



Queer Fallout

Samuel R. Delany and the Ecology of Cruising

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Abstract Taking as its provocation Leo Bersani's fleeting turn to questions of ecology at the end of his 2002 essay "Sociability and Cruising," this piece asks what it would mean to use the practice of cruising as an unexpected model for a new ecological ethic, one more deeply attuned to our impersonal intimacies with the human, nonhuman, and elemental strangers that constitute both our environment and ourselves. In order to develop such a model, the essay looks not only to Bersani's work but also (and primarily) to Samuel R. Delany's *Times Square Red*, *Times Square Blue*, whose attention to the positive fallout of spontaneous cross-class contact, I claim, complicates the proprietary, insular, and paranoid logics prevalent in much popular environmental discourse. Delany's text, which decenters both intention and identity in its definition of the social, limns the contours of a queer environmentalism predicated less on intentional, direct(ed) investment than on ambient affects, impersonal futures, and nonteleological practices of care.

Keywords queer ecology, ecocriticism, environmentalism, New Materialism, cruising

In the final paragraph of his 2002 essay "Sociability and Cruising," Leo Bersani concludes his discussion of impersonal intimacy and promiscuous attachments with an unexpected turn to ecology: "Let's call this [ethical model predicated on ascetic practices] an ecological ethics," he suggests, "one in which the subject, having willed its own lessness, can live less invasively in the world."¹ Cited out of context, there is perhaps little surprising about this statement, particularly its final clause. Environmental stewardship, in its most familiar incarnations, often asks us to live less invasively—to "leave no trace," to cite one popular backcountry adage, or to "take only pictures, leave only footprints," to cite another. Ethical relationality is thus commonly predicated on restraint, on learning to make do with less, on compromising our acquisitive or consumptive desires for the sake of an often enigmatic—but protectively policed—"common good." Yet queer theory challenges the foundations (and foundational status) of

1. Bersani, "Sociability and Cruising," 62 (hereafter cited in the text).

both that “common” and that “good”: invested not in chaste restraint but in polymorphous pleasures; not in the steadying pull of biological reproduction and its familiarly (and familiarly) accompanying “future generations” but in “the formation of new alliances and the tying together of unforeseen lines of force”;² and not in conserving or sustaining present ways of life but rather in rupturing or annihilating norms, the field seems to trouble and in fact endanger many of the tenets that environmentalists hold so dear.³

Certainly Bersani himself is not a theorist known for endorsing environmentalism’s familiar paradigms of responsibility and respectability; after all, this is the writer who, in *Homos*, opened a chapter by asking, skeptically, “Should a homosexual be a good citizen?” and then went on to suggest that “given the rage for respectability so visible in gay life today, some useful friction—and as a result some useful thought—may be created by questioning the compatibility of homosexuality with civic service.”⁴ Furthermore, the practice at stake in this piece of Bersani’s—cruising—seems to signal the death knell for any reading of the essay as modeling an ecological ethic, regardless of its final turn. For the encounters involved in and resulting from cruising—stereotypically temporary, casual, anonymous—seem to have little in common with the practices associated with meaningful planetary stewardship.

But what if we took seriously Bersani’s casual remark and asked what the relationship may in fact be between cruising and environmentalism? In what follows, I seek less to account for Bersani’s claim⁵ than to expand upon it, to ask how cruising might inspire an ecological ethic more deeply attuned to our impersonal intimacies with the human, nonhuman, and elemental strangers that constitute both our environment and ourselves.⁶ To develop such a model, I look not only to Bersani’s work but also (and primarily) to Samuel R. Delany’s *Times Square Red*, *Times Square Blue* (*TSRTSB*), whose attention to the positive fallout of spontaneous cross-class contact, I claim, complicates the proprietary, insular, and paranoid logics prevalent in much popular environmental

2. This is Michel Foucault’s formulation in “Friendship as a Way of Life,” 136.

3. For more on the fraught relationship between queer theory and ecocriticism, see Seymour, *Strange Natures*; Ensor, “Spinster Ecology”; and Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson, “Introduction.” These texts have identified the incompatibilities between the two fields as primarily involving the status of temporality (specifically, the question of futurity) and the status of the “natural.” The present essay implicitly develops a queer ecocritical practice centering on the question of desire; however, rather than take a side in debates about environmentalism’s erotophobia, it positions itself *to the side* of it and attends to how, in Delany’s account of cruising, forms of socioecological health emerge indirectly from sites of pleasure.

4. Bersani, *Homos*, 113.

5. Bersani does this himself in the final sentence of “Sociability and Cruising,” when he argues that “if our psychic center can finally seem less seductive than our innumerable and imperfect reappearances outside, it should then seem not only imperative but natural to treat the outside as we would a home” (62).

6. In so doing, I am responding to the challenge that Bersani himself issues on the closing page of “Sociability and Cruising”: “Our task now might be to see how viable the relationality we have uncovered in . . . sociability and cruising might be for other types of connectedness” (62).

discourse.⁷ As Delany's text brushes near Bersani's and next to contemporary environmental writings (with which it might have more in common than either field is ready to acknowledge),⁸ it limns the contours of a queer environmentalism predicated less on direct(ed) investment than on ambient affects, impersonal futures, and nonteleological practices of care. Ultimately, I will argue, in tracing how intimacy, impersonality, and consequence disperse throughout urban space and across various measures of time, Delany offers us new ways to understand what Timothy Morton has called the "politicized intimacy with other beings"⁹ that constitutes contemporary ecological relations as such. The result is an environmental ethic that acknowledges the extent to which ecological entanglement resembles the queer relationality of cruising far more than it does the other (more normative) relational paradigms to which we so often analogize it.

