

## **INSIGHTS**

# **An inclusive natural world**

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I have friends who live on a small urban farm in Portland, Oregon. They grow a variety of vegetables, have several fruit trees, and share their space with ducks and chickens. We recently witnessed their three female ducks engaging in an uninhibited sexual encounter. I was enthralled as they rhythmically stimulated each other until they reached a sexual climax. It amazed me how quickly each observer constructed her or his own explanation. I was told by one friend that the ducks' behavior was a common occurrence in the yard although she really tried to discourage it. Another friend commented on how the "ladies [ducks] were just horny and needed a man." Still another friend assured the group that this expression of sexuality was only happening to demonstrate dominance of territory. With hesitation as the only queer voice in the discussion, I challenged the comments of my friends: I thought the ducks were having a great time with each other. They were connecting. They were having sex and that seemed completely natural to me.

When I later reflected on the conversation, I became filled with questions. What was the reason for discouraging same-sex duck sex? Would it be encouraged if the sex were between male and female ducks? What if a male duck was present and the female ducks still engaged in the mutual pleasuring of each other? It appeared all too easy to assume that these ducks were lacking something, i.e., a male duck. It was also an oversimplification to suggest their sexual behavior was only an act of dominance. Vigorous struggling is common in all duck sex. The shape of the female duck's vagina is a physical barrier that prevents a male duck's penis from entering fully unless the female shows that she is receptive by keeping her body level and lifting her tail feathers high. Perhaps these particular female ducks had

same-sex sex simply because they wanted to. I want to be clear that I am not comparing duck and human sexuality. I am merely widening the lens to include queer sexual behavior as no more or less valid than nonqueer sexual behavior in both the human and more-than-human world.

Public displays of sexuality that challenge heteronormative behavior are regularly self policed by queers. In some cases when queers have boldly expressed their sexuality in heterodominant spaces, they have experienced hateful acts of violence. “This is one of many reasons why queers have sought autonomous urban and rural spaces where they can collectively experience their sexuality” (Sbicca, 2011). When the overcast skies disappear and the warm sunshine finally arrives in Portland, Oregon, the city awakens. Parents and children start riding their bikes. Couples lay on blankets in city parks while watching their dogs. Neighbors are in their yards harvesting food from their gardens. Groups of friends barbecue while laughing and listening to music. And many queer-identified individuals of all genders and sexual orientations head to one of the clothing-optional beaches at Rooster Rock State Park or Sauvie Island to bask naked in the sun along the river.

On my first visit to Rooster Rock State Park I was amazed at how liberating it was to hike fully exposed to panoramic views of the Cascade Mountains. The deep blue ripples of the Columbia River flirtatiously lured me closer. To shed my clothes was symbolic. My vulnerability was uncovered for all to see. This kind of bodily disclosure raised my awareness to the topography of the land. The robust curves of sandy dunes, the orgy of fir trees, and the burly rock cliffs were indeed exuding sex and sexuality. At its roots sexuality is an emotional trigger. There is profound culturally embedded shame around nakedness and sexual expression. I felt so deviated from the normative structure of society that veils itself with appropriate and inappropriate ways of being. I looked around and saw a landscape of queerness. The land had no expectation of me. I was naked and free from the nagging whispers that cloak my sexuality with the limitations of this way or that way. I saw three men applying sunblock to one another’s bodies. They engaged in a passionate kiss and returned to applying the sunblock. Much like the ducks, it was an uninhibited expression of sexuality. They showed no hesitation or fear of being ridiculed. This natural setting offers queers freedom to build relationship with each other and the more-than-human world. Unlike the experiences in non-queer spaces, “interactions in queer autonomous spaces develop sustainable social

relations and value-practices, based on mutual respect, consent, sexual liberation, and non-normativity, in which people engage in open-ended processes of developing alternative ways of being, feeling, thinking, engaging, acting and becoming-liberated” (Jeppesen, 2010: 477). The beach at Rooster Rock provides a safe-haven for queerness in nature. This is just one of many autonomous spaces that allow opportunities for queers to feel connected to and a part of the natural world.

Although the *American Psychiatric Association* removed homosexuality from its list of “disorders” in 1973, the perception of sexual and gender diversity as an unnatural category still remains. In developing a queer ecopsychology we must transform our ecological perspectives to see the purity and naturalness in diverse expressions of sexuality and gender, in both the human and more-than-human world. Queer ecopsychology must transcend the need to pathologize sexual expression and gender-non-conforming life. Distinguished evolutionary biologist Joan Roughgarden has contributed ground breaking work in her research of diversity, gender, and sexuality in nature and people. Roughgarden (2004) first takes an in-depth look at some of Western culture’s academic disciplines and discusses how each creates its own way to justify difference. Through her exploration she challenges Darwin’s sexual selection theory and introduces what she calls a social selection theory. This examination illuminates the history of how sexual and gender diversity is pathologized, thought of as weak, and in some cases considered irrational. A queer ecopsychology must follow her lead and move outside the frame of heteronormativity to new theories that include sexual and gender variation. If we continue to generalize about the sexual experiences of humans and the more-than-human living world it will exclude the infinite possibilities of sexuality. This generalization reinforces female/male, gay/straight, and natural/unnatural binary thinking. When we fail to see sexuality and gender on a spectrum it “not only denies that certain behavior already exists, it limits the potential for that behavior to become more common, and more commonly accepted” (Johnson, 2011).

When we have a sense of belonging we are more likely to feel invested. We are more inclined to protect what we are a part of. I believe queering ecopsychology could provide ways to bridge the gap between the social justice and environmental movements. Perhaps if members from both communities “come out” visibly in

support for the other's cause we will become united in a greater movement that recognizes and encourages infinite ways of being natural. The awesome openness of a queer ecopsychology will recognize sexual and gender diversity as central to and not in addition to the foundation of a flourishing ecosystem. I look forward to this evolution.

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