

Whose Better? (re)Orientating a Queer Ecopedagogy

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Abstract

Previous invitations to queer environmental education research and practice have fallen largely silent. This paper seeks to address that silence by orientating ecopedagogy toward a phenomenology of queer experience. Inspired by the utopian promises of the “It Gets Better Project” and ecopedagogy generally, the author suggests that queer phenomenology can offer new insights into ecopedagogy. The hope of a queer ecopedagogy lies in its inclusion of diverse beings and its celebration of (dis)orientating experiences that might lead to more egalitarian and democratic futures.

Résumé

Les invitations à la recherche et à la pratique en éducation environnementale homosexuelle ont cessé en grande partie. Le présent article aborde le vide ainsi créé en orientant l'écopédagogie vers une phénoménologie de l'expérience homosexuelle. Inspiré par les promesses utopiques du projet « It Gets Better » et par l'écopédagogie en général, l'auteur affirme que la phénoménologie homosexuelle peut donner lieu à des éclaircissements sur l'écopédagogie. L'espoir de créer une écopédagogie homosexuelle repose dans sa manière d'inclure des êtres différents et d'engendrer des expériences d'orientation (voire de désorientation) pouvant mener à un avenir plus égalitaire et démocratique.

Keywords: ecopedagogy, queer phenomenology, experience

“Just hold your head up and you’ll go far. Just love yourself and you’ll be set... and I promise you it will get better.”

Jamey Rodemeyer, ‘It Gets Better, I Promise!’

As I watch Jamey Rodemeyer’s *YouTube* video, entitled “It Gets Better, I Promise!” I am struck by the poise, certainty, and most of all *hope* that the young man shares with his faceless, nameless online audience. In the video, Jamey speaks about his trouble with bullies and the dark thoughts that move in and out of his life. In the end, however, he finds support and love from many unexpected places—he talks in particular about pop star Lady Gaga as an inspiration—and describes feeling “liberated” from his struggles and free to be himself. Jamey’s message is clear: learning to love yourself is the key to overcoming obstacles and finding a community who can and will love you back. He posted his video in May 2011, after coming out as bisexual to some of his closest friends. In September of that year, Jamey committed suicide at the age of 14.

These kinds of events are all-too commonplace within the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and queer (LGBTQ) community. Canada's Centre for Suicide Prevention reports that LGBTQ youth are 1.5 to 3 times more likely to report suicidal ideation and 1.5 to 7 times more likely to report having attempted suicide than their non-LGBTQ peers (2012). While this problem is not new, a string of suicides in 2010-2011, including Jamey's, brought new focus within the North American media on these statistics. Dan Savage, an openly gay columnist and gay-rights activist, responded by starting the "It Gets Better Project" with his partner Terry Miller. The project involves a series of online testimonials and video blog posts shared by celebrities, politicians, organizations, and "average" citizens declaring support for the struggles that face LGBTQ youth. The core message of each story is that no matter how difficult life is currently—in the face of bullies, intimidation, violence, and conservative politics denouncing queer rights—things will get better. The testimonials are often very personal, describing the teller's own experience with these issues during their teenage years; but others, both within and outside of the LGBTQ community, simply offer support. Most of the stories end by referring those watching to seek the aid of organizations that specialize in counseling LGBTQ youth, such as the Trevor Project, or to offer financial support for such projects.

As a gay man, I continue to agonize over these suicides, remembering my own struggles as a teenager questioning his sexuality within my Catholic family, as a student in a Catholic, all-boys secondary school, and as a member of various sports teams—some rife with machismo and homophobic language—throughout high school and university. I am deeply touched by the messages that brave individuals post online in support of LGBTQ youth, and it is my hope that those messages have and will continue to save lives. Yet, as an educator with a deep interest in and commitment to not only LGBTQ rights and other humanitarian crises but justice and care for *all* beings and the natural world, the project's message strikes me as a familiar one: things are bad now, but the future holds promise and hope for renewal. I often wonder what these messages of hope for the future ask of those of us living in the present, and how they tie us to various narratives about the past.¹ It seems to me that the promise, even certainty, of a better future—whether it is based on personal experience, optimism, or even borne of necessity—requires critical reflection. Whose version of "better" are we offering up as hope after all?