Cruising's Queer Ecology

Drawing on the work of sociologist Georg Simmel, Bersani's essay rehearses the fundamental distinction between society—predicated on interests and identities—and sociability, in which an impersonal mode of being facilitates something akin to "pure relationality" and fosters the feeling "of association as such" ("Sociability and Cruising," 45). Sociability, according to Bersani's account of Simmel, "abstract[s] the relational from concrete relations," granting us access to "the pleasure of the associative process," to "a pure relationality" that dwells "beyond or before the satisfaction of particular needs or interests" (45–46). While such bracketing of the personal—which, in Bersani's account, entails the renunciation of both possession and any acquisitive impulse—requires a sacrifice, it is also "pleasurable," its "satisfaction inherent"; for within sociability, each one of us, like the woman who becomes one of Simmel's examples, is "not completely [one]self" but rather "only an element in a formally constituted gathering" (46, 47). "It is as if there is a happiness inherent in not being entirely ourselves," Bersani suggests, provocatively, "in being 'reduced' to an impersonal rhythm" (47). And like the self, no longer driven by acquisitive impulse, this happiness or pleasure "does not serve an interest, satisfy a passion, or fulfill a desire. It is an intransitive pleasure intrinsic to a certain mode of existence, to a self-subtracted being" (48).

7. Delany, *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (hereafter cited in the text as *TSRTSB*).

8. I am not the first to link Delany's work to questions of queer ecology. In "Back to the Garden," Tavia Nyong'o reads Delany's 1979 memoir of communal living as a text that "develop[s] literary strategies for estranging the romance with nature, supplying terms for a more robust and inclusive contemporary literary ecological imagination" (748). Although Nyong'o's approach is quite different from my own, our readings both emphasize the way in which Delany's work limns the contours of "sexual ecologies 'without nature'" (747) and invests in "stranger intimacies" (a phrase that Nyong'o borrows from Nayan Shah [749]). While Nyong'o's reading of Delany's countercultural ecologies emphasizes the role of race in queer ecology, my reading of the same emphasizes questions of class, largely because of Delany's own foregrounding of that topic in *TSRTSB*, a text that critiques the intertwined processes of gentrification, sanitization, and (capitalist) privatization that radically changed Times Square in the 1980s and 1990s.

9. Morton, "Thinking Ecology," 266.

Although cruising and sociability themselves are immanent, nonteleological practices, Bersani wishes his theorization of the terms to reach beyond itself; he insists that attending seriously to cruising “is not a question of demonstrating that certain outrageous practices are really taking place within the parameters of a traditional ethics, but rather of specifying the ways in which those practices may or may not require us to elaborate new ethical vocabularies” (60). If one of the goals of the current essay is to pursue such an elaboration, it seems important to acknowledge that in many respects Delany has beaten us—and Bersani himself—to the punch. Although *TSRTSB* precedes “Sociability and Cruising” by three years, it often reads as a response to Bersani’s variously articulated challenges, not only in its articulation of “new ethical vocabularies” but also in its attention to ways of life—and forms of civic investment—predicated on the culture of cruising in the 42nd Street movie houses and the peep shows of the “old” Times Square.¹⁰

Indeed, for Delany, eroticism, sexual contact, and open expressions of desire are fundamental to the democratic potential of the spaces in which we dwell. Throughout *TSRTSB*, he establishes the links—or, to use one of his own favorite terms, the “propinquity”—between casual sexual contact and casual nonsexual encounters. While he is not invested in the nonhuman world per se (although, as my discussion will illuminate, the emphasis on ambient conditions in his conception of the cityscape puts him in implicit conversation with environmental thought), his thinking is ecological insofar as it takes seriously the capacity of seemingly casual, localized, and contingent relational practices to circulate throughout the broader social milieu in which they transpire.¹¹ We thus might argue that *TSRTSB* theorizes a kind of sexual ecology, a term that I borrow from Gabriel Rotello, whose 1997 book of the same name has been deemed “the *Silent Spring* of the AIDS epidemic.”¹² *Sexual Ecology* analyzes AIDS as an ecological phenomenon, arguing that the “enemy” is not the disease itself but rather the conditions that facilitate its spread. Sexual ecology, as Rotello defines it, thus “consists of the entire spectrum of causes and effects that influence the spread of sexually transmitted

10. *TSRTSB* is, of course, also an elegy for a Times Square that no longer exists as well as a fervent critique of those sociopolitical forces (including the Times Square redevelopment project’s capacity to capitalize [literally] on the fear of contact that flourished in the wake of HIV/AIDS) that brought about its demise. Although the book is thus suffused with a sense of loss, Delany’s experiences ultimately serve as a source less of melancholy than of a utopian faith in the promise of urban democratic life. His work thus fits both the temporal and the affective models that interest José Esteban Muñoz in *Cruising Utopia*. There, Muñoz calls on readers to engage in a model of attention “that . . . resembles a kind of politicized cruising” in order to glimpse “the anticipatory illumination of the utopian” (18).

11. In so doing, Delany demonstrates anew the relevance of urban spaces and practices to environmental and ecocritical thought, fields that—despite the changing foci of critical attention—still tend to be dominated by more familiarly “natural” spaces.

