Eros and the Mechanisms of Eco-Defense

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Desire drives everything. Arising in our animal bodies, eros impels us to stretch and strive for what we want. What we want, most of all, is connection.

Rooted in patriarchal pastoralism, globalized via colonialism, serving the aims of capitalism, and furthered by slice-and-dice-style science, the hegemonic economy of (re)production and consumption is the catastrophic antithesis of exuberant eros. It persists by damming and diverting eros along with rivers.

Sparked by rioting street queens and enacted in explicit solidarity with the Black, Chicano, Native American, and women’s liberation movements of that era, the fabulous gay liberation movement of the 1970s has devolved into a fairly conservative movement that asks for only reactionary “rights” like marriage and military service. We need a theory and praxis of animal liberation that resuscitates the queer spirit of rebellious and generous connectedness.

To be fully realized, the ecofeminist ethos of care (Kheel 1993) must be nourished and informed by eros. But “love don’t come easy,” as Diana Ross and the Supremes once sang. Eros can’t be hurried, ordered around, or expected to march in anything like a straight line. To resuscitate eros, we must understand its queer ways.
Steps to an ecology of eros

“The diversity of modes of singing amongst birds is so great that it defies explanation”
— C. K. Catchpole and P. J. B. Slater, Birdsong (2008, 234)

“We don’t only sing, but we dance just as good as we want.”
— Archie Bell, introducing himself and the Drells on the 1968 recording of “Tighten Up”

The leaves of Bruce Bagemihl’s (1999) 750-page encyclopedic account of animal homosexuality teem with “wuzzling” dolphins, “necking” giraffes, and “cavorting” manatees, not to mention “aquatic spiraling,” “sonic foreplay,” and a form of sexual stimulation known as the “genital buzz”—and all of that just in the few pages devoted to an overview of the “dizzying array” of ways that nonhuman animals court and show affection to one another (13–18). In all, Bagemihl carefully reviews the documented accounts of same-sex courtship, affection, pair-bonding, parenting, and sex—did I mention “mounting, diddling, and bump-rumping”?—among the members of some 300 species of mammals and birds.

Zoo visits, televised nature programmes, and storybooks featuring stereotypically gendered characters teach us to think about other-than-human animals as relentlessly heterosexual despite “the much more prevalent sex diversity among living matter” (Hird 2004, 86). It’s not just pop culture that gets it wrong. Bagemihl (1999) also documents the long, sorry history of scientific obliviousness, bewilderment, and heterosexist hubris in the face of same-sex sexuality among other-than-human animals. From the ethologist who decried the moral degeneracy of butterflies to the wildlife biologist who evicted a same-sex couple from the nest they had built together so that he could give it to a heterosexual pair, the litany of wrongs and wrong-headed writings is leavened only by the unintentional humor of the sometimes surreal extremes to which scientists have gone in order to avoid seeing (much less naming) the queer eros right in front of them.

Before we ascribe the bemusement of those scientists entirely to the mutually reinforcing junction of ignorance and bigotry, consider this: The fungi known as Schizophyllum Commune swap genes by touching and have as many as 23,000 mating types (or, as we like to call them, sexes), thereby preventing “selfing” in a species in which any individual can both give and receive genetic material in order to produce progeny (Casselton 2002). Confused? That’s my point. Not only does non-reproductive sexuality flower in a variety of forms, but sexual reproduction itself occurs by means of a “remarkably diverse” (Fraser and Heitman 2004) array of strategies.
But—wait!—there’s more: not only some plants but also some animals reproduce by various asexual means, including parthenogenesis. As Catriolina Mortimer-Sandelands and Bruce Erickson (2010) note in the introduction to their important anthology, *Queer Ecologies*, this “diversity of asexual modes of reproduction as well as several multi-gendered ones … appear to defy dominant, dimorphic accounts of sexual reproduction altogether” (12).

