Final Research Paper:

Subverting Allonormativity

Using Queer Ecology and Queer Pedagogy at Zoos and Other Sites

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EDU5101: Perspectives in Education

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April 18, 2021

Abstract

While academia may portray ecology as ordered and immutable, this is inaccurate given how unfeasible it is to account for the vast diversity of life. Regardless, there is a widespread notion that nonhuman animals are strictly heterosexual — a belief that queer ecologists aim to dispel as it can be used to justify designating nonheterosexual humans as "unnatural" and (by extension) immoral. In this paper, I will discuss how one of queer ecology's main mascots — the penguin — has (along with other nonhuman animals with homosexual individuals) been used by queer pedagogists at zoos to disrupt heteronormative notions that their visitors may hold. I will also criticize how such actions can accidentally introduce allonormativity (e.g. by focusing on the sexual aspects of queer relationships). Accordingly, I propose that queer pedagogists at zoos and aquarium can break this unnoticed norm by teaching about asexual animals such as sheep.

Introduction

If there was one thing that I took away from this course, it would be that the world is a dynamic place full of phenomena — ranging from those as widespread as colonialism to concepts as personal as our own subconscious thinking — whose interpretations are as diverse as the subjects they attempt to explain. In other words, everything is subjective, and there is nothing wrong with that. After all, it is unavoidable; we all have our own experiences and values, so we should all be seeing things differently as a result of their influence.

Our intrinsic subjectivity was one that went unnoticed by me during my past studies in animal ecology. Essentially, I had only been trained in the art of objectivity, learning all about statistics and standardized, repeatable research protocols to become a neutral investigator of the world's phenomena. Through taxonomies and theories, I was taught that there was a sense of order. If anything appeared outside of it (e.g. two species copulating with one another to create a never-before-seen type of offspring) it would be studied extensively until an explanation (in the previous example, the process of hybridization) could be provided and return the new phenomena back to the pre-existing state of order.

This was why I found myself visiting the SEA LIFE Sydney Aquarium while I was studying over in Australia. Ethicality issues aside (their dugong habitat did seem a tad bit small), I was excited to see three animal celebrities in particular — a pair of gay male penguins named Sphen and Magic and the child that they were raising together (Sopelsa, 2019). At their core, they were just penguins doing whatever penguins usually do (albeit in a state of captivity). Reading beyond that, they were a blow to my courses' assumption that the diversity of the world's biology could ever be pigeonholed into an ordered set of categorized taxonomies. All of my courses neglected to mention the existence of homosexual animals (apart from humans). In

fact, organisms were usually framed as always seeking to reproduce with one another in order to pass along their genes and continue their bloodline. With this focus on sex, we were usually discussing species who underwent heterosexual reproduction, with a rare occasional detour into those that could reproduce asexually (e.g. female Komodo dragons can still produce offspring via parthenogenesis even if they are not fertilized by males [Watts et al., 2006]). Accordingly, I was fascinated with how these penguins were able to defy the norms that had been subtly pushed upon me by my professors and change my own perspectives on animal ecology.

While I did not know it at the time, these penguins steered me into the realms of queer pedagogy and queer ecology, specifically with regards to how they were associated with the rejection of pre-existing academic norms and assumptions. For the rest of this paper, I will be building upon this idea of queer ecology taking place in the pedagogical contexts of zoos and aquaria, first discussing its subversion of heteronormativity before critiquing how such attempts have themselves accidentally enforced a new norm — specifically one that assumes that all beings are sexual.

The latter point in particular is my rationale for choosing to write about this topic, seeing as I was unable to find any queer ecology literature that had been written with an asexual perspective. Accordingly, I will propose an additional path that environmental educators who want to bring queer pedagogy (Would they be queer eco-pedagogists?) to their zoos/aquaria/classrooms could take: teaching their audiences about asexual nonhuman animals. However, before detailing my proposal, I have to ask: What exactly is queer ecology?

Queer Ecology and Queer Pedagogy Can Subvert Heteronormativity

First and foremost, queer ecology is not simply an umbrella term describing organisms that can fall under the "queer" (i.e. LGBTQIA+) identity. Like queer pedagogy, it is more about disrupting normative notions except with a focus on those that view nature as comprising only of cisgendered, heterosexual, and monogamous organisms (Sandilands, 2016). Given the inaccuracy of such a view — Bruce Bagemihl's 1999 book *Biological Exuberance* managed to catalogue more than 450 species with documented homosexual and/or bisexual behaviour — no one should be having these norms in the first place. As such, do people actually care about animal sexualities in the first place?

