Queer Natures, Queer Mythologies by Sam See (review)

Scotty Streitfeld

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Kopley does not address these questions. What she does do, however, and does admirably with regard to any such queries, is construct a platform from which to launch further investigations.

No book can be everything to everybody, of course, and once one accepts Kopley's approach as not only methodologically pluralist but also biographically circumscribed, one can fully appreciate its considerable virtues and already impressive scope. *Virginia Woolf and Poetry* is thoroughly well-researched and at the same time historically conscientious: expressions of the author's own and potentially anachronistic views are always discernible as such. It does what it sets out to do reliably, sensibly, and as lucidly as its primary materials allow, and in the process yields much food for thought regarding Woolf's poetically infused fiction. In short, Kopley's study makes a substantial contribution to scholarship and provides indispensable reading for anyone interested in Woolf's complex engagement with poetry.

Notes

1. Richard von Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis, with Especial Reference to Contrary Sexual Instinct: a Medico-Legal Study*, trans. Charles Gilbert Chaddock (Philadelphia and London: The F. A. Davis Company, 1893), 307. See also Havelock Ellis, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* (New York: Random House, 1905/1945), 294.

Queer Natures, Queer Mythologies. Sam See. Christopher Looby and Michael North, eds. New York: Fordham University Press, 2020. Pp. 323.

Reviewed by Scotty Streitfeld, University of California, Irvine

Recent work in queer studies is marked by methodological self-reflexivity, where rebelling against nature and subverting universalizing norms appear as critical habits now open to challenge and debate. *Queer Natures, Queer Mythologies*, which collects published and unpublished writings of the late Sam See, draws its critical energies from this self-reflexive wave, analyzing modernist literature's Darwinist thinking and its attachments to myth to reconsider queer historicist methodologies. Focusing on two key terms, nature and myth, that tend to be at odds with queer theory, the book's two parts, based on See's two planned monographs, argue that these terms are central to the construction of sexual feeling in modern culture, and to literary historiographies of sexuality. See's work offers a significant contribution to queer theory and queer modernist studies.

One of See's main aims is to challenge queer theory's tendency to reject nature, often framed as a construction of eugenics and sexology. See's introduction argues that Darwin's writings can be read as a queer theory of nature, and as grounds for an evolutionary aesthetics of non-normative sexual feeling. In this introduction, See critiques the historicist account of nature, articulated via Foucault's argument about sexology: that nature is really culture, and that it reproduces sexual normativity sifted through eugenic thought. To this second objection, See responds that the enemy is not nature but the naturalistic fallacy—"the association of nature with normativity" (16). From there, See offers a critique of Foucault's argument in *The History of Sexuality* that sexuality cohered through discourses of medicine, science, and public health. Because Foucault focuses on "logical" discourses, he tends to ignore aesthetics, especially literature, as a site of affect. By casting queer claims to nature as "reverse discourse," the Foucaultian position precludes art's status as a register of sexual feeling (19). By contrast, See emphasizes art's "status as a natural object," and extends this critique to Kant, who excludes art from nature, and aesthetic judgment from desire. Contra Foucault and Kant, See reads "queer feeling" as aesthetic and

affective experience, one that "creates an indissoluble link between nature and art, such that nature must be viewed as aesthetic (creative) and art as natural (grounded in feeling)" (35). Absent presumptions of teleology, virtue, or normativity, nature becomes the basis of a queer aesthetic grounded in infinite variability and change.

Complicating assumptions about queer modernism's attachments to artifice, *Queer Natures* is motivated by parallel attachments to nature. The first chapter of Part 1 analyzes the rural festival at the center of Woolf's *Between The Acts*. Focusing on Woolf's multiple fascinations with concentration—as attention, as distillation—See shows how Woolf's use of camp both follows and parodies sexological constructions of backwardness as degeneration as they were deployed by fascism amid the Second World War. Against fascism's eugenic visions, Woolf condenses, from her novel's degeneration narrative, a "Darwinian understanding of nature as infinitely heterogeneous and transformative" (55). In a subsequent chapter on "the 'low-down' and the 'down-low' aesthetics" of Langston Hughes's poetry, See highlights Hughes's challenge to standard alignments between nature, performance, and artifice, uncovering and emphasizing the queer natures of Hughes's aesthetics. While modernist accounts of performance are at stake here, See also sets his sights on Butler's theory of gender as performative citation. While Butler rejects any conception of gender as being founded in nature as essentializing, See argues that Hughes's poetic form, by crossings lines of race and gender, and moving between the lyric and the dramatic, produces speakers whose affects are natural but contingent. In other words, these speakers embody "identitarian instability as natural but not normative—as embodied, material, and subject to change but not naturalized, original, or transhistorically unvarying" (109). In these two chapters, See shows how two writers in early twentieth-century contexts turned to nature as a source of aesthetic and sexual feeling in order to articulate desire outside the constraints of normativity and identity.