Alaimo (2010) and others have commented on the inadequacy of our conceptual categories in the face of all of this. As biologist J. B. S. Haldane famously opined, “the universe is not only queerer than we suppose, it is queerer than we can suppose.” So it’s not surprising that eighteenth-, nineteenth-, or even twentieth-century scientists unwittingly assimilated their observations of same-sex behavior into dualistic schemas they themselves couldn’t see (because they seemed like reality).

Of course, just because mushrooms swap genes by brushing against each other is no reason to presume that we could or should do the same. Just because marsupials are also mammals does not—alas—mean that we can bound around with infants in our pouches. Nonetheless, this survey of the variety of (always embodied) animal eros offers us much more than an antidote to the still-too-common misconception that homosexuality is unnatural. First: Things we can’t imagine right now might still be possible. And: We too may be queerer than we suppose.

People have courted, demonstrated affection, constructed households, and raised their children in a blooming profusion of different ways. And, while there’s some doubt that we deserve the sobriquet of *sapiens*, there’s no doubt at all about the *homo*. We not only sing to our same-sex sweethearts in almost as many languages and styles of music as there are varieties of birdsong, we also dance together in configurations that don’t fit within the boy-girl two-step of the Western square dance—and not just in urban discos.

Since errors and erasures in this realm are almost as endemic as those concerning same-sex sexuality in nonhuman animals, a brief survey is in order. While gay or lesbian *identity* constructed in contradistinction to the relatively recently invented category of “heterosexual” is fairly new and geographically bounded (Katz 2007), same-sex erotic *behavior* has been “virtually universal in human societies” (Drucker 1996, 75), sometimes in defiance of cultural norms but often with cultural toleration or approval. From traditional marriages between African women (Morgan and Wierenga 2006) to casual sex “play” between Pakistani men (Khan 2001)—neither considered particularly queer by the participants—expressions of same-sex desire continue to thrive even in regions where they are repressed or reputed not to exist.

None of this is news. Or, rather, none of this should be news, since the evidence—like that of animal homosexuality—has been hidden in plain
view. For example, in Africa, where rock-solid scientific certainty of the absence of indigenous homosexuality delayed appropriate AIDS-prevention interventions for many years and where several states still justify anti-gay legislation with the idea that homosexuality is alien to the continent, indigenous same-sex sexuality “is substantially documented in scores of scholarly books, articles, and dissertations in a wide range of academic disciplines, in unpublished archival documents … in art, literature, and film and in oral history from all over the continent” (Epprecht 2008, 7).

In the Americas, culturally condoned expressions of same-sex sexuality were so common among indigenous peoples that this was frequently cited by invading Europeans as justification for cultural genocide (Galeano 1992; Katz 1976; Smith 2005). In some North American native cultures, “two-spirit” people—those believed to have both male and female aspects due to their gender presentation and/or sexual orientation—were not only tolerated but esteemed (Roscoe 1988). Similarly, “there are striking examples of the recognition and acceptance of forms of same-sex desire in the history of important parts of Asia” (Sanders 2005, 32), including China, India, Japan, and Java. Locals varieties of homoeroticism in Thailand and elsewhere in Asia-Pacific were and remain truly diverse, confounding not only heteronormativity but also easy explanations about what “homoeroticism” might mean (Jackson 2001; Wierenga, Blackwood and Bhaiya 2007).

As Chou (2001) cautions about China, homosexuals of the past ought not be simplistically romanticized. Some traditional patterns of same-sex sexual behavior, in that region and elsewhere, occurred within and were patterned by social inequalities that today we would condemn as unjust. Some historical reports of same-sex eroticism record its repression. Nevertheless, whether they have been esteemed, approved, tolerated, used, abused, or repressed—and however they have thought of or denoted themselves—people who sometimes or exclusively have sex with members of their own sex have existed in virtually every human population. We’re just that kind of animal.