Penguins as a Symbol

As it turns out, penguin sexuality has historically been a controversial topic, with Luc Jacquet's 2005 nature documentary *The March of the Penguins* being a flashpoint. The film was not, as my seven-year-old self had thought, just a boring documentary on emperor penguins that I had to watch and answer homework questions about. As Sturgeon (2010) observes, Jacquet had crafted a story all about penguin nuclear families, depicting the males as loving fathers that brave brutal and dangerous conditions inhospitable to humans (e.g. intense snowstorms) in order for both them and their mates to achieve their ultimate goal in life: having children. Such a story did not win just an Oscar, but the approval of fundamentalist Christian audiences everywhere for (intentionally or not) affirming norms that are oriented towards an ideal (to them) family — a monogamous male-female couple raising children. In other words, Jacquet's penguins became a symbol of heteronormativity for these Christians. For them, the penguin lifestyle was a moral one that we should all aspire to mimic, although there is something confusing about such an endorsement.

As Szczygielska (2017) points out, observations that not all penguins lived up to this Christian stereotype were made as far back as 1911 when Dr. George Murray Levick surveyed the Adélie penguins of Antarctica's Cape Adare. There, he witnessed male penguins partaking in multiple acts of necrophilia and sexual abuse — hardly actions that matched up with the virtuous monogamy pushed by fundamentalist Christians. In fact, not even the emperor penguins that Jacquet filmed subjected themselves to monogamy as humans strictly know it (i.e. a lifelong relationship with a single partner). As the documentary's narrator mentions, their version of monogamy is serial, meaning that they will look for a different mate to partner with each year.

Further breaking down the stereotype were the multiple, high-profile homosexual penguins such as Sphen and Magic in zoos and aquaria all over the world. One couple in particular — Roy and Silo of the Central Park Zoo — had already made headlines in the year before the release of *The March of the Penguins* when their keepers realized the actual nature of their relationship, subsequently resulting into their designation as icons for the gay community before they had even been claimed by the fundamentalist Christians (Sturgeon, 2010).

Penguins as a Culture War

With two parties associated with such divergent values both laying claims to penguins, one would expect public outrage to follow any attempt to disrupt their attachments. Returning to Roy and Silo, such an anger had occurred in light of the publication of a children's book — *And Tango Makes Three* — all about their relationship and the child (the eponymous Tango) that they successfully raised together after zookeepers gave them an egg to hatch (Sturgeon, 2010). To be more specific, *And Tango Makes Three* faced complaints from those who felt that young readers would be exposed to values (i.e. homosexuality) that were inappropriate and counter to traditional Christian ones, subsequently facilitating their adoption of them (Magnuson, 2011;

Sturgeon, 2010). Accordingly, it became the fourth and sixth most frequently removed book from schools and libraries in the 2000-2009 (in spite of 2006 being its first printing year) and 2010-2019 decades respectively (American Library Association, 2013; American Library Association, 2020).

Outrage has also come about from the gay community with regards to penguin couples. In 2005, keepers at Germany's Bremerhaven Zoo discovered that three of the zoo's five penguin pairs were actually comprised of homosexual males (Talburt & Matus, 2012). In light of this, they decided to bring over four female penguins from Sweden as a way to encourage their males to enter heterosexual relationships and subsequently breed. In response, various gay rights activitists protested against the zoo, accusing them of interfering with the penguins' natural behaviour for no reason ("Gay outrage over penguin sex test", 2005).

In light of all of this anger, another question arises: Why do people form these attachments in the first place?

Penguins as a Counter to Heteronormativity

As Terry (2000) notes, nonhuman animals are often used as a way to tell us more about ourselves. Building on this, Hird (2004) (as cited in Bell, 2010) observes that such animals are used as a reference for what counts as "natural." In turn, "natural" entities are considered to have positive connotations, as demonstrated by how people tend to go more for food products that are perceived/advertised to fall under this descriptor (Román et al., 2017). Accordingly, it follows that whatever traits or attributes are seen in nonhuman animals determine what is "natural" and thus should be accepted as the norm, justifying the humans who also display them.

As Bell (2010) points out, this mindset is harnessed by those propping up penguins as a symbol for the homosexual community. Their existence is evidence that homosexuality is

"natural", justifying homosexual humans in the face of claims that they are "unnatural"/"abnormal" (unlike the natural heterosexuals) and thus should not exist (Alaimo, 2010; Bell, 2010). Extending on this, with an apparent lack of homophobia in the nonhuman animal kingdom, perhaps those who express hatred against homosexual people should be seen as "unnatural" instead (Alaimo, 2010).