Glimpses of what See intended for the shape of *Queer Natures* are visible in two shorter chapters that extend this thesis about the queerness of nature to discourses of science and homosexual rights advocacy. The chapter on Oscar Wilde and Walt Whitman shows how Wilde's *De Profundis* draws from Whitman a "nature-based queer aesthetics" which is "rooted in scientific principles" of nature's variability and the aesthetics of sexual feeling (91). The subsequent chapter on Edward Carpenter and Edward Forster describes a theory of realism based in Darwinian thinking about erotic feeling, one that travels to Forster's *Maurice* by way of Carpenter. The epilogue to Part 1 extends this concern with science, tracing the politics of the "myth of nature," which See describes as the "belief that all concepts, including sexuality and literature, are subject to change" (137). See shows how this myth, involving strategic alignments with both science and mysticism, has served as a powerful rhetorical tool for queer people whose histories are defined by violence.

This epilogue to Part 1 serves as a bridge to Part 2, "Queer Mythologies," based on See's second planned monograph, a text that is less finished than the first, owing to the author's untimely passing. This part's first two chapters reproduce published essays on modernist novels, including Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises,* Dos Passos's *Manhattan Transfer,* and Ford and Tyler's *The Young and Evil*. The chapter on Ford and Tyler directly addresses this project's core interest: a narrative and poetic method that T.S. Eliot called "the mythic method," defined by its commitment to a foundational falsehood which produces a universal claim. For See, *The Young and Evil* serves as a paradigmatic example of Eliot's mythic method, insofar as the novel's interest is not in establishing a gay folklore (a record of a minority culture and discourse) but rather a myth of queer community. In that regard, the novel's "mythopoeic structure and texture [. . .] depicts the queer community itself as a mythic construction, a collective imaginable only as fragments" (205). At stake in this second project is the question of what role attachments to myths of collectivity play in the historiography of queerness and sexuality more broadly. The following two short chapters offer some basis for extrapolating See's answers to this question. Excavating critical discourse on the formal and poetic failure of Hart Crane's epic, *The Bridge*, See reconstructs a dialectic that, he argues, resembles Kenneth Burke's paradox of purity, in which the poetics of collectivity negate, yet also somehow produce, the individual. In See's account, *The Bridge* enacts this paradox, which "presume[s] myth only to negate it—to produce not synthesis but 'synergy,' fusion where the sum is more than its parts" (236). Likewise, in See's

account of Eliot's *The Waste Land*, non-reproductive figures, such as Tiresias, come to stand for a mythic "time for queerness out of time," one that he argues might be harnessed by "queer methodologies," in their challenge to ideas of chronological time based in reproductive futurity (265). Closing the main text of the book, these accounts of queer mythology reveal the book's most provocative, though also its most speculative, possibilities for unsettling the norms of queer theory's historicist contextualization of sexuality.

The implications of See's rereading of Darwin for modernist studies are less foregrounded than his more full-throated engagement in debates in queer studies. The book assembles works by canonical modernists—Woolf, Hughes, Dos Passos, Hemingway, Crane, Eliot—all of which become sites for working out a method whose queerness emerges through an unsettling of traditional alignments of modernism with novelty, tradition, artifice, and secularism. By the end of the book, no singular definition of modernism or modernity takes hold. In an essay at the end of the volume, Scott Herring clarifies See's resistance to defining modernism as a literary break with ancient or past forms, a "readymade thesis" with which See dispenses through his "queering of the ancient/modern divide" (271). Herring's explanation is persuasive, and may account for the lack of a unified modernism that carries across the two projects on nature and myth. The volume concludes with two other essays, by Heather Love and Wendy Moffat, which are helpful in contextualizing the book's conversations in studies of queer theory and modernism. Love's essay discusses See's interest in "resolv[ing] the tension between high style and low feeling" in modernist works (289). Moffat describes See's plans for future projects, including a book on postmodern tragedy, "Too Late On Time," which "ask[s] how to avoid the extinction of the queer in the twinned voids of abstraction [. . .] or in lack of distinction" (305). *Queer Natures, Queer Mythologies* offers an important account of the queerness of its two key terms—nature and myth—with important implications for the history of sexuality. The editors, Christopher Looby and Michael North, have done an outstanding job collecting and editing See's published and unpublished work in a volume whose structure approaches, as close as any such collection possibly can, the cohering of the author's two scholarly projects. To the extent that it represents See's work on, and beyond, these two projects, this volume is incredibly rich.