Queer Eros in the Enchanted Forest: The Spirit of Stonewall as Sustainable Energy

pattrice jones

I live in an enchanted forest. In the hundred-acre wood occupied by the denizens of VINE Sanctuary, an animal refuge established by LGBTQ people, beech trees synchronize their photosynthesis so that all may share the sugar. Flying squirrels nest with birds in the cavities of hollow trees and might stick their heads out to see who’s there if you come knocking at dusk. Wild turkey hens collaboratively raise their young, sometimes taking them on walks to visit Pete and Repeat, two captive-born toms who share a coop with chickens rescued from egg factories.

In the wooded back pastures, a cow who rescued herself and her calf from a beef farm mingles with dozens of similarly self-possessed bovines. If you hike up to visit, their pheasant friend—who rewilded himself after being hatched to be hunted—might fly alongside you for a moment before returning to his own projects. Down at the duck pond, feral descendants of birds purchased at pet stores socialize with wild waterfowl. Back at the barn, sheep give rides to survivors of egg factories, and a group of peace-keeping geese help with the project of rehabilitating roosters formerly used in cockfighting.

One of those roosters—Sharkey—once teamed up with a Muscovy duck called Ready to coparent a duckling who had been cast out by her own mother. Along with their friend Rocky the peacock (who had a crush on Sharkey), they cocreated a vibrant community of care without regard for what people think about who should love who. In so doing, they transgressed manmade categories, stereotypes, and boundaries, motivated by the joy of mutual affection rather than the demands of procreative productivity. That’s the spirit of Stonewall, and it may be our only hope to avert climatic catastrophe.
As ecofeminist Val Plumwood has written, “our relationships with nature are currently failing.” Repairing those relationships will require us to surrender the prideful idea that humans are separate from and superior to everybody else on the planet, but—as anybody who has ever fallen in love knows—decentering yourself can feel delicious and prompt creative activity. Because animals have been knocking down fences and other artificial barriers built by people for millennia, we might be able to learn something about resistance, too. So let’s make friends with queer ducks and other transgressors of Eurocentric conceptions of sexuality and identity.

Queer Ducks

The first time I saw Jean-Paul and Jean-Claude having sex, I thought they were fighting and promptly separated them. Three times, I broke up what seemed to be a vicious attack, removing the victim to another part of the sanctuary, only to later discover that he had climbed a fence, walked through the woods, walked down a road and up a driveway and then climbed one more fence to reunite himself with his . . . boyfriend? Yes, even though I knew that ducks are among the hundreds of nonhuman animals for whom same-sex relationships are common, some combination of speciesism and internalized homophobia had led me to separate a bonded pair who remained together (albeit not monogamously) until the end of their lives.

Jean-Paul and Jean-Claude were survivors of a foie gras factory where they had been confined in the dark without adequate access to water and force-fed massive quantities of grain in order to induce the fatty liver disease that defines that cruel delicacy. Let us pause for a moment to reflect upon the courage and tenacity Jean-Claude displayed in finding his way back to Jean-Paul again and again despite their forcible separation by a mystifying mammal. We know how it feels, don’t we, to want to be with somebody—whether lover, comrade, friend, or family—that much?

Let’s call that heartfelt drive for relationship eros and join Audre Lorde in recognizing the erotic as our most sustainable source of power. “Eros” is the Greek word for love in all of its manifestations, including but not limited to the sexual. In her germinal essay “The Uses of the Erotic,” Lorde calls upon us to seize “the power which comes from sharing deeply any pursuit with another person,” noting that “recognizing the power of the erotic within our lives can give us the energy to pursue genuine change within our world.” Along with other forms of renewable energy, eros may be the key to averting planetary catastrophe engendered by human folly.
Biologist J. B. S. Haldane famously suggested that “the Universe is not only queerer than we suppose, but queerer than we can suppose.”

Two-spirit Native American poet and scholar Qwo-Li Driskill, who also recognizes Lorde’s conception of eros as essential, reminds us of the “complex realities of gender and sexuality that are ever-present in both the human and more-than-human world, but erased and hidden by colonial cultures.” Those colonial cultures include the present-day United States, where queer eros continues to encounter stone walls built by the “rationalist dualisms that oppose reason to nature, mind to body, emotional female to rational male, human to animal, and so on.”