Many—perhaps most—of the people who have sex with partners of the same sex do not think of themselves as homosexual or even bisexual. At the same time, terms denoting homosexual identity (or something like it) abound. While the globalization of gay pride has led to the importation of the terms gay and lesbian and variants thereof into numerous languages (Kaytal 2002), local terms both old and new express local ways of enacting and thinking about same-sex sexuality. Again, it is necessary to resist idealization. While some contemporary same-sex practices challenge social inequalities or are integrated into egalitarian communities, others conform to—and perhaps reinforce—binary notions of gender and patriarchal conceptions of power (Blackwood and Wierenga 2007).
Nonetheless we can revel in the linguistic and conceptual creativity deployed in the service of same-sex sexuality. In China, some activists have repurposed the term tongzi—a Chinese translation of a Soviet-era term for comrade, constructed from tong (same) and zhi (spirit, goal, or orientation)—as a way of denoting themselves in a manner congruent with cultural values (Chou 2001). In Uganda, the previously derisive term kuchu is now claimed with pride (Tamale 2007). In the United States, many Native Americans have embraced the term two-spirit as “an expression of our sexual and gender identities as sovereign from those of white GLBT movements” (Driskoll 2004).

Diversity in self-identification also flowers within populations. Thailand’s national lesbian organization uses the term ying-rak-ying (women who love women) to describe its constituency; at the same time, many Thai women who do love women reject that term in favor of tom (short for tomboy) or dee (short for lady), because these better express their sense of themselves within the rigid gender system in which their sexualities operate (Blackwood and Wieringa 2007).

Which brings us to gender. Recently, Czech archaeologists unearthed neolithic skeletal remains of a biological male who had been buried—4,500 to 5,000 years ago—in the manner in which females of that time and place usually were interred (“Third Sex Prehistoric Skeleton” 2011). Considerable diversity in ideas about gender has been documented in the human cultures that have arisen in different times and places since then, both in terms of whether gender is mutable (Nanda 2000; Ramet 1996) and how many genders there might be (Davies 2006; Roscoe 2000). Communities also have varied in the ways that they have coped with or explained persons who don’t quite fit into any of the categories created by their culture’s gender system (Epprecht 2007).

The multiplicity of sexualities and exuberant diversity of gender expression among Homo sapiens suggests that some measure of flexibility—or, at least, a capacity for and tendency toward variability—is intrinsic to our species. The rigid enforcement of a two-gender system that goes hand in hand with rigid insistence on relentless heterosexuality is an artifact of a particular set of circumstances, seeming natural only because of its tendency to reproduce itself.

Televized nature programs tend to portray evolution as an urgent quest in which every animal attempts to spawn as many offspring as possible. Some scientists, too, have implicitly defined evolutionary success as reproduction of the individual rather than the survival of the family, population, or species. Some ‘evolutionary psychologists’ attribute virtually every characteristic and behavior to the reproductive imperative implicit in this presumed law of nature.
But, if incessant reproduction is the law, we’ve got an awful lot of animal scofflaws. In some species, only a few individuals even attempt to reproduce. In many species, females—for whom reproduction is often a physically perilous affair—actively avoid pregnancy by means of a variety of strategies (Bagemihl 1999).

Natural selection in the sense of helpful genetic mutations passed along to offspring who then disproportionately survive to reproduce certainly does occur and certainly does explain many evolutionary changes. But exclusive focus on the reproductive success of individuals ignores the interlocking material and social circumstances that also evolve. It’s not quite right to say that organisms adapt to their environments, since organisms are part of their ecosystems, which themselves constantly change as their participants evolve (Oyama 2000). Furthermore, natural selection acts upon not only physical traits but also behaviors, many of which are transmitted by social learning (Avital and Jablonka 2000). Moreover, cultural and physical traits often co-evolve.