12. Rotello, *Sexual Ecology*. The comparison to *Silent Spring* comes from Biddle, “Grim Warning on AIDS in the 90s.” Nyong’o, “Back to the Garden,” also uses the phrase “sexual ecologies” (747), but does not engage Rotello.

diseases”;¹³ as he goes on to insist, “To begin the process of envisioning a sustainable gay lifestyle that can encourage gay liberation and avoid epidemic disease over the long haul, we have to learn to think ecologically about sex.”¹⁴

TSRTSB, I would argue, also helps us “learn to think ecologically about sex”—not, as Rotello would have it, by tracing the contextual contours of a sexually transmitted disease so as to limit its spread but rather by revealing the way that intimacy, community, and care themselves spread in the spatiotemporal wake of casual sexual activity. Whereas Rotello’s response to HIV mandates a largely prophylactic and risk-averse approach to erotic life—including a commitment to monogamy and a reduction in cruising—Delany, inversely, advocates an embrace of contact, positing it as fundamental to the vitality not only of individual subjects but also, and more profoundly, of the urban environment itself. The difference between the writers’ approaches, then, might have repercussions not only for the status of cruising but also, importantly, for the *orientation* of environmental activism. If Rotello seeks to change casual sexual practice by aligning it with a chaste, “mature,” and restrained environmentalism, Delany, I want to suggest, can inspire a change in that same environmentalism by inviting it to attend to the impersonal, collateral, and insistently ambient effects of casual relationships.¹⁵ Although Delany never directly engages ecology as such, his text is predicated upon close attention to “a complex of interlocking systems and subsystems” (*TSRTSB*, xx), to the way in which “social interchanges of information and material occur in various forms of social nets” (122), to how interclass contact becomes “the lymphatic system of a democratic metropolis” (199). Ultimately, he encourages us “to look not so much at social objects and social monuments but to observe, analyze, and value a whole range of social relationships” (177).¹⁶

Among the social relationships that concern Delany is the relationship between practices of cruising—or public sex more generally—and the forms of spontaneous cross-class contact fundamental to the livability and democratic health of urban spaces. The distinction that Bersani (via Simmel) draws between society and sociability finds its analog in Delany’s differentiation between the roles that two forms of social-net

13. Rotello, *Sexual Ecology*, 16.

14. *Ibid.*, 189.

15. In Rotello’s argument, it takes HIV to make sexuality ecological; he understands erotic contact in terms of an ecological system only when that contact is pathologized. Within his conception of ecology, then, queer eroticism is legible only as a threat—and cruising and casual sex, insofar as they contribute to pathogens’ “spread,” constitute the greatest threat of all. But *TSRTSB* demonstrates the ways in which sexuality is already ecological, in which its effects disperse and roam in nonpathological—and often beneficial—ways. Although the current essay does not have the space to take up the relationship between HIV/AIDS and environmentalism, the broader project of which it is a part does just that.

16. My reading of these paradigms as ecological dovetails with Jane Bennett’s definitions of ecology in *Vibrant Matter*. In her account, ecology is a “complicated web of dissonant connections between bodies” (4) and an “interconnected series of parts, but . . . not a fixed order of parts, for the order is always being reworked in accordance with a certain ‘freedom of choice’ exercised by its actants” (97).

practice—networking and contact—play in civic life. Networking, like society, is animated by interest, by identity, by motive—and often, consequently, by affinity or likeness. It “tends to be professional and motive-driven. . . . [It] crosses lines only in the most vigilant manner . . . [and] is heavily dependent on institutions to promote the necessary propinquity (gyms, parties, twelve-step programs, conferences . . .), where those with the requisite social skills can maneuver” (*TSRTSB*, 129). *Contact* (a term that Bersani adapts from the work of Jane Jacobs), by contrast,¹⁷ is “more broadly social,” amenable to chance and surprise and difference alike:

Contact is the conversation that starts in the line at the grocery counter with the person behind you while the clerk is changing the paper roll in the cash register. It is the pleasantries exchanged with a neighbor who has brought her chair out to take some air on the stoop. . . . It can be the conversation that starts with any number of semiofficials or service persons—mailman, policeman, librarian, store clerk or counter person. As well, it can be two men watching each other masturbating together in adjacent urinals of a public john—an encounter that, later, may or may not become a conversation. Very importantly, contact is also the intercourse—physical and conversational—that blooms in and as “casual sex” in public rest rooms, sex movies, public parks, . . . on street corners with heavy hustling traffic, and in the adjoining motels or the apartments of one or another participant, from which nonsexual friendships and/or acquaintances lasting for decades or a lifetime may spring, not to mention the conversation of a john with a prostitute or hustler encountered on one or another street corner or in a bar—a relation that, a decade later, has devolved into a smile or a nod, even when (to quote Swinburne) “You have forgotten my kisses, / And I have forgotten your name.”¹⁸

Importantly, cruising here is just one example—if a privileged one—of the routine forms of spontaneous contact between strangers that Delany understands to have been compromised by the sanitizing “redevelopment” of Times Square and the privatization of urban space more broadly. Indeed, the rhetorical power of the passage consists in how scenes that we understand as constitutive of the daily culture of any American city come to touch the nonnormative, “fringe” practices of public sex and how scenes specific to 1980s New York burgeon within (or diffuse into) a more conventional portrait of

17. It would be a misrepresentation of Delany’s book to overstate the distinction between networking and contact. Indeed, I would argue that *TSRTSB* demonstrates the extent to which contact is not the negation of personalized relations (including those involved in networking) but rather the precondition for them. Thus we might read networking (and/or the relationships it involves) as the privatization of contact; networking is a way to attempt to contain or enclose contact, to give it predictable shape and teleological direction by delimiting/predetermining the kinds of people included in a social network. Although I do not have space in these pages to take up Delany’s treatment of class in as much detail as it deserves, I want to suggest that his investment in nonproprietary forms of relation is, relatedly, a way of resisting two intertwined forms of privatization—(a) the emphasis on private (or secured and privatized) property at the expense of truly public urban spaces and (b) the reification of personal identity (and its accompanying forms of identitarian sociality) (*TSRTSB*).