Those binaries abide in our own minds, making it difficult to perceive our own diversity and complicating any quest to liberate ourselves or others. Even concepts and terms that feel and are freeing in some ways to some people in some places at some times may be hurtful in others, because they inadvertently include and cannot help but replicate antiquated European ideas about sexuality, family, and selfhood. We keep adding letters and asterisks to our acronyms because the idea of sexual-orientation-as-identity and conceptions of trans-ness rooted in (or in opposition to) the European-style gender binary cannot adequately cope with the actual diversity of human sexuality and gender expression. Exported around the world for the fine purpose of fostering LGBTQ rights, our neocolonial notions may inhibit rather than facilitate the liberation of eros.

Worse, the consolidation of erstwhile “queer” people into normalcy within the reprocentric culture that has brought us to the brink of climatic catastrophe, although perhaps soothing to those who crave the comforts of conformity, only adds to the emergency. Although late consumer capitalism requires more and more people buying more and more things and is therefore thrilled to sell destination weddings to same-sex couples while promoting the patriarchal notion that parents are paragons of productive adulthood, the others who share our increasingly stressed habitat probably would prefer that we remain queer. As we celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of Stonewall, let’s remember that many of the bar-going stone throwers that night were people who transgressed not only the norms of straight society but also the strictures of a nascent gay/lesbian rights movement that was busy telling straights “we’re just like you” and hoping to one day be blessed by the state.
Stonewall Was a Riot

Eros upsurged despite and in direct contradiction to the state at the Stonewall Inn one night in 1969. Drag queens and other subversives literally turned the tables on the cops, barricading them into the bar they had come to raid. Fifty years on, Stonewall is a national monument authorized and delimited by the state. Could it be that the state celebrates its loss in that skirmish in its years-long war against queer eros? Or does the monument, like most war memorials, reflect a victory for the state?

I can't say that I don't feel any subversive glee at the idea of park rangers, who are a kind of police, protecting the memory of a night that queer folk fought back against cops, even as I feel queasy about the embrace of the armed state implicit in every smiling selfie taken in front of the plaque commemorating the site. All of our emotions are queer in the sense of refusing to march in the straight lines demanded by logical consistency.

I feel admixed myself here. I came out as a teen in 1976, the same year I quit eating meat. Both choices were the result of eros resisting diversion by the dominant culture. Whatever society said I should want, I did not, in fact, want a boyfriend. Nor did I wish to kill a cow. I wanted romantic relations with women, and I wanted harmonious relations with my nonhuman kin. By 17, I was the “cocoordinator” of the first college gay liberation organization in my state, where the newness of our endeavor allowed us to take a playful approach to creating change. In some ways, the question we wrestled with—how to be joyously queer (we were ahead of our time in reclaiming that word) without scaring the straights into attacking us even more—has been my abiding preoccupation ever since: How can we unsettle people enough to provoke them to reach for their most heartfelt desires but not so much that they retreat into the perceived safety of stasis? How can we infuse our most pragmatic strategies with erotic energy, always remembering the end goal of liberation even as we pursue dismal necessities like “rights” within the inherently violent existing legal system?

I love rainbows and everything they represent about our blurry multihued existence and the promise of sunshine after a storm. But I began to feel queasy, working at a lesbian bookstore in the 1990s, when the rainbow decals, badges, jewelry, t-shirts, trinkets, and flags began to outnumber the books. And then the Pride flags flew at the 1993 March on Washington, where many participants pleaded for the right to get married and carry guns for the government, and my concern shifted from the commodification of queer identity to the attenuation of queerness itself by means of the very “pride” that was supposed to liberate us.
The Pride flag is a flag. First used on battlefields and then to denote militarized nation-states, flags continue to signify combative identity. As ethnonationalisms around the world upsurge, we cannot pretend that pride in identity isn’t inherently hazardous. Yes, of course, persecuted people often find both communal solace and a center around which to organize resistance by embracing a subordinated or despised identity. At the same time, perpetrators of the worst atrocities tend to be inspired by identity. Again and again, people have fled persecution only to persecute others. Again and again, people with genuine grievances have been tricked by malicious leaders into perpetrating genocide. This is something that people do, often enough that we ought to be wary whenever we feel both prideful and aggrieved, even when both of those feelings are justified. I also worry that all forms of prideful identity carry within them the injurious imaginary border between people and nature.