In this paper, I describe and interpret pedagogy as a fundamentally orientating endeavour, concerned with guiding subjects—children, adults, parents, teachers, even researchers—toward particular objects of inquiry and areas of personal and political action (van Manen, 1997). This orientating effect draws those of us interested in cultivating ecologically and socially just pedagogies into a position of responsibility for the ways in which unique and diverse experiences or narratives are invited into or are silenced by our educational practices. As an example, I present the "It Gets Better Project" as

a pedagogical intervention raising many important questions about both the political and personal struggles facing LGBTQ youth around the world. In this essay, however, I am more interested in how the project implicitly works to homogenize queer experiences of being orientated into domestic, reproductive, and consumption-orientated versions of heterosexuality; what Lisa Duggan describes as the “new homonormativity” (2002). As a result, I claim that the “It Gets Better Project,” while seemingly outside of the discourses of environmental education, requires critical, ecopedagogical attention. Yet, too few LGBTQ and queer voices are present within our field at this moment.

In response to this dilemma, I outline steps toward a queer ecopedagogy: a kind of “pedagogic thoughtfulness” (van Manen, 1997) that blends various aspects of phenomenological enquiry, queer theory, and the ecopedagogy movement. The resulting practice I propose attends to the (dis)orientating effects (Ahmed, 2006) of queer subjects and bodies in an extremely diverse, more-than-human world (Abram, 1996). Queer ecopedagogy promotes embodied attentiveness and reflection on being or feeling queer in the world, as well as various personal and political commitments for engaging with dominant “political, bureaucratic, or ideological structures” (van Manen, 1997, p. 154) that oppress and silence a wide range of beings, not just LGBTQ-identifying humans. My emphasis in the title on “(re)orientating” arises from a recognition that at least two groups of scholars have invited environmental education theorists, practitioners, and researchers to actively “queer” their work (see Gough et al., 2003; Russell, Sarick, & Kennelly, 2002). While no clear, organized response has followed those invitations, to my knowledge, they still remain foundational for subsequent ecological, queer pedagogies. I suggest that newer approaches to queer thinking—in particular Sara Ahmed’s phenomenological exploration of “(dis)orientation” in her book *Queer Phenomenology* (2006)—might reinvigorate queer thought’s contributions to environmental education broadly, and vice-versa. Queer ecopedagogy invites all of us to experience and imagine ways of being and acting that challenge our notion of what constitutes a “better” life, including those that seek a more radical change in the world.

Pedagogy as an Orientating Endeavour

“It gets better. You don’t know that now. You don’t know what you don’t know, but I know: it gets better.”

Novelist Anne Marie MacDonald, ‘It Gets Better Canada’

In the quote above, Canadian novelist Anne Marie MacDonald suggests to her presumed audience of struggling LGBTQ youth that “not knowing” about the future places them in a vulnerable position. But she knows what they do not, which is that their struggles will melt away and they will find happiness and success in life. I suggest that MacDonald is exemplifying a position of love and hope

for LGBTQ youth in the world; she wants them to trust that her experiences and knowledge about life are a kind of prototype. She has lived through the pain and is now enjoying her adult life, a life that youth such as Jamey Rodemeyer have been denied. Many of the “It Gets Better Project” testimonials take on a similar message, that given enough time and perseverance, youth’s struggles will turn into adult happiness. It is suggestive of what Joseph Campbell (2008) refers to as “the road of trials” (p. 89): a period of tests, temptations, and struggles through which a hero must descend and be renewed in their faith to successfully move forward in life. But, as Campbell notes, “the psychological dangers through which earlier generations were guided by the symbols and spiritual exercises of their mythological and religious inheritance, we today... must face alone, or, at best, with only tentative, impromptu, and not often very effective guidance” (2008, p. 87). Arguably, our guidance through such trials comes from our pedagogical introduction to generations and “heroes” whose lives follow a similar path, individuals who come to embody perpetual hope in a better future.

Hannah Arendt argues that “the essence of education is natality, the fact that human beings are *born* into the world” (1968, p. 171). She contends that human children are new members of a strange world, requiring careful and special introduction to that world; as such, parents and educators are responsible for overseeing such introductions. Arendt notes that the child is in a state of “becoming,” that they enter into “a world that was there before him [sic], that will continue after his death, and in which he is to spend his life” (1968, p. 182). What makes humans unique, in her view, is that not only does the child develop in their “functions of life,” but they are also fundamentally tied to a historical world and society that sees them as a renewing force; as such, educators and parents are also tasked with protecting the world, with providing for its continuance. This fundamental relationship that Arendt establishes between children and educators, parents, and the wider “world” exposes the spatially and temporally orientating nature of pedagogy.