In other words, gay penguins can disrupt heteronormative notions, justifying their place in queer ecology. As an environmental educator interested in queer pedagogy, I now wonder: Can they be used to teach people to reject heteronormativity?

Penguins (and More) as Queer Pedagogy

As it turns out, they already are. Szczygielska (2017) spotlights the ARTIS-Amsterdam Royal Zoo and the Berlin Zoo for events that they have hosted in tandem with local gay pride festivals. These events entail special tours and lectures that focus on penguins and other zoo animals that participate in homosexual behaviour (e.g. buffalos, foxes, seals, swans), with their explicit goal being to show audiences that nature is actually diverse in terms of sexuality as opposed to being completely comprised of heterosexuals (Persio, 2018).

Returning to the Central Park Zoo, the authors of *And Tango Makes Three* had written it with the express purpose of breaking down heteronormative notions and getting parents to become more comfortable with the concept of homosexuality to the point where they could talk about it with their children (Young, 2010). Accordingly, discussions of *And Tango Makes Three* can be another route for environmental educators wanting to incorporate queer eco-pedagogy.

Rejecting Heteronormativity Can Introduce Allonormativity

However, such approaches are not completely inclusive. For the latter, Talburt and Matus (2012) noticed how narratives around gay penguins — including *And Tango Makes Threes* — tended to focus on their wish to fulfill the reproductive behaviour of raising a child. Combined with how mates are also depicted as being permanently paired with one another (just like in Jacquet's *The March of the Penguins*), Talburt and Matus (2012) as well as Szczygielska (2017) warn that the heteronormative ideals of monogamy and nuclear families that ultimately place value on reproduction can still be maintained under the guise of queer ecology. Such a focus on reproduction can also be interpreted as a focus on sex, which leads to the question: What about animals (human or otherwise) who do not care for it?

Asexual Invisibility in Queer Ecology

Generally, there was a lack of asexual visibility throughout the resources I had found discussing queer ecology, with none of them ever mentioning this identity. In fact, in Catriona Sandilands' 2016 summary about queer ecology, she uses the LGBTTIQQ2SA abbreviation when identifying the queer political movements that inform the discipline. She takes care to list out each entry in the abbreviation — lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, intersex, queer, questioning, and two-spirited. However, when reaching "A", she decides to define it as "allies" instead of "asexual". While such a choice in itself may be innocent (it had previously been in use and thus endorsed by Pride Toronto [Armstrong, 2014]), it reflects a common experience where asexual people who seek to enter safe spaces and communities for LGBTQIA+ individuals see that the "A" has been explicitly co-opted by cisheterosexual "allies" (i.e. those who support the Queer community but do not identify with it), resulting in feelings of exclusion (Meyer, 2019). Perhaps these acts could also be interpreted as innocent misunderstandings. Yet,

the fact that many asexual college students have reported being intentionally gatekept out of the Queer community suggests otherwise (Meyer, 2019; Mollet & Lackman, 2018). Considering how Sandilands herself was the one who conceived queer ecology, her lack of acknowledgement for asexuality represents how the discipline still has some ways to go in its efforts to break norms.

Such a point is further demonstrated by Bell (2010) and their description of a pair of queer ecology-adjecent activists who directly equate sex with naturalness, arguing that humanity's prudishness with regards to sexuality is related to its disrespect and destruction of nature. However, would this mean that those who do not partake in sex are unnatural? Accordingly, queer ecology, despite their attempts to disrupt heteronormativity, may accidentally be propagating allonormativity — the treatment of sexuality as something that all humans experience (Mollet & Lackman, 2019).

Queer Ecology and Queer Pedagogy Can Subvert Allonormativity

As interviews conducted with asexual people suggest, allonormativity can contribute to anxious feelings that they are broken and abnormal compared to the rest of society (Mollet & Lackman, 2019). Furthermore, they may hide their own identity in fear of being ostracized or being misunderstood, even to mental health professionals who would be able to help them adapt to whatever pressures they are facing (Meyer, 2019; Mollet & Lackman, 2019). As such, asexual people may be at heightened risk for poor mental health, necessitating a solution that can help break down allonormativity. Perhaps queer eco-pedagogy may be an avenue for this. Essentially, students could be taught to be more familiar with asexuality and recognize that not everybody is

strictly a sexual-driven being. In other words, they can learn that being asexual is normal. How could this be done though?

How Can More Attention Be Brought to Asexuality?