Because the elevation of humanity above all others also entails a separation of humans from all others, we find it difficult to perceive, much less be mindful of, the multiplicity of ecological, material, and social systems in which we participate. Sure of our superiority, we literally cannot imagine what we might learn if we stepped down off our self-constructed pedestals and looked around.

Speciesism confuses us not only about other animals but also about ourselves. The Aristotelean notion of “man” as a uniquely “rational animal” leads us not only to discount the cognitive capacities of other animals but also to overstate the role of reason in our own lives. In truth, we are social animals who are all-too-easily swayed by advertising, propaganda, and peer pressure. Most of our cognition occurs outside of conscious awareness. We are motivated more by desire than by reason.

That’s not necessarily bad news. Noticing how people actually act, as opposed to how members of the imaginary superior species act, can lead us to discover strategies more likely to bring about the more equitable, peaceful, and sustainable communities we all want. As I have argued elsewhere, “Eros begins in the body but always reaches outward, seeking connection.” If we can tap into that wellspring of wishing for true communion, it will help us see what we need to do and give us the energy to do it. We can forge bonds not only with other oppressed people but also with other entities who have been disgraced and displaced by the dominant culture, and these can be based on felt solidarity rather than identity.

If we’re going to feel pride, let’s be proud of what we do rather than what we are. And if we must fly a multihued banner, let it stand for variety, including not only the blooming profusion of ways that people desire each other and express themselves but also biodiversity.
As the World Turns

Somewhere near you stands a tree. That tree communicates with insects and with other trees by means that may seem queer to you, using fungi as telephone lines or sending off messages encoded in scents. You send and receive scent messages too, although you may not be aware of this. More importantly, you are among the animals dependent on that tree. Do you breathe? Thank photosynthesis, which has been there for you, day in and day out, since the day you were born.

How much longer can you count on trees? The droughts, floods, and wildfires of recent years are but the tip of the melting iceberg that has already begun to submerge the lands on which we stand under rising tides for which our own reprocenric rapacity is to blame. In order to ensure the things we need—fresh water to drink, clean air to breathe, enough food for everybody to eat—we will need to set aside socially constructed cravings in favor of our most heartfelt desires.

As social animals, we want relationships more than anything. The same drive for queer communion that propelled the Stonewall rebellion can power a quest for other kinds of connectedness, bringing us back into vibrant relationship with the talking trees, polyamorous ducks, and other queer beings who share this queer planet with us. In turn, those improved relations can animate our struggles for social justice, increasing our ability to think imaginatively and act creatively within systems that confound the constraints imposed by Eurocentric logic.

I live in an enchanted forest. So do you. The forest is on fire. Eros can save us, but only if we are willing to forswear pride in order to rejoin the joyful worldwide resistance against humdrum human hegemony.

NOTES

4. Ibid., 56.
5. Ibid., 59.

pattrice jones is a cofounder of VINE Sanctuary, an LGBTQ-led refuge for farmed animals that works within an ecofeminist understanding of the interconnectedness of systems of oppression. An activist since 1976, jones has organized rent strikes, kiss-ins, and guerrilla theatre as well as multifaceted local, national, and international coalition efforts. As a scholar, jones has taught in the fields of psychology, women’s studies, and gender studies and has published widely, authoring The Oxen at the Intersection (Lantern, 2014) and contributing essays to collections such as Contemporary Anarchist Studies (Routledge, 2009); Sistah Vegan (Lantern, 2010); Sister Species (University of Illinois Press, 2011); Ecofeminism (Bloomsbury, 2014); Animal Oppression and Capitalism (Praeger, 2017); and Animaladies (Bloomsbury, 2018).