

Paris is Burning

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Asking the question ‘what does it mean to be oriented?’ Sara Ahmed invites us to think about spatial orientation and sexual orientation together, as we follow familiar paths or attempt to carve out new pathways through the world. One way to trouble the path-taking process, she suggests, is to explore the background - the ‘sedimented histories’ - that make some pathways so much easier to pursue than others. Questioning in particular the paths that promise to deliver us in ‘straight lines’ from here to there, Ahmed makes a play for trajectories that take us askew, for swerving, deviating re-orientations that might be either or at once spatial, social and sexual.

What becomes of this process of ‘orientation’ when our very earth is re-orientating itself? Why so much cleaving to straight lines when the planet is vacillating, upheaving, convulsing? This is our question, our incitement in the paper *Queer Fire*. The kind of pathways or orientations that we are drawn toward are not just those that take us across the surface of the planet or through the sedimented layers of social worlds, but those that ply the deep history of the earth – with all its previous swerves and deviations.



Figs 1 & 2 *Věstonice Venus* (29-25,000 BCE) [Wikimedia Commons]

Most of our ancestors didn't simply tread or carve pathways. They *blazed* trails. They used fire to deal with variable terrain, variegated life forms and volatile weather as they made their way through the shifting space-times of the earth. And fire doesn't do straight lines, at least not for long. A heatwave, a dry spell, a gust of wind, and the flame front does its own thing. What sedimented histories of ash and char seem to be telling us is that fire's pathway through earth history is a succession of accidents, irruptions, deviations, the alternation of blazing glory and smoking ruin. It's a history - where it hasn't consumed its own traces - of bodies putting themselves on the line, of slow and painful trials, but also of learning how to craft luxuriant landscapes and to bake exquisite objects.

With its enthrallment to the straight and narrow and the closed circuit, contemporary environmentalism, we feel, is not the positively incendiary force it could be. Beneath all that belt-tightening and loin-girding, we and many others detect a continued allegiance to prevailing modes of economic futurism – the 'straight time' of ecological modernization, sustainable self-discipline and green growth. Closely related to this socioeconomic repetition of the present, we might also see a commitment to what has been called 'reproductive futurism': the coercive investment in heterosexual coupling, the nuclear family, and most of all, the

figure of the child. Or what Lee Edelman denounces as 'the disciplinary image of the "innocent" Child performing its mandatory cultural labor of social reproduction'.

And that's a hefty burden, not only for the children who don't fit the template, but for those who do. Even, or especially, in the environmental context, reproductive futurism is not simply a matter of the child being cherished in and for itself, but of being valued for its contribution to perpetuating the species – or at least a certain vision of this species. As Rebekah Sheldon poignantly depicts the role of 'futurity's child' – in the ever-more catastrophic environmental storyline: 'the child ... is kind of retronaut, a piece of the future lodged in and under the controlling influence of the present'.

In this way, what is primed as childhood 'innocence' may be more of a grooming to raise the chance of our successors making it through a degraded and disastrous future. And the difficult daily truth for those of us who teach 'environment' – in whatever form – is that we find ourselves serving on the frontline of this retronaut prepping. Our task is to talk students through climate tipping points, species extinction and irrevocable planetary exhaustion. For the privilege of being informed about the crises visited upon them by previous generations, we charge them heavily – here in the UK tertiary sector upwards of £9000 a year – adding up to levels of debt that will weigh on many of them to the end of their lives. Scarcely even qualifying as cruel *optimism*, this is lifelong indenture to the apocalypse.

Meanwhile the best that the 'breakthrough' 2015 Paris agreement on climate change has to offer is the prospect of 3 °C of global heating, at a time when 2 °C has recently been upgraded to 'extremely dangerous' global warming. And even the Paris accord rests on the assumption of that unproven modes of extracting and sequestering carbon on a massive scale will compensate for continued emissions. As climate scientist Kevin Anderson reflected on the Paris accord: 'the world has just gambled its future on the appearance in a puff of smoke of a carbon-sucking fairy godmother.'