Arendt’s utopian concerns with the protection of children and the renewal of the world suggest the anticipation of trials and tribulations along the way, difficulties for which education prepares us. Arendt’s conclusion makes this dramatic vision of life more clear:

Education is the point at which we decide whether we love the world enough to assume responsibility for it and by the same token save it from that ruin which, except for renewal, except for the coming of the new and young, would be inevitable. And education, too, is where we decide whether we love our children enough not to expel them from our world and leave them to their own devices... but to prepare them in advance for the task of renewing a common world. (1968, p. 193)

Educator Max van Manen takes up a similar theme in describing “pedagogic competence” or “tactfulness” concerned not just with loving children or teaching, but in orientating the young to “what is worthwhile knowing and becoming” (1997, p. 158). While van Manen and Arendt are focused upon

children, we need not be so narrow in our views of pedagogy; those who work with adolescents, adults, immigrants, or in any pedagogical situation recognize that there is a desire to steer students toward new knowledge, skills, and even actions. This is particularly relevant for ecopedagogical work.

Orientating Ecopedagogy: Phenomenology and Critical Pedagogy

Influenced by the critical pedagogical work of Paulo Freire, Ivan Illich, and others, Richard Kahn defines ecopedagogy as an educational and cultural movement which pairs the Freirian hope for justice with a “future-oriented ecological politics” (2010, p. 18). This “ecopedagogy movement” has two intertwined goals: first, it seeks to oppose the global forces of neoliberalism and capitalist imperialism, and second, it promotes a democratic and culturally attuned vision of ecoliteracy that is rooted in various ecologically ethical precepts. The vision of ecoliteracy that Kahn proposes links traditional notions of environmental literacy espoused by environmental education—knowledge of ecosystem functions, biodiversity, and threats to environmental stability, to name a few—with “varieties of social and cultural literacy” (Kahn, 2010, p. 11) such as peace education, social justice education, or human rights education. One particular focus for the ecopedagogy movement, in espousing this broad understanding of ecoliteracy, is to address the “cosmological” dimensions of social and environmental change. Kahn, echoing Arendt above, suggests that fundamentally questioning and challenging our cultures’ historical worldviews and imagining new and better futures ultimately draws our attention to the “education of the young,” a process which “comes to embody the social hope that even the most undeniable of outcomes can be trained for, grasped, redirected, and transformed” (Kahn, 2010, p. 37). Ecopedagogy—insofar as it espouses this looking backward to move forward, anticipates difficulties ahead for all beings, and seeks to intervene and “guide” them toward utopian futures—is thus an orientating endeavour.

Kahn notes that there are no explicit connections between these other approaches to “ecopedagogy” and the “ecopedagogy movement,” but I believe they are both radically orientating projects that compliment each other. Philip Payne and Brian Wattchow in particular provide an example of a *phenomenologically* influenced ecopedagogy, what they call “slow pedagogy:”

Slow pedagogy is, we feel, a candidate for a radically different approach to, and lived form of educational practice, or ecopedagogy. It encourages meaning-makers to experientially and reflectively access and address their corporeality, intercorporeality, sensations, and perceptions of time, space, and [place]. (Payne & Wattchow, 2009, p. 30)

This version of ecopedagogy builds on what van Manen (1997) refers to as the four “existentials”: space, embodiment, temporality, and relationality. These existentials highlight subjective experiences within various environments,

something I believe is of great value for those of us interested in bridging perceived gaps between seemingly “human” concerns about social justice and ecological issues or threats.

Van Manen in particular suggests that hermeneutic phenomenology is a form of inquiry particularly suited to pedagogy. Phenomenology is “a kind of deliberate naivety through which it is possible to encounter a world unencumbered with presuppositions” (Evernden, 1993, p. 57), and *hermeneutic* phenomenology recognizes the always-interpretative process involved in describing and understanding experiences and texts from a given point of view, or “horizon.” Van Manen suggests that phenomenology’s deep commitment to careful attentiveness and thought “radicalizes thinking and the acting that flows from it” (1997, p. 154). His radical, phenomenological approach to pedagogy starts from attentiveness to “unique” pedagogic situations in order to reflect upon the deeper essence of knowledge, action, indeed pedagogical life itself.