Natural selection acts upon groups as well as individuals. The overall fitness (or lack thereof) of the social group—family, flock, tribe, or troop—significantly influences likelihood of individual survival. Some circumstances—such as high rates of predation—do mandate that everyone at least attempt to reproduce for the population to survive, but in most instances the problem faced by populations is the opposite. The long-term survival of any group requires that its population be calibrated to the availability of resources. Same-sex sexual activities (and non-reproductive heterosexual erotic activities) allow for pleasure, bonding, and other benefits without risk of reproduction. Hence, queer eros enhances group fitness.

Adults who don’t reproduce help groups in other ways. Homosexual pairs adopt orphaned offspring in many species. Adult animals who do not reproduce—including but not limited to exclusively homosexual animals—tend to contribute more to their social group than they take out. In all social circumstances where adults cooperate to provide protection and resources to juveniles, those who do not reproduce contribute without withdrawing. Those adults also have more energy to devote to activities that benefit the group, whether these be writing operas or looking out for predators.

The simplistic view of natural selection and the European mindset in which it emerged both presume a struggle for scarce resources as the precondition of life. This way of thinking about the world makes sense in its own ecological context. Even after the decimation of the plagues and purges of the centuries just past—the traumatic impact of which must still have been reverberating in European psyches—the population of Europe remained too high to be satisfactorily supported by its deforested and depleted ecosystems.
Within such simultaneously barren and crowded surrounds, the Hobbesian view of each against all must have seemed self-evidently true.

But, in fact, plentitude rather than scarcity is the norm in nature. Most animals—like most people, prior to the successive waves of conquest and consequent population explosion that have globalized the environmental crises from which they arose—spend comparatively little time securing food and shelter, with plenty of time left to play. Virtually every human culture has produced music, visual art, and sport of some sort. All of these—along with non-reproductive sexuality—can be seen as exuberant uses of the abundant energy that shines down from the sun every day (Bagemihl 1999).

Bagemihl contrasts his theory of biological exuberance with the notion that homosexuality serves as a natural check on population, but I see those ideas as complementary and mutually reinforcing. The exuberant upsurge of queer eros keeps populations in check, thereby setting the stage for even more exuberance. Suppression of queer eros thus injures populations, and their enveloping ecosystems, as well as individuals.

Reproduction and its discontents

In zoos and vivisection labs, animals are assorted into boy-girl pairs and forced to mate if they do not do so willingly. Often, this involves breaking up same-sex pair bonds or preventing females from fleeing unwanted penetration. Likewise, in animal agriculture—whether on factory farms or family farms—everything depends on reproduction. From the electro-ejaculation of bulls to the confinement of fragile “broiler breeder” hens with heavyweight roosters made sex-mad by starvation, numerous cruel and unusual strategies ensure that no farmed animal opts out of compulsory heterosexuality.

Even animal lovers join in the superintendency of animal sexuality. Dog lovers who decry puppy mills still feel free to decide whether, when, and with whom the canines under their control will partner. Animal advocates pursue the laudable goal of reducing animal homelessness and execution by demanding that all companion animals be deprived of reproductive freedom rather than by abolishing the for-profit traffic in dogs and cats. Animal sanctuaries, with similarly pragmatic rationales, routinely prevent their residents from choosing to reproduce.

Meanwhile, homosexual or transgender behavior or identity remains a risky endeavor for people in many places. In some 35 countries, homosexual behavior remains a crime punishable by imprisonment. In South Africa—the first country in the world to enshrine non-discrimination on the basis of sexual
orientation in its national constitution—lesbians still confront an everyday threat of “corrective rape.” Here in the United States, Mercy for Animals cofounder Nathan Runkle was gay-bashed nearly to death only a few years ago.

The structural function of homophobia is the maintenance of the man-on-top binary gender system (Pharr 1997). That system dates back to the days when both daughters and dairy cows were the property of males who presumed the right to force females—whether they be called wives, slaves, or livestock—to bear more or different offspring than they would otherwise choose. Patriarchy and pastoralism both require fairly relentless preoccupation with and control of reproduction (and, hence, sexuality). The traditional pastoralism from which today’s factory farms evolved necessarily involved hands-on control of the reproduction of captive animals (Patterson 2002). Tools and tactics first used to gain and maintain total control over nonhuman animals were adapted for use with human slaves (Spiegel 1996). The process of conquest by which men who viewed women, land, animals, and people of other races as property created a globalized economy also carried homophobia around the world.