18. *Ibid.*, 123–24.

American urbanity. The passage thus suggests not only that contact is what cruising becomes as it disperses across time, space, and publics to become a common way of life but also that scenes of public sex, if not a prerequisite for these more familiar, banal encounters, nevertheless index contact's own (im)possibility. At its best, Delany suggests, a city is a realm where we all find ourselves (knowingly or not) beckoned to cruise.

Thus the passage as a whole represents, in microcosm, the most powerful aspects of cruising's queer ecology. First, we might notice the complicated temporality in which contact inheres. Meaningful—and fleeting—encounters typically take place in spaces of suspension. They happen “*while* the clerk is changing the paper roll in the cash register.” They happen as the neighbor takes a break on the stoop or as “semiofficials” forestall various responsibilities—expanding, however gently, the time of the task. They happen in the marginal furrows of society, in the space of “waste” and pleasure as opposed to the time of duty or (re)production. Indeed, whereas networking is instrumental (Delany's paradigmatic example is writers angling for book deals at conferences), the future of contact is starkly impersonal: “I have forgotten your name.” Contact and cruising are realms in which anonymity and impersonality can be the ground of intimacy rather than barriers to it, where nonknowledge of our variably significant others can be a state that endures.

Likewise, rather than simply emphasizing the fleetingness of casual encounters, Delany's account of cruising changes how longevity looks and feels. (What does it mean, his text often implicitly asks, for something to last?) Forgetting is invoked not as a sign of disappearance but as an indicator of persistence. Yoked together in Delany's final sentence are the possibility of friendships “*lasting* for decades or a lifetime” and one-time encounters that have “*devolved* into a smile or a nod.” The lasting and the devolving are not opposed but rather are parts of the same sociosexual ecology. What they have in common, as other scenes from the book illustrate more fully, is the way in which they—the fading, the remaining, the devolving, the burgeoning—suffuse the spaces in which they take place and make urban life livable.

At the same time that Delany's points are insistent, they are also necessarily non-programmatic. For he advocates not particular identity categories, actions, or practices but rather a posture of openness to chance, a willingness to acknowledge that we cannot possibly know what will come of any given encounter. The passage above, perhaps unsurprisingly, is awash in language of contingency: not only the “*may*” and “*may not*” through which Delany traces the uncertain contours of consequence but also the repeated refrain “*it can be,*” which gestures toward the impossibility of predicting what forms contact might or will take. We cannot know in advance what will last or fade, how we may feel lasting traces of the fading, or how forgetting itself may become a form of relation. We do not know how what “*devolve[s]*” may still permeate our days—not as an absence experienced with longing or regret or melancholy but as a diminished persistence that, having become more part of our substance (and our surroundings) than of our memories, affects our daily experience of the world.

Thus while there is, importantly, nothing preordained about these beginnings—Delany permits himself to inhabit, to borrow the language of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (writing in a quite different context), “the present fullness of a becoming whose arc may extend no further”¹⁹—there is also nothing preventing them from yielding social consequence, direct or indirect. Part of the point is that these beginnings are typically not fraught with expectation; they are not the start of a familiar narrative but rather episodes open to and predicated on indirect effects. The paradigms of intimacy and relationality that concern Delany, not unlike the forms of environmental damage and slow violence cataloged by Rachel Carson and theorized by Rob Nixon, often are invisible until they reach a threshold of legibility.²⁰ We forget about many of those whom we encounter until we see them again on a street corner, until chance brings them back into our life narrative and begins to articulate the ways in which they may have been there—invisibly, anonymously, ambiently, materially—all along.

Ecological Lessness; or, Environmentalism without Environmentalists

The anonymity central to cruising is, for both Bersani and Delany, not an exceptional condition but rather a constitutive one. Indeed, it is not simply others who remain anonymous but also, importantly, ourselves. Such identitarian lessness is, for Bersani, the source of sociability’s *pleasure* and, for Delany, the wellspring of urban democratic *ethics*. To understand lessness as the site of such an ethically impersonal pleasure—or of a pleasurable impersonal ethics—is to begin to trace the contours of its environmental significance.

As the opening salvo of this essay indicated, paradigms of lessening are hardly unfamiliar to mainstream environmentalism. But whereas the latter’s investment in lessness relates almost entirely to the actions that we take (or fail to take) under the banner of “restraint,” Bersani’s psychoanalytic lessness is ontological, pertaining to the realm of being, not doing, less. While Bersani suggests that there can be a happiness “inherent in not being entirely ourselves,” the logic of environmentalism often urges us to be *more* ourselves (often by doing, consuming, and demanding *less*), turning planetary stewardship into an extension and intensification of our identitarian commitments.²¹

Furthermore, even when environmental stewardship is not specifically identitarian, those imploring us to action tend to rely on language of shared values, appealing

19. Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading,” 149.

20. See Carson, *Silent Spring*; and Nixon, *Slow Violence*. I will return to the unexpected link between TSRTSB and Nixon’s work later in the essay.