Phenomenology is also employed as a method of research and critical deconstruction within environmental education, and Payne (2003) in particular employs the term “ecopedagogy” in reference to such work. He advocates for phenomenology because it provides a distinct methodology committed to describing, interpreting, and critiquing both embodied, lived experiences in various environments, as well as historical and cultural discourses, texts, practices, and institutions. Payne’s phenomenological approach highlights both the theoretical and the practical orientations of ecopedagogy. In assessing testimonials from the “It Gets Better Project,” for example, a phenomenological approach looks for the uniqueness within each narrative—its context, the characters, and their particular series of events. From there, we look for particular themes that are shared across those cases, such as the difficulties of being an LGBTQ youth, struggles to come to terms with one’s sexual orientation, bullying, and an ultimately successful, joyful quality of life after persevering through the “trials” of youth. Finally, we subject them to critical analysis and reflection; what is lost in our movement from the unique to the universal? Whose voices or experiences are silenced, co-opted, or weeded out? I argue that a deeper understanding of queerness, one tied to embodied experiences of orientation and critical of discourses that outline the “natural” from the “unnatural,” is often left out of more popular, mainstream narratives like the “It Gets Better Project.” Before presenting a queer ecopedagogy as a response to this dilemma, I want to focus on what is unique and and/or essential about queer experience.

(Dis)Orientation: Queering Experience

“As their son and as a kid in a small town, there was a certain image of who I thought I was supposed to be, and as I entered adolescence, I started having feelings that I didn’t understand and couldn’t explain that I knew they didn’t mesh with the image of what I thought I was supposed to be.”

Fort Worth, TX Councilman Joel Burns, ‘It Gets Better’

The quote above comes from Forth Worth City Councilman Joel Burns' emotional appeal at a city council meeting in 2010. Responding to a widely publicized string of suicides among LGBTQ youth, Burns shares some of those tragic stories and calls for an end to bullying and harassment in schools. Burns—whose speech was videotaped and is available online as part of the “It Gets Better Project”—then shares his own struggles as a teenager with violent verbal and physical bullying as well as suicidal ideation. He describes feeling despair while coming to terms with his sexuality in a small Texas town, stopping short of sharing a story about his own attempt at suicide. The son of a “tough cowboy... named Butch,” Burns believed he would never become the kind of man others wanted him to be; he admits to feeling “estranged, humiliated, and confused.” He assures his audience, however, that if his tough cowboy father can love him and his partner, then it is possible for others who struggle with similar issues, saying “you can have a lifetime of happy memories if you just allow yourself and give yourself the time” (Burns, 2010).

As a child, it is unlikely that Burns had any exposure to the kinds of stories he now tells; and LGBTQ issues have only recently gained traction in North American education (Britzman, 1995). To my knowledge, only two groups of scholars within environmental education in particular have raised concerns about the silence of queer scholarship in the field.³ The first article, “Queering Environmental Education,” was published in this journal 10 years ago (Russell, Sarick, & Kennelly, 2002). The authors sought to introduce environmental education to the projects of queer theory and queer pedagogy (see Britzman, 1995) in order to challenge previously unaddressed heteronormative practices within the field. The article introduced us to queer scholarship specifically addressing environmentalism as well as groups seeking to bridge queer experience with environmental activism, such as EcoQueers (now defunct) and the Radical Cheerleaders.

The second article, “Tales from Camp Wilde: Queer(y)ing Environmental Education Research,” was published a year later. Noel and Annette Gough invited four other contributors to join them in an imaginative exercise intended “to perform a queer(y)ing of environmental education research informed by queer theorizing” (Gough et al., 2003, p. 45). In what they describe as a rhizomatic approach, the article explores various responses to how environmental education research might “queer” both the signified within environmental education—that is ecology, nature, bodies, knowledge, teachers, and learners—as well as the signifiers we ascribe to, such as the new ecological paradigm, dominant social paradigm, and the ecological imperative.

Both of these articles end with an invitation for more queer scholarship in the field: “We hope that you return and bring some of your own tales of queer(y)ing environmental education research with you” (Gough et al., 2003, p. 61). Yet, after nearly a decade, these invitations remain unanswered; and no further work has come forth in that time. Why? Are environmental educators hesitant to address their own underlying experiences with queerness or heteronormativity?

Following van Manen and Payne, I want to reinvigorate these invitations to queer work in environmental education by returning to what Edmund Husserl refers to as “the things themselves” (cited in van Manen, 1990), that is, phenomenological investigations of queer *experience*.

Queer is a multivalent term. The word emerges from a broad etymology, variously related to the German *quer* meaning “oblique, peculiar, or odd,” the old English word for *thwart*, the Latin for *twist*, and a Greek root word meaning “across” (Ahmed, 2006; Talburt, 2000). Queerness can be ascribed to that which is “out of line” with what is considered to be acceptable—socially, culturally, experientially, biologically, and so on. Many of us might recognize that queer has long been a derogatory term for homosexuality, tied to its pathological history as a deviant sexual identity or set of sexual practices. The word queer is still identified colloquially as another moniker for the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) community and their struggles against heteronormativity, homophobia, and transphobia; however, it can now be taken up in a positive way to self-identify based on one’s sexual orientation or experience of having sexual practices that are outside the norm. Queer, as an identity, describes or is taken up by subjects who possess habits, concerns, and desires that lie outside of variously defined socio-cultural norms, particularly regarding sexuality. Queer subjects challenge the presumed naturalness of a heterosexual orientation for cultural politics *and* evolutionary theory (Ahmed, 2006).