In today’s topsy-turvy world in which Uganda’s Christian president condemns homosexuality as a foreign import despite the fact that Christianity comes from elsewhere while the indigenous Langi people allowed marriage between men and biologically male mudoko dako people (Tamale 2007), it may be important to repeat that queer eros flowered in a variety of flavors prior to the era of European colonialism and imperialism. While cultures varied in their attitudes towards homosexual behavior, toleration appears to have been the norm (Epprecht 2008), including in places where homophobia is now most marked (Galeano 1992).

What happened? First, European Christians brought their atypical antipathy to homosexual behavior with them when they invaded the Americas, in some instances using native sex and gender norms as excuses for cultural genocide (Galeano 1992; Smith 2005). Obversely, Europeans were vested in the notion that Africans were like animals—and, hence, relentlessly heterosexual. “The prevailing prejudice was that Africans were uncivilized and close to nature … The emerging consensus on homosexuality thus required that Africans conform to the expectation of a supposedly natural heterosexuality” (Epprecht 2008, 40). The mechanisms by which African sexual diversity was denied or suppressed eerily echo those by which homosexuality among nonhuman animals was elided from the record for so long. Anthropologists failed to see, refused to record, hesitated to publish, or explained away instances of same-sex sexuality of which they were aware.

These colonial cover-ups were in many instances compounded by post-colonial leaders eager to avoid any suggestion of the luridly ‘exotic’
spectacles of African sexuality promulgated by National Geographic and the like (Epprecht 2008). Many of these leaders were men eager to enjoy the subordination of women facilitated by homophobia (Tamale 2007). Meanwhile, the post-colonial wave of trade globalization brought commodified conceptions of “gay,” “lesbian,” and “transgendered” identity to regions where indigenous cultures had other ways of conceptualizing same-sex activity (Katyal 2002). Rooted as they are in European ways of thinking about identity, these may or may not prove to be useful to queer people elsewhere—or to our shared struggle to bring ourselves into balance with the biosphere—but they certainly have provoked a fresh wave of homophobia-fueled violence in many places (Blackwood and Wieringa 2007).

How did “gay” or “lesbian” get to be nouns instead of adjectives (or, even better, verbs) anyway? In short, the same Enlightenment ideas that brought us scientific racism engendered a way of thinking that led eventually to the categorization of people on the basis of what we now call sexual orientation. “The rise of evolutionary thought in Charles Darwin’s wake generally coincided with the rise of sexological thought in Richard von Krafft-Ebing’s” (Sandilands-Mortimer and Erickson 2010, 7). As we’ve seen, sexual selection is but one aspect of natural selection. Yet, perhaps because of the preoccupation with reproduction implicit in patriarchy/pastoralism, that element of evolution became the center of evolutionary theory. In consequence, “sex became a matter of fitness, and individual attributes could now be evaluated based on their apparent adaptiveness to an organism’s reproductive capacity” (Sandilands-Mortimer and Erickson 2010, 8).

That was bad news for eros. The medicalization of homosexuality arose at the same time, and from the same train of thought, as eugenics and scientific racism. Many of the medical assaults on people who were (or were perceived to be) either homosexual or non-gender-normative “occurred in the context of Race Hygiene and Race Betterment movements”; not only queers but also deaf, disabled, or dark-skinned people were considered “literally, biological enemies of the human species” (McWhorter 2010, 76). All of these efforts to improve the species presumed and sought to preserve the position of Homo sapiens at the top of an imagined hierarchy, the scientific rationalization of which continues to make speciesism feel logical even to those who now know that evolution is not an upwards affair.