21. Choose any identity category through which we understand ourselves and there exists a way to yoke our environmental investments to it. Sandra Steingraber, writing a guide to child rearing in a time of planetary degradation, proclaims that “ultimately, the environmental crisis is a parenting crisis” (*Raising Elijah*, 281). *LGBT Weekly* instructs us in “Finding the Gay in Green.” The Acton Institute maintains a long list of faith-based environmental groups. The examples could go on seemingly indefinitely.

both to *who we are* and to *who we most want to be*. The recent anthology *Moral Ground: Ethical Action for a Planet in Peril*, for instance, interpellates its readers as members of an existing moral community: “What is missing [in our environmental consciousness] is the moral imperative, the conviction that assuring our own comfort at terrible cost to the future is not worthy of us as moral beings. . . . Ethics is certainly about how to act. But in an important sense, ethics is also about who to be. What is the best a human being can be?”²² The text understands there to be a fundamental homology between what we do and who we are, between our status as agents and our identities as beings. It thus leaves little room for practices or postures that are not immediately rolled into identity—or for an understanding of action that is not embroiled in intention, agency, and aim. Furthermore, in the paradigm advocated by both the *Moral Ground* editors and their contributors, community is predicated on resemblance; stewardship is our shared project because we are moral in the same way, value the same things, and strive toward the same ends. Theirs is a politics of recognition, one that knows in advance not only what it seeks but also who its allies are and where its affinities lie.

Such a stance is, perhaps, the logical extension of environmental writing and activism’s broader tendency—and need—to personalize and personify the planet in order to (urge us to) invest in its endurance. But rather than finding increasingly personal lines of appeal, we might instead seek to develop an environmentalism that divests, depersonalizes, and perhaps even defaces human action—precisely in order to begin reckoning with those queer animacies and agencies that constitute the natural world. For when we relate to “the environment,” we are relating to—and acknowledging our imbrication with—the inanimate, the geologic, the distant, the invisible, the systemic, the strange. The resulting entanglements are distinctly *not* personal, distinctly *not* reciprocal, distinctly *not* human. But this does not mean that these same relationships are not intimate; as scholars of toxicity have demonstrated, “the environment is not located somewhere out there but is always as close as one’s own skin.”²³ And so perhaps what we need is a new model for intimacy—for our relation with those entities that, no matter how consubstantial we are with them, we can never fully know and that make no recognizable attempts to know us.²⁴

22. Moore and Nelson, *Moral Ground*, xvi.

23. Alaimo, “MCS Matters,” 11. The resulting consubstantiality has led critics like Morton to claim that “there is no environment as such” (Morton, “Thinking Ecology,” 272). I choose to retain the term *environment* (even while acknowledging Morton’s point) because I believe so doing helps us to think through the paradigms of relation that we practice toward the world around and within us—even if, or perhaps especially if, the fact of our indistinguishability from the “environment” means that some of these paradigms prove to be autoaffective.

24. For a related theorization of the “radical asymmetry between the natural and the social,” see Clark, *Inhuman Nature*, 30. There, Nigel Clark considers “what . . . it mean[s] to say that life, or the earth, or nature or the universe are not just constellations of material and energy with which humans forge connections, but realities upon which we are utterly dependent—in ways that are out of all proportion to life, nature, the earth or the universe’s dependence on us” (*ibid.*).

Such a model, of course, already exists within these theorizations of cruising, which seek—to borrow Bersani’s language—to “conceptualize a sociality no longer imprisoned within identitarian ideologies” (“Sociability and Cruising,” 50). Cruising’s impersonal intimacies thus can help us to develop a disanthropocentric ecological imagination, as material ecocritics insist we must: not (or not only) by articulating the forms of queer agency immanent to nominally “inanimate” entities but rather (or also) by demonstrating how human relations might themselves already be more disanthropomorphic than we are wont to think. For, as Jane Bennett insists, not only is matter vibrant, but due to our entanglement and mutual constitution with it and due to “the extent to which human being and thinghood overlap,” “we are also nonhuman.”²⁵ If, in elucidating the implications of such a claim, Serenella Iovino and Serpil Opperman cast matter as embodying “a form of ‘emergent’ agency that is combined and interferes with every ‘intentional’ human agency”—meaning that “none of our intentional acts is limited to the sphere of ‘pure’ intentionality”²⁶—and if “geophilia,” in Jeffrey Jerome Cohen’s account of stone’s own vibrancy, “recognizes matter’s *promiscuous desire* to affiliate with other forms of matter,”²⁷ then it is also worth recognizing that Delany’s model of intimacy might, however counterintuitively, do much the same.

Perhaps what TSRTSB offers us, then, is a new way not only to think through our relationship to the material strata and cycles of the environment but also to understand the kinds of nonnormative (in)animacies that already characterize humanness—and social ecology—itsself. Such a possibility might return us to Bersani’s and Delany’s insistence on an impersonal lessness. For insofar as scholars like Stacy Alaimo, in her model of “transcorporeality,”²⁸ and Mel Chen, in her analysis of queer “intoxification,”²⁹ insist that we are constituted by—and coconstituting of—all that surrounds us, they help us to loosen our proprietary claims to autonomous subjectivity. They thus demonstrate that, precisely in being more than ourselves, we are already less ourselves in an identitarian sense.³⁰ And so maybe it is time to let our minds (like the cruiser’s eye) wander, to ask what it would mean for environmentalism to take its existing investment in *doing* less and transmute it into an investment in—or at least comfort with—*being* less. Perhaps such an approach would resemble life in the movie houses Eros I, the New Adonis, or the Capri. For in Delany’s account, when identities are bracketed and selves are lessened and claims are weakened, what is left is a mode of relation predicated on act and gesture, where what one does (either idiosyncratically or characteristically) is not immediately commensurate with who one is understood to be.

25. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 4.

26. Iovino and Opperman, “Material Ecocriticism,” 86.

27. Cohen, *Stone*, 27.

28. Alaimo, “MCS Matters,” 11.

29. Chen, *Animacies*, 196.

30. Morton, similarly, claims that “ecological . . . interdependence implies that there is *less to things* than meets the eye. Yet this lessness means that we can never grasp beings as such” (“Guest Column,” 277; emphasis added).