Drawing from the aforementioned instances of zoo-based queer pedagogy where they held special programs all about homosexual nonhuman animals, perhaps the same could be done but with asexual ones instead (i.e. conduct tours, presentations, and lectures that highlight and point them out to visitors in order to normalize asexuality). However, are there even any asexual species (barring those that asexually reproduce instead of forgoing reproduction entirely), or am I applying an exclusively human concept onto other animals for no real reason?

Can Animals Even Be Asexual?

Given how asexuality has only recently entered the public consciousness — the Asexual Visibility and Education Network (the largest online asexual community) was only established in 2001 (Asexual Visibility and Education Network, n.d.) — academics have not paid too much attention to it yet, explaining its under-representation in queer theory and other social studies (Przybylo & Cooper, 2014). This trend carries over to the field of animal behaviour. However, out of this limited literature, Gupta (2014) notes how only six species — rats, guinea pigs, gerbils, rabbits, sheep, rhesus monkeys — can be interpreted as possibly being asexual based on pre-existing studies (i.e. some of the all-male subjects were observed as being sexually inactive despite being presented with females). However, the studies associated with five of these species have a major flaw — their male subjects were never presented with other males. Perhaps they were actually gay, meaning that would have actually performed sexual behaviours had the animals that they preferred been added.

Research for the remaining species — the sheep — is more robust. Roselli and Stormshak (2009) — reviewing past literature into the sexual partner preferences of rams (male sheep) — describe how testing usually occurred over a two-to-three-year period. A starting period is held where the rams are allowed to develop a sexual bond (or not) with ewes (female sheep) that are in heat. Those with stronger sexual bonds (denoted by a higher frequency of specific sexual behaviours such as vocalizations, mounts, and ejactulations) are split off from those with less libido, and these two groups are given separate sexual partner preference tests. In these tests, rams are presented with four stimulus animals (two male, two female) that have been restrained to reduce aggression. This test is performed four times for each subject. Those who displayed sexual behaviours only with ewes, only with rams, with both ewes and rams, and with neither are categorized as female-oriented, male-oriented, bisexual, and asexual respectively. In the three studies examined by Roselli and Stormshak (2009) — Perkins et al. (1992), Price et al. (1988), and Roselli et al. (2004) — 17.0%, 18.5%, and 12.5% of the tested rams were respectively categorized as asexual. For comparison, 8.5%, 7.4%, and 9.5% of the rams were respectively categorized as male-oriented. With such sizeable numbers, rams would be a suitable example of an asexual animal that queer eco-pedagogists can teach people about. As a digression, Price et al. (1988) and Roselli et al. (2004) also uncovered substantial proportions of bisexuality (18.4% and 22.0% of rams respectively); environmental educators can also spotlight them as an example of bisexuality in nature if they so choose.

Caveats

However, before environmental educators rush to create new material all about the asexual sheep, there are some caveats. First and foremost, using nature as a justification for one's

existence/behaviours may not be the best logic. After all, while homophobia may be non-existent in the nonhuman animal kingdom (Alaimo, 2010), heterophobia is not. Citing Roughgarden (2004), she points out that most male bighorn sheep live in collectives where they engage in homosexual acts with one another. Nonhomosexual males are considered as "aberrant", subsequently being more submissive to the others. Based on the logic of "natural = good", this would justify discrimination against heterosexuals, right? I would hope not; there is too much hate existing in the world already.

As highlighted by Sturgeon (2010), another caveat is that we are transplanting human concepts onto nonhuman entities. This is illustrated by how the usage of rams would only represent a simplified, subsetted definition of asexuality — i.e. a lack of sexual attraction. As Mollet and Lackman (2019) note, understanding on what asexuality is has evolved in the relatively short amount of time it has been studied, resulting in such a monolithic definition not applying to and/or not being detailed enough to encompass all who identify as asexual. For example, asexual people may still feel romantic (but non-sexual) affections towards others (Bogaert, 2015). They may also experience sexual attraction, but only to those to whom they have a strong emotional connection (defined as demisexual by Miller, [2019]). Accordingly, asexual humans may not actually feel that their own identity has been accurately represented (and thus not normalized) by the asexual nonhuman animals that are discussed. In fact, they may even interpret such an oversimplified definition as one that fails to acknowledge and erases their own identity, gatekeeping them out of the already-gatekept asexual community.

Regardless of all of the flaws related to teaching about asexual animals, at the very least, they can be considered as a way to get a foot in the door and raise awareness of asexuality's general existence. After all, we have to start somewhere.

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