Along with delusions of grandeur and a perverse preoccupation with reproduction, the process of conquest that has led us to the present juncture exported an ethic of exploitation and a fantasy of infinity. That ethic, and the fantasy that enables it, have since been codified into the economic rules by which European powers still force the rest of the world to play.
Capitalism demands and indeed requires incessant growth—new markets for new goods, which must come from somewhere—in order not to collapse. Unlike economies in which participants cooperate to trade fairly, capitalism is mathematically unbalanced by the removal of profits into private pockets and thus requires constant infusions of fresh resources. Thus, it requires not only incessant reproduction—whether of factory farmed chickens, assembly line automobiles, or worker-consumers to build those cars and eat those birds—but also the diversion of desire. Every natural impulse, whether for self-expression or social contact or—yes—sex, must be detoured toward the purchase of some product (for which, of course, one must earn the money to buy). And so now queer eros, where it is not still actively suppressed, faces the same dispiriting fate as heterosexual romance—the destination wedding!

Having integrated virtually every place on earth into its economy of empty capacity, late consumer capitalism has run out of places to go for fresh supplies of worker-consumers. Everything now depends on getting everybody to buy more—which is of course the opposite of what everything actually depends on.

Seven billion people now stand on an overheated planet. “Humans have already changed the biosphere substantially, so much so that some argue for recognizing the time in which we live as a new geologic epoch, the Anthropocene” (Barnosky et al. 2012, 57). Climate change comes down to “patterns of human behavior, particularly over-population and over-consumption” (Oscamp 2000), both of which follow directly from the suppression and diversion of eros in all of its exuberant diversity.

Preoccupation with reproduction characterizes most present-day human cultures. Reproduction remains an obligatory duty to family and community even as we confront the catastrophic environmental effects of overpopulation. Parenthood remains conflated with adulthood in many minds. This “repro-centric” (Sandilands-Mortimer and Erickson 2010, 11) logic is both cause and consequence of suppression of queer eros. If reproduction is the paramount goal, then non-reproductive eros must be suppressed; if non-reproductive eros is suppressed, eros will seek satisfaction in socially sanctioned reproduction and consumption.

Unless…

**Consciousness of lost limbs**

In 2001, the mass trial of 52 Egyptian men arrested for dancing together at a floating nightclub rightly drew international attention to the ongoing persecution of homosexuals in that country (Hawley 2001). But let’s notice
something else: these were men who knew they faced prosecution for homosexual activity. And they were dancing. To disco. On a boat.

From “Fiddler on the Roof” to “Mississippi Masala” (not to mention “Romeo and Juliet” and all of its remixes), pop culture thrums with tales of young lovers defying parental prohibitions to follow their hearts. In the real world, eros often leads lovers of all ages to disobey even more powerful authorities. Here in the United States, in South Africa, and elsewhere, laws prohibiting miscegenation aimed to maintain oppressive racist regimes, but men and women of different races persisted in partnering, the threat of jail notwithstanding. All around the world to this day, same-sex couples come together despite real and menacing threats ranging from social ostracism to the death penalty.

“Beneath the paving stones—the beach!” Like half-forgotten dreams, anarchist slogans like that Situationist gem from the 1968 student rebellion in Paris pop up on walls and burst from the mouths of black-clad teenagers smashing shop windows with baseball bats. Tattooed survivors of childhood sexual abuse tuck battered copies of the CrimethInc Ex-Workers Collective Manual Days of War, Nights of Love into backpacks, to read while sitting in endangered trees. Vegan punks bake cupcakes for each other, just to bring some sweetness to their struggles.

Eros is right there—ready—to show us where we need to go and give us the energy to get there. Yet eros is also so easily deadened or misdirected. Eros can help us save ourselves and each other, and quit wrecking the planet along the way, but to do so it must be deliberately cultivated.

It might seem counterintuitive to pursue the aim of checking human hubris by cultivating human eros. But true eros, unlike plastic pleasures purchased from profiteers, is both enlivening and relational. Eros is exuberant, sometimes jumping up when and where you least expect it. Eros begins in the body but always reaches outward, seeking connection.