This paradigm precludes neither investment nor care; rather, it simply depersonalizes them. In the anthropological essay that constitutes the first half of *TSRTSB*, Delany makes a rare turn to his life beyond Times Square, recalling his mother's stroke, which left her "a creature wholly alien yet recognizable in fifty little ways—a hand gesture, a shake of the head, a sudden single phrase ('I know') muttered thirty-seven times, a smile, a moue—as the subject . . . she once was" (52). If a stroke inaugurates a falling off from full subjectivity, leaving in its wake a once familiar person now recognizable only in those "fifty little [gestural] ways," then life in the movie houses suggests a model of relationality predicated upon those tendencies, one where gesture or act is not understood as a trace of the whole subjectivity it fails to reach but rather as the sufficient ground of familiarity. For the men in the theaters, "fixtures" (73) and "regulars" (15), are less characters than they are characteristic habits or postures. They are sometimes professions and names and proclivities but rarely more than that; the trajectory of intimacy that burgeons in the theaters leads one to "recognize . . . faces" and develop "passing acquaintances" (32, 33), just as casual conversation in the supermarket check-out line permits one to "[add] a voice to a face now and again encountered in the neighborhood" (124). But from these forms of minimal knowledge emerge "everything from basic intra-neighborhood 'pleasantness' to heroic neighborly assistance in times of catastrophe" (156). As Delany reflects:

Despite moments of infatuation on both sides, these were not love relationships. . . . They were encounters whose most important aspect was that mutual pleasure was exchanged—an aspect that, yes, colored all their other aspects, but that did not involve any sort of life commitment. . . . More than half were single encounters. But some lasted over weeks; others for months; still others went on a couple of years. And enough endured over a decade or more to give them their own flavor, form, and characteristic aspects. You learned something about these people (though not necessarily their name, or where they lived, or what their job or income was); and they learned something about you. (56–57)

Here, partial (metonymic) knowledge is not a step on the way to "completeness" but rather a mode of ethical relation all its own. What Delany invests in, then, is less any one of these men (although he does develop ongoing relationships with some) than the broader culture that they collectively inhabit and the pleasure that they share. Throughout, Delany attends less to beings or things than to the medial dimension—the common dimension of contact—in which such encounters transpire and in which their effects persist. In this shift toward an objectless (or intransitive) mode of care, Delany's account of cruising begins to feel more directly ecological, insofar as it prioritizes the atmosphere in which relationality itself inheres. This dimension of contact—partial, textured, sensory, seemingly ephemeral—is, like the "overall pleasurable social fabric" and "general sense of social well-being" that he references in his discussion of Jacobs, at times hard to pin down, but it is no less central to our experience for that (126).

Smog, we might remind ourselves, is not the only thing that can hang over cities and alter the way in which we see our world.

Indeed, the effects that such contact produces are insistently ambient, dispersed, diffuse, incomplete. They embody the “field and force” that “human beings [can] share”; they have “flavor” and “form”; the pleasure foundational to them “color[s]” all other aspects of the encounters and their milieu. Rather than relating to one another dyadically, and rather than each being a discrete node in a social network, these men *environ* one another, their relationships valuable (and socially relevant) precisely insofar as they fail to be permanent, localized, defined, or proprietary. As such, they seem to exemplify what Bersani, writing with Adam Phillips, deems “impersonal intimacy”: an “experience of exchange, of intimacy, of desire indifferent to personal identity.”³¹ Such a description may apply not only to bodies in the context of cruising but also to the way in which much environmental contact works. For what is the environment if not indifferent to³²—and in constant contact with—us?

Before such indifference and anonymity, our tendency as environmentalists—as I have tried to suggest—is to make ourselves more personal, more ourselves, to care all the more ardently for the planet (and its metonyms). But what if we took seriously the possibility of engaging the planet disanthropocentrically, of meeting it in its *very impersonality*, and acknowledged that kind of apparent divestment as an affirmative form of relation? What if we conceived of an environmentalism *without* environmentalists—one that thinks far less about who we are (or wish to be) and far more about what makes us up, where we position ourselves, the gestures and entanglements that come to define us, and, yes, the things that we (fail to) do? Such a change not only could help us to understand stewardship as a more impersonal phenomenon but also could articulate the ways in which those who are not likely to engage deliberately with questions of the environment are in fact already acting ecologically, whether positively or adversely. What if environmental stewardship were understood as a dispersed set of practices, affiliations, affects, and animacies—some long-lasting, some fleeting, some deliberate, some entirely accidental? What would it look like to acknowledge a broader range of practices as “ecological” and to deem fewer—or, alternatively, far more—people “environmentalists”? For under a model where practices and postures are irreducible to identity,³³ where investment and identity need not be synonymous (or mutually constitutive) terms, we could acknowledge the ethical importance of a casual environmentalism, an amateur environmentalism, a playful environmentalism, and even an accidental

31. Bersani and Phillips, *Intimacies*, 122, 113.

32. Importantly, to be indifferent is not to be inert. Even those critics invested in the vibrancy of stone acknowledge its indifference (for instance, see Cohen, *Stone*, 23).

33. The fact that this model emphasizes posture over identity is part of what allows me to take cruising—a practice typically associated with gay men—and suggest it as a relational and ecological model that might be adopted (and adapted) more broadly. It is worth observing, too, that cruising has analogs that are both less clearly linked to particular subcultures and more often invoked in environmental(ist) discourse, such as gleaning.

environmentalism—all of them predicated on an ecological understanding that the casual is no less powerful, and ultimately no less causal, than are the deliberate and the premeditated.

