex relations between the discourse of environmentalism and specific landscapes as they constitute (and are constituted by) these men. The men's talk reveals a boundary between macho/dominant masculinity and more feminine or spiritual or politically correct forms of masculinity. They speak of a stereotype of macho masculinity that they construct as other

to themselves, and especially as other to the selves they produce in their talk with Davies and Whitehouse. But some of the men admit to being drawn into this undesirable form of masculinity, and one describes getting caught up in macho talk and patterns of desire through being part of the gay scene:

When he “came out” as gay, he thought he would find many other men like himself, misfits who had never achieved and did not want to achieve dominant forms of masculinity. To his horror, he discovered that he was as different from other gay men in the rural Queensland city that he moved to, as he had been from heterosexual men. (p. 72)

Other men in Davies and Whitehouse’s study describe adolescent experiences of “mistakenly” expressing masculinity in drunken heroic and dominating ways, and in which they experience themselves as male in relation to female nature. These early experiences were embarrassing to talk about because these men had remade themselves as environmentally caring and profeminist adults. One recalls going out into the bush at the age of 15 and becoming extremely drunk:

We chose the bush . . . because of the privacy, obviously, because you couldn’t be seen. The other thing is, it was like pitting yourself against, you know, you’re out there against the environment and you’re a man and, I mean, this is an embarrassing confession, that one of the things I did, and I remember doing this, I was really pissed and I dug a hole in the ground and my mates came along and I was rooting the earth . . . and they said, “What are you doing?” and I said, “Oh I’m fucking Mother Earth.” I haven’t thought of that for twenty years now. (p. 75)

Davies and Whitehouse find this man’s “insight” “interesting”: “As a young drunken boy wanting to conquer nature, his act of copulation was one which, he later explained, combined love of nature as well as conquering nature” (p. 75).

Here we must digress. All this talk of rooting and fucking reminds us of Steve Van Matre sleeping with the earth, Mary Doll digging and sloshing in the mud, and especially of Chet Bowers (2002) who returns frequently to “root metaphors” in his arguments for an ecological understanding of curriculum. Each of these authors chooses metaphors that are consistent with our own dispositions to create and conserve organic and evolutionary connections with the earth and one another. But metaphors matter in the literal sense that they have material effects, and even if we cannot *not* think through metaphors, we are responsible for the metaphors we choose to privilege and thus need to be self-critically responsive to the effects of their deployment. So we wonder at what point we need to be suspicious of the materialities we imagine through the metaphors we choose. When and under what circumstances should we remind ourselves that “root metaphor” is a metaphor and does not signify a “real” root? Haraway (1994) asks a difficult but pertinent question for all of us who work with words: “How can metaphor be kept from collapsing into the

thing-in-itself?” (p. 60) In other words, how can we resist replicating the worlds we analyze in our own material-semiotic practices? Queer things, metaphors.

Returning to Davies and Whitehouse (2000), we note that although only one of the environmentalists in their study identified himself as gay, all of them found a variety of strategies for “troubling the surface of rational dominant masculinity and of coming to (be)long in landscapes in embodied ways” (p. 84). They note that:

“nature” has many meanings, as does “masculinity,” and there are many contradictions between them. One way of managing these different meanings is to make discursive and bodily practice specific to particular folds in time and space (such as “the pub” and “Kakadu”). Another way is to merge and meld elements of one discourse and the related set of practices with other discourses and practices. These men constantly *separate themselves out* from other, lesser men, who are macho exploiters of women and environments. But the individualistic hero image is not easily let go of. Each man escapes from culture and other men in a journey of renewal and return. Each one finds himself vulnerable to the practices and discourses of the culture he finds himself in—vulnerable to becoming “like them.” (p. 85, emphasis in original)

We suggest that the “separating out” to which Davies and Whitehouse refer is continuous with an autonomous queer(y)ing of identity that is “specific to particular folds in time and space,” an interpretation that raises generative questions for environmental education research. For example, their analysis suggests that it might be possible to “read” some popular media texts—TV’s *The Crocodile Hunter* comes immediately to our minds—not only as banal entertainments but also as complex inscriptions of body/landscape relations. Is Steve Irwin the Liberace of Australian Wilde(r)ness? And in responding to that question what might we learn about our own embodied and locatable knowledges in/of the theatre/landscape we share with him?