By “eros” I mean not only physical love and sexual desire but also what Black lesbian feminist poet and activist Audre Lorde (2012) called the “sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, [that] forms a bridge between the sharers” (56). Eduardo Galeano (1992) reports that among the Maya of Colombia, the ancestors of whom rose up against the sexual constraints imposed by the Conquistadors, the word for sex is “play.” Eros is playful. Queer eros is both cause and consequence of a happy state of affairs in which life is not a grim struggle to reproduce in the face of scarcity but, rather, joyous usage of the surplus energy that shines down from the sun every day.

Because eros is inherently surplus and always oriented outward, genuine eros is always generous. We share smiles with sweethearts and give gifts and
kisses to beloved others. It feels good to do this. Eros awakens feelings of all kinds—including the ones that ought to be telling us this is an emergency and giving us the energy to do something about it. As Lorde wrote in her classic essay on the uses of the erotic, “as we begin to recognize our deepest feelings, we begin to give up, of necessity, being satisfied with suffering and self-negation, and with the numbness which so often seems like their only alternative in our society” (58). Our feelings are fuel, and the good news is that they are renewable sources of energy.

Eros arouses not only desire but also curiosity, creativity, and courage. It has abidingly proven to be more powerful than guns or governments in motivating human behavior. Inherently ecological, because it begins in our animal bodies, eros undammed and undiverted will flow in the direction of biospheric balance.

Greta Gaard (1996) points out that “dominant Western culture’s devaluation of the erotic parallels its devaluations of women and of nature” and that “these devaluations are mutually reinforcing” (115). As with all of the intersections of oppression, the upside of seeing the junction is recognizing opportunities for intervention. And so, when we nurture wombats, women, or weeds genuinely and with generosity, we also are cultivating eros. But, if we hope to use eros to reanimate ourselves while animating our environmental efforts, we will have to come to better terms with our own animality.
The animal problem

The Eurocentric logic of mind-over-matter tells us that we should transcend our animal bodies by means of our very fine minds. That’s the same logic, however, that divides and conquers the world into male-over-female, white-over-black, and straight-over-gay. My favorite flavor of ecofeminist theory extends the feminist understanding of intersectionality to include earth and animals, deepening our analysis of race, gender, and other social constructs along the way.

Neither homophobia nor speciesism (nor any other ism) is a disembodied idea. They are practices (and accompanying rationalizations) that arose at particular times and places for particular purposes. Perhaps the most important purpose, for both of those and for sexism and racism too, is control of reproduction. Thinking about that intersection forces us to face not only our own animality but also our complicity in the ongoing subordination of other species by our own. That raises the question of how to go about animal liberation.

Neither we nor the other animals we propose to liberate are abstract entities. Actual animal liberation is all about bodies—theirs and ours—and is therefore all about eros.

Without eros, ethos risks slippage into the realm of disembodied abstraction. Suppression of eros is suppression of our animal selves and is thus antithetical to the project of animal liberation. Suppression of eros severs us not only from our desires but also from others, deadening our feelings and relationships in the process. It’s difficult to imagine how a liberatory ethos of care could be adequately enacted by beings who are cut off from themselves and others.

What would an erotic ethos of care bring to the project of animal liberation? First, eros is always embodied and therefore always actual. Animals don’t care about our pretty ideas or pure intentions—what matters is what actually happens. An ethos of care rooted in eros would therefore mandate that care be actually enacted, that our ideas interact with that practice, and that both theory and praxis be constantly adjusted in response to what actually happens.

Next, eros is all about desire. Different animals want different things. Salmon want streams that haven’t been dammed or diverted. Frogs want unpolluted ponds. Chickens want out of those battery cages. Dogs want other dogs. All of these desires are located in bodies. Their frustration is felt physically. So, again, this brings us back to the actual. But also, the animal rights movement as it is currently constituted does not, in my view, make an
adequate effort to wrestle with that diversity of desires, preferring to focus on rights that are most important to animals like us (e.g. legal liberty). An ethos of care rooted in eros would mandate a much more thorough reckoning of animal desires and a consequent (and continuing) adjustment of aims and tactics.