Casual Causality

To argue that we could practice an environmentalism divested from deliberate long-term aims is, perhaps, to commit sacrilege. Although trying to articulate truisms about the environmental movement is a losing battle, if occasionally a heuristically necessary one, most environmentalists would agree that our commitment to the planet is a long-term affair. And not an affair, really, but more like a marriage: for better or worse, until death do us part—and beyond. TSRTSB's most obvious challenge to such an imperative comes in its embrace of the fleeting; however, its more powerful intervention involves its elaboration of paradigms of indirect consequence. For environmentalism's investment in longevity tends to be predicated upon a normative understanding of a causality presumed to function in a largely knowable, linear way—and to render the desired future achievable in turn. Environmentalist writing thus tends to fear surprise; precaution and prevention (not only of harm and damage but also of the unknown and the unexpected as such) rule the day.

By contrast, Delany, ostensibly bracketing questions of permanence and longevity, demonstrates paradigms of investment that inhere in the absence of readily recognized endurance and teaches us how to position ourselves relative to forms of consequence whose bounds exceed certainty, intention, and control.³⁴ As he inhabits an intransitive posture, one that cruises and wanders rather than being determined by particular goals or ends, Delany attends to co-occurrence as such; in so doing, he traces the way in which the overlap of the casual and the causal conditions democratic community and ethical relations alike. Whereas an environmentalism predicated on prevention and control insists (like Sedgwick's model of paranoid reading) that "no horror, however apparently unthinkable, shall ever come to [us] as new,"³⁵ Delany suggests that we make and remake our worlds precisely out of consequences that we could not possibly intend or anticipate and that we perhaps cannot even experience as such. Just as his urban encounters are sometimes fleeting and sometimes more permanent (and sometimes recur, enduring precisely in or as their temporariness), the results of contact are, for him, sometimes positive and sometimes deleterious, sometimes life altering and sometimes utterly inconsequential, and most often somewhere in between. The exact nature of an encounter's significance is frequently indeterminate, both because he is often unaware of his interlocutor's path after they part ways ("not all tales end in premature

34. Once again, we might feel how Delany's approach resonates with the work of material ecocritics, who understand our entanglements with agentive matter to serve as a necessary challenge to the fallacy of "pure intentionality."

35. Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading," 146.

death or incarceration. For most, indeed, we never learn an end at all” [TSRTSB, 48]) and because causality itself is often delayed, indirect, and unpredictable, particularly in the context of these casual encounters. Indeed, Delany insists that it is often precisely because encounters or interactions are fleeting, minimal, and casual that their consequence can build.

To insist that causality is always at least in part casual is not to advocate that we renounce intent or deliberateness and welcome whatever may come to pass. Rather, Delany’s model suggests that we stop reifying outcomes (and the presumed predictability of a course of action that could help us reach them) and focus on cultivating the conditions of possibility for a democratic social ecology. For while he repeatedly emphasizes that “the nature of the social practices [he is] investigating is such that *specific benefits and losses* cannot be systematized, operationalized, standardized, or predicted” (169; emphasis added), and while these interactions’ socioaffective power stems largely from the fact that they arise unbidden, Delany does insist that “what [he is] proposing is that we utilize consciously the same principles of socioeconomic diversity through which those pleasant, various, and stable neighborhoods that were never planned grew up naturally” (178–79). Like Delany’s model of city planning, which straddles the line between accident and intent, designing *for* the possibility of chance encounters, we might imagine an environmentalism that focuses at least as much on fostering the socioecological conditions that make systemic and structural changes (and their related forms of solidarity) possible as on reaching targeted ends (those 350 parts per million highlighted in the name of Bill McKibben’s activist collective, say, or a ban on GMOs).

Interestingly, Delany’s most sustained account of casual contact’s capacity to spread borrows directly from the lexicon of environmental degradation, transforming its connotations in the process. Near the close of the book, Delany leaves the theater and turns to the street, his eyes fixed not on the flickering image on a screen before him but on a historically bright light above:

That evening, around seven-twenty, I got home to comet Hale-Bopp, bright and fuzzy-bearded above the west extremity of Eighty-second Street . . . ; I turned up the street to make a quick trip to the supermarket. On my way back down Eighty-second Street, Hale-Bopp created a veritable wave of contact.

. . . .

[O]ver the next eight months, I have seen none of the people involved in them again. . . . Their only fallout is that they were pleasant—and that pleasantness hangs in the street under the trees and by the brownstone stoops near which they occurred, months after Hale-Bopp has ellipsed the sun and soared again into solar night. That fallout will remain as long as I remain comfortable living here. (182–83)

No matter how many times I read TSRTSB, I am always stopped in my tracks by the word that flashes up not once but twice in this passage’s final sentences. Accustomed as ecocritics are to works seeking to represent the kind of slow violence that Nixon so

magnificently theorizes—the aftermath of a nuclear bomb; the prolonged temporality of global climate change; the persistence and magnification of toxins as they make their way through ecological systems and chains—it is, of course, not the word *fallout* itself that startles me. But within a context not of damage but of gain, dealing not in chemicals but in affect, Delany's use of the term—and the kind of endurance implicitly at stake within it—turns Nixon's logic on its head. For what he helps us to see is not slow violence but slow intimacy, the promise of a mode of relation (interpersonal or environmental) that attends to the forms of significance that inhere in the wake of a past event—even, or perhaps especially, if that happening seemed to matter little at all.