Peter Appelbaum and his daughter Sophia demonstrate a similarly deconstructive queer(y)ing of “normal” body/landscape relations in their reading of a popular example of young adult fiction.

### *The Ear, the Eye and the Arm: A Book Review From Camp Wilde*

Peter and Sophia Appelbaum

Our family has been reading *The Ear, the Eye and the Arm*, by Nancy Farmer (1995). In this futuristic Zimbabwe, “Dead Man’s *Vlei*” is a former toxic waste dump—dense layers of something that used to be called “plastic.” People live in Dead Man’s *Vlei*. They are almost invisible, blending in with the grayness of the *Vlei* itself. They are part of the *Vlei* as the *Vlei* is part of them. We have been talking about this book as we read it, several chapters a night at bedtime. It strikes me (Peter) that the issue of toxic waste is presented not as a feature of the plot, but as a backdrop to important character development.

The main characters have important experiences in the Vlei that help us to understand how they are growing during an experience in which they are outside of their cloistered home for the first time. It is curious that the next sequence of this picaresque novel takes place in a utopian society that has locked modern technology outside of its domain. Here everything initially seems “just right” to the young heroes whose adventure we are lucky to share through reading. In each situation, the environment and technology are not the main feature of the story, but the context through which human individuals construct their sense of humanity, ethics, and relationship to the landscape.

It is this perversity of environmental detail, in the denying of centrality, that the centrality of the environmental context is enabled to emerge. Britzman (1996) describes perversity as “pleasure without utility,” and it is the specifically non-utilitarian use of the landscape in Farmer’s novel that we find to generate, peculiarly, a concern for our own relationship to the environment. Noel Gough (1993b) has written about this phenomenon as well, arguing that in reading and discussing science fiction and cyberpunk literature together, students and teachers can often critically reappraise human relationships with science, technology, and the environment.

In *The Ear, the Eye and the Arm*, mutations caused by environmental devastation also lead to uniquely human manifestations of the changes that might be wrought by such devastation: the terms in the title refer to mutated humans who have perversely heightened abilities of perception. The mutated enhancements are the result of being born in toxic regions of the country. Yet it is through these three people, and by implication, through the changes that humans have introduced into their environment, that the heroes of the novel are able to realize their potential, that the utopian civilization is able to survive, and that the world of magic and science merges into a plot climax that we feel we can’t reveal to anyone who has yet to read the book.

### A Resting (Not Arrested) Place

One way in which we have sought to explore new genres of research in environmental education is to venture beyond our own comfort zones in the production of this essay. When we invited Mary Doll and Warren Sellers to visit Camp Wilde we did not know what they would bring with them or how they would perform (in) the “camp” of *their* imaginations. Mary teaches literature and literary criticism, and Warren has worked as a designer, director, producer, consultant, and teacher in the electronic media industries. The modes of inquiry and interpretation through which meanings are produced within their respective traditions of social relationships and organization are different from those with which we are most familiar. We were not particularly surprised that some reviewers of our manuscript had a little difficulty in understanding the implications of their respective contributions, or why they were written in the

way they were. One reviewer speculated that s/he was “not well practiced in reading the genre” in which these contributions were written and thus found them “unclear and confusing.”

Similarly, when we invited Peter Appelbaum to visit Camp Wilde we did not expect him to bring his daughter, but we are very pleased that he did. Again, some reviewers did not see any explicit or obvious connection between Peter and Sophia’s book review and environmental education research. In our view, this does not mean that such a connection is absent, or that we should try to assimilate the difference between their understandings of Camp Wilde and ours by making the connections that *we* see more explicit. We are suspicious of trying to make the strange familiar, and prefer to read each of our guest’s contributions as an invitation to work constructively with discourses that appear to be incommensurate without colonizing them.