Third, eros is all about relationships. An ethos of care rooted in eros would therefore mandate that such deliberations flow from, insofar as possible, real relationships with the animals in question.

Which brings me to my expanded conception of the organic intellectual—let’s call it my theory of the veganic intellectual. As conceptualized by Gramsci (1971), the organic intellectual—a person who conceptualizes and articulates the ideas of a class of people in which she is enmeshed—is essentially a function of the social group, both growing out of and acting upon the group. Whether or not they have formal education, organic intellectuals both learn and teach in the context of active engagement with the struggles of their group, whether that group be an economic class or some other aggregation.

Roosters have helped me not only to think through several important subjects but also to apply the resulting ideas in ways that help other roosters. When the first avian resident of what would become VINE Sanctuary turned out to be a rooster rather than a hen, he refused to allow my stereotyped ideas about roosters to define him or our relationship. This forced me to think deeply about where I got those ideas, which in turn led me to investigate the role of animals—real and imagined—in the social construction of gender. Similarly, a bonded pair of male foie gras factory refugees provoked me to commence a series of workshops at which participants considered the intersections between queer and animal liberation.

Then, in flew a group of two dozen roosters who had been living together for years. They schooled both me and the young orphans from factory farms in the methods and morals of flock life. Their habit of sleeping in the trees rather than in buildings eventually led our sanctuary to be the first in which chickens rewilded themselves. That wouldn’t have happened if we hadn’t decided to listen to the roosters themselves—who expressed themselves very clearly using their voices and bodies—on the question of how to balance freedom against safety from predation.

Our sanctuary was the first to figure out how to rehabilitate former fighting cocks. I say “our sanctuary” deliberately because this was a collective effort. The process involves not only soothing but also socializing these abused birds. I certainly could not have conceptualized that process without having first been taught about roosters by roosters, and the process cannot be implemented unless there are roosters willing and able to model the social
behaviors that former fighters must learn in order to resolve conflicts without injury.

The veganic intellectual, then, plays the same role as the organic intellectual, but for a group that includes nonhuman animals. The veganic intellectual does not claim to be “the voice of the voiceless,” but rather recognizes and listens to animal voices. The veganic intellectual—I think of Karen Davis (1995) with chickens and Lori Gruen (2009) with chimps—thinks in conjunction with nonhuman animals, exercising both empathy and careful observation, and then shares any arising ideas with people who don’t have the same opportunities for communion.

The return of the repressed

Desire drives everything. It’s easy to maintain patriarchy once you’ve tricked little girls into dreaming of their wedding days, and it’s not so hard to control the working class if a preponderance of grown men are addicted to pornography and flat-screen TVs. Conversely, it can be difficult to engender progressive change while wild eros is dead-ended into such socially constructed cravings.

According to a warning recently published in Nature by more than twenty researchers in biology and allied fields, we seem to be “approaching a state shift in Earth’s biosphere” (Barnosky et al. 2012, 52) wherein “the biological resources we take for granted at present may be subject to rapid and unpredictable transformations” (57). Reductions in both “world population growth and per-capita resource use” (57) will be necessary if we hope to avoid or even mitigate the coming cataclysmic changes.

Scientists haven’t had much luck in using rational argumentation to persuade people to change our patterns of resource consumption (much less our mania for reproduction). Maybe we’ll get lucky (in both senses of that phase) if we focus on feeling instead, cultivating queer eros in all of its manifestations, including not only love among animals but also topophilia and biophilia. That project will depend on our ability to put people in touch with their most heartfelt desires (which won’t tend to be wedding dresses or artisanal cheese), and that in turn will require us to embrace our own animality, including its queer eros.
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