So why fire, apart from the fact that, like insurgents the world over, we often dream of taking a flaming torch to the whole shambles? Why do we think fire might help us

take the swerve away from the straight line/straight time of the ecological austerity-reproductive futurist coupling? Where do we look for fuel and sparks?

A preference for body heat over clear, bright light seems to ignite a succession of radical movements and countercultures. Seeking to unleash the energetic potentiality of women from its literal and symbolic enchainment to the hearth, feminism has long resisted the sublimation of desire into productive or reproductive perpetuity. Queer thought and practice has experimented with possibilities for multiplying and intensifying pleasure in ways unhindered by self-sacrifice for the sake of future generations. Emblazoned under headings like 'Gay Flames', 'Flaming Creatures', 'Capturing Fire', queer cultures have not only imagined but sought to enflesh burning desire and flamboyance. For centuries black and other racially minoritized cultures have improvised and experimented on the revolutionary force of what Fred Moten refers to as an 'inspired materiality': *The Fire Next Time*, calls James Baldwin, *The Fire This Time* responds Jesmyn Ward and her co-authors across the decades.

There is a reason – we suspect, but cannot prove – why fire flares figuratively and so often literally wherever frustration and anger fuses with intense desire and impassioned creativity. We like to believe that there are traces deep in our sedimented histories, perhaps also playing across our tender surfaces: memories of a flame that not only destroys but creates - revitalising ecological systems, opening new pathways, transmuting the stuff of the physical world. A fire, as we see it, that is more than a metaphor for incendiary political desire. Fire, that is, as a medium, a material-energetic force which carries us beyond the 'denaturalising' of existing social arrangements so beloved of critical thinking - and deep into the realms of renaturalisation, into innervating contact with the elements and powers of the earth.

So we think of fire as the connection between the sensual-sexual yearnings of the living body and the potentiality of the wider world, as a hinge between the differential force of sex in all its forms and the indeterminacy of the inorganic, as a juncture between the exuberance of biological life and the excess of the geophysical and cosmic realms. To reorient ourselves, spatiotemporally, socially, sexually on a planet in the throes of reorienting itself, we suggest, it helps to have a long run-up.

The more fire history, social history and sexual history we can review, the more glimmer we get of the paths not taken, the unrealised prospects, the still-open horizons.

One moment we touched on in the paper that continues to intrigue us is the earliest evidence yet found of a kiln – built perhaps 30,000 years ago – which is accompanied by the oldest known sculpted and fired female form, the famously full-bodied Věstonice Venus. Here, it seems, carbon-combusting earthly godmothers first discovered the power of chambered and intensified flame to transmute geological matter – opening the way to all the ovens, furnaces and heat engines to come. But it feels as though, at this juncture, enclosed fire and sexual identities are still in formation – and that somewhere in this molten state the earthenware goddess and the metal-circuited cyborg co-exist as potentialities.

One path, or rather a convergence of pathways, brings us to the notion of Gaia – the self-regulating planet that symbolically fulfills the whore/mother relation to patriarchal projects of planetary modulation and control. In this way, contemporary strategies to keep the earth system entrained within the inherited Holocene regime seem once more to invoke a reproductive futurism – now scaled up to the planetary level. So we wonder what kinds of environmentalism might be inspired by the idea of pyroGaia – an inherently flamboyant astronomical body on which fire and life incite each other to ever-new and pointlessly exuberant sensual displays. What forms might sexual pleasure take if futurity was seen not as an end in itself but as an erratic side effect of a willingness to share bodily warmth and bond over extreme heat? And what should we be teaching our ‘environmental’ students if our task is other than forging inferno-proofed replacements for the current generation?

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Nigel and Kathryn’s paper *Queer fire: ecology, combustion and pyrosexual desire* in *Feminist Review* Issue 118 is available [here](#)

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