Although we would prefer not to be defensive, we feel compelled to respond to those reviewers who wanted us to provide “a more clear discussion of queer theory”: “As it stands,” one wrote, “a less careful reader could come away thinking queer merely referred to the unconventional.” We stand by our right to explore how queer theorizing might work, and what it might produce, rather than to explain what it means or what it is. If readers of the *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education* (who we assume to be “careful”) want to know what those who claim authoritative status in queer theorizing think it is, we recommend sources such as Suzanne de Castell and Mary Bryson’s (1998) “notes toward a queer researcher’s manifesto” (p. 249).<sup>10</sup> Because we do not presume to say what queer theory *is*, we also cannot say what it is not, and if our queer(y)ing of heteronormativities in environmental education research therefore looks to some readers like the “merely unconventional” then we accept that risk. To paraphrase Haraway (1989a, p. 307), we are not interested in policing the boundaries between the queer and the unconventional—quite the opposite, we are edified by the traffic.

So, farewell from Camp Wilde. We hope you have enjoyed your visit and that it was not too comfortable. We hope that you return and bring some of your own tales of queer(y)ing environmental education research with you. We have very deliberately eschewed any attempt to provide a straightforward (as it were) account of queer methodology or to present a comprehensive argument for “doing” queer research in environmental education. Rather, we have assembled some of the theoretical resources and cultural materials we had to hand and, with a little help from our friends, performed an orientation to environmental education research that we hope will never be arrested by its categorization as a “new genre.”

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> We make no categorical distinction between environmental education research and environmental education. We emphasize research because research is what we do. Research is anything that people who call themselves researchers actually do that their peers recognize as research, and thus includes any means by which a discipline or art develops, tests, and renews itself.
- <sup>2</sup> See Noel Gough (1999) for a critique of examples of environmental education research that can be read as *reductio ad absurda* of technical-scientific discourse.
- <sup>3</sup> We first noticed colleagues using the term “queer(y)ing”—and variations such as “que(e)r(y)ing” and “queer-y-ing”—in the mid-1990s (see, e.g., Gibson-Graham, 1997; Nicoll, 1997), but have since found earlier uses (e.g., Sandilands, 1994).
- <sup>4</sup> All first person plural pronouns (“we,” “us,” “our”) in this essay refer unequivocally only to the two of us (Noel and Annette Gough). Our guest contributors wrote their own scripts, and we do not presume to speak for them.
- <sup>5</sup> As Deleuze (1994) notes, paradox is “the passion of philosophy” (p. 227).
- <sup>6</sup> Queer(y)ing Nature’s activities include camping, hiking, cycling, kayaking, skiing, snowshoeing, etc. See <http://www.binetcanada.org/en/mar/play.html>, accessed 1 September 2002.
- <sup>7</sup> We use “troubling” in similar ways to Lather (1996; Lather & Smithies, 1997), to signify that we read terms that are “troubled” as *sous rature* (under erasure), following Derrida’s approach to reading deconstructed signifiers as if their meanings were clear and undeconstructable, but with the understanding that this is only a strategy (Derrida, 1985).
- <sup>8</sup> Beardsley declared his images to “picture” rather than “illustrate”: “When he became art editor of *The Yellow Book*, he insisted that the journal’s policy allow the artwork to stand on its own rather than illustrate particular contributions” (Bernheimer, 2002, p. 215).
- <sup>9</sup> Reproduced from <http://aleph0.clarku.edu/~djoyce/julia/mandel2.gif> (Joyce, 2003).
- <sup>10</sup> Although we hope our work is consistent with all seven items in de Castell & Bryson’s “manifesto,” we do not see our own identities as being coterminous with their characterization of queer researchers. Watch this space for our “notes toward a cyborg researcher’s manifesto.”

## Acknowledgments

We thank three anonymous reviewers for alerting us to readings of parts of our manuscript that we did not anticipate, which provided us with the opportunity to try to avert such readings. We also thank Connie Russell for her thoughtful editorial mediations and her patience.

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