And if we turn explicitly to the status of the environment(al), we cannot help but notice in the passage above that as Hale-Bopp fades from the night sky, the enduring impact of the contact it inaugurated “hangs in the street under the trees and by the brownstone stoops near which they occurred.” This affective legacy—dispersed, muted, ambient—inheres in the streets of Manhattan, and, without permanently linking the parties involved, persists within the space that they chanced to share. It is worth pointing out that Delany's primary relationships do not and likely cannot perform the same function. Perhaps our primary relationships can never be ambient; they are always more personal, more interested, more directed. Indeed, within the structure of this passage itself, the proprietary and the personal are bracketed insofar as they frame the encounters on the street but do not directly influence it, insofar as the “wave of contact” inaugurated by the comet is a distinctly impersonal phenomenon or force. The scene begins at “home” (although, interestingly, Delany arrives home to “bright and fuzzy-bearded” Hale-Bopp, not to his partner). It ends with a litany of possessives and a gesture toward domestic life—“With *my* cane, I walked up *my* stoop steps, carrying *my* groceries and *my* notebook into the vestibule, where I *unlocked* the door and pushed into the lobby” (183; emphasis added). But between? Between we have people who may or may not “belong” to (or in) the neighborhood, who are not names or stories or identities but rather bodies and postures and garments, relational paradigms and ethnic/racial/socioeconomic types (“a heavy, white-haired plainclothes policeman”; “two women . . . , one in a brown raincoat, both in hats”; a “father and two kids, son and daughter”; “a homeless man in his twenties with blackened hands and short black hair”; “an older Hispanic gentleman in an overcoat, with a pencil-thin mustache” [182–83]). It is these anonymous figures—and the fleeting interactions they (and Delany) share—that leave a trace (or a tail through the night sky).

So what if those of us invested in environmentalism acknowledged what we might be loath to admit—that the earth can never be our primary relationship? For in virtually all respects, environmentalism's gains are not direct but *collateral*—a term that we are accustomed to using to describe damage, not improvement. Saving the planet, even if that is our goal, can only ever be collateral to our efforts, can only ever be an indirect effect of other practices. In other words: we cannot save the earth. We can do x, y, and z and hope that they add up to meaningful change. We can do x, y, and z and hope that

others we do not know—the anonymous fellow denizens of this moment and the even more radically anonymous denizens of moments yet to come—do p, q, and r. Stewardship is not simply about those metonymic gestures addressed earlier but also about impersonal interactions, about acknowledging the ways in which our planetary fate—whatever we do or however we identify—is yoked to the agency of strangers (human and nonhuman), to the contingent relationship between intent and outcome, to the even more complicated relationship between unintentional actions and their ultimate end. Endurance is only ever going to come as a result of a confluence of circumstances. Our contribution is only ever going to be provisional, partial, and minor. Our task, then, may be not to get into the business of saving but rather to ask ourselves a series of questions that are no less important for being a bit more diminutive: How are we to relate to a job that is only ever partially and contingently done? How do we build a political movement responsive to accident, to the collateral, to the unintentional? How do we learn to value the things that happen secondarily—whose outcomes lie beyond the reach of our control, and beyond the reach of our intent? And how might we thus acknowledge the fact that the secondary need not be devalued but rather differently valued, requiring different paradigms of engagement—and yielding different forms of benefit—than those we associate with our primary relationships? What if, rather than analogizing environmental stewardship to the forms of care that we already know how to practice,³⁶ we trained ourselves—and each other—in these?

Coda: Queer Fallout

Although the term *fallout* itself appears only these two times in *TSRTSB*, its resonances—like those of so many of the local moments that Delany depicts—characteristically spread. For we might say that the book’s meditations urge us primarily to consider how forms of pleasure and sociability (not just toxins) can yield fallout and how benefit (not just damage) can unfurl collaterally. In the passage about Hale-Bopp, pleasantness is the queer fallout of casual encounter; more broadly, *pleasantness*—an adjective that Delany defines as “pleasure in its most generalized form” (121) and that suffuses the text (appearing thirty-nine times, with increasing density)—is the queer fallout of desire’s free expression. A healthy, diverse, safe³⁷ New York City is the queer fallout of a Times Square where movie houses and other spaces conducive to pleasure intersperse with a range of small businesses. A livable life is the queer fallout of a net of casual

36. Here I am thinking not only of familial relationships (as in the rhetoric of “Mother Earth”) but also, more generally, of environmentalism’s emphasis on love (as in the rhetoric of “love the planet”). Delany’s text, importantly, demonstrates how care inheres in the absence of “love relationships” (*TSRTSB*, 57). It is not, certainly, that love is irrelevant to environmental stewardship but rather that love need not necessarily be privileged among affects that accompany and engender care.

37. I use these ideologically loaded terms as a way of gesturing toward Delany’s project of redefining words we think we already know. *Safe* is chief among them (see esp. *TSRTSB*, 121–22), but the others also figure into his text.

encounters that, on their own, often seem to yield little of immediate consequence. Sustained ethical investment in the environment(s) where we live—and the wide-ranging communities that comprise them—is the queer fallout of forms of contact that seem to require less commitment than coincidence.

And to extend such provocations beyond the bounds of Delany's own argument—to consider, in other words, how his pages' resonances spread—we might argue that an environmental ethic more thoroughly engaged with urban space, with impersonality, with sociability and pleasure, with material entanglements and disanthropocentric possibilities could be the queer fallout of attending seriously to *TSRTSB* and of collectively acknowledging of the possibilities that Delany proposes. For if we expand the scale of our gaze, loosen our own proprietary attachments to the texts that we think of as being germane to our field, and open ourselves more fully to contingency and surprise, we might realize (perhaps with a start!) that those of us invested in environmental activism and ecological thought have in fact been cruising the planet all along.

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