Theoretically, “queer” branches out into a wide array of disciplinary and interdisciplinary foci including cultural studies, gender studies, and sexuality studies; it is understood differently by those who profess to do research in queer theory, queer pedagogy, queer politics, and even the newer field of queer ecology. Each of these disciplinary traditions maintains a rich history, often coinciding with particular struggles faced by LGBT individuals and groups in light of heteronormative practices and theories that silence queer experience. Donna Haraway offers what we might consider the core task that exists across these theoretical approaches when she describes “queering” as “the undoing of ‘normal’ categories” (2008, p. xxiv). Noreen Giffney and Myra J. Hird also speak to a broader sense of queer theoretical work:

The unremitting emphasis in queer theoretical work on fluidity, über-inclusivity, indeterminacy, indefinability, unknowability, the preposterous, impossibility, unthinkability, unintelligibility, meaninglessness and that which is unrepresentable is an attempt to undo normative entanglements and fashion alternative imaginaries. Far from being a narcissistic exercise in abstraction, this represents a concerted effort to make sense of, and make space in, a world that has given up on us. (Giffney & Hird, 2008, p. 4)

In her book *Queer Phenomenology* (2006), Sara Ahmed draws our attention to the kinds of peculiar, confusing experiences that arise in testimonials like those found in the “It Gets Better Project.” Influenced by the phenomenological work of Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, as well as feminist

philosophers such as Judith Butler, Ahmed flushes out bodily-spatial experiences of orientation that phenomenology is uniquely poised to investigate. Ahmed's queer phenomenology highlights bodily orientations within space that are *disorientating*, or directed toward objects of desire that are less familiar, backgrounded, or unexpected. Bodies, she argues, inhabit spaces and horizons, with some objects within one's reach and some objects out of reach. While the subject's orientation within this horizon involves many perceptual capacities, the relations between subjects and objects are not always directly visible; bodies come to actively work toward and engage with certain preferred or required objects over time, repetitively, and therein they develop an orientation. This repetition *orients* us not only to physical objects, "but also objects of thought, feeling, and judgment... [as well as] aims, aspirations, and objectives" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 56).

To illustrate, Ahmed uses the example of the writing table, with ink, paper, and a hard surface that are objects of orientation for a writer because of repeated desires to perform certain actions (writing, thinking, editing) and not others (eating, playing cards, or drafting). The preferred objects are not always foregrounded perceptually, but they are within the horizon of objects that the subject, in this example a writer, tends toward. In these ways, bodies and objects come to be imprinted upon each other over time and in space, making their relation historically significant. In addition, Ahmed points out that the social dynamics around objects and subjects are tied to the work that each are *expected* to do based on histories of action: thus the table becomes gendered when it is repetitively used by men to write and by women to cook food. It is when bodies "take up spaces that they were not intended to inhabit," or are oriented toward unexpected objects that "the hope for new impressions, for new lines to emerge, new objects, or even new bodies" becomes possible, and for Ahmed, such arrivals are to be celebrated and invited (2006, p. 62). In this light, I believe queer phenomenology is strongly aligned with the critical work of a ecopedagogical project that emphasizes, among other tasks: "the importance of deconstructing language, texts, images, myths, and discourses due to their presumed or possible effects on human subjectivities and subsequent constructions of gender, youth, class, ethnicity and nature" (Payne, 2003, p. 170).

Challenging Queer Natures

Certainly, these queer experiences of (dis)orientation are prevalent in gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered communities. Joel Burns' fear of his macho father as a 13-year old conveys his underlying awareness of the compulsory nature of the heterosexual orientation. For Ahmed, "subjects are *required* to 'tend toward' some objects and not others as a condition of familiar as well as social love" (2006, p. 85). Within the private, domestic sphere, we are directed as children toward a future that will—indeed must—preserve our family's blood-

lines. We inherit a debt of life, which we repay through the very social acts of reproduction and succession. Drawing from Freud, Ahmed suggests that a queer orientation—defined here as sexual desires not of a heterosexual nature—actually threatens the family unit. Burns’ fear in this sense becomes palpable; he believes that he owes his father, or all of society, a debt of life, and that his sexual desires toward other men foreclose his future chances at repaying such a debt. He stands “out of line” with familial and social norms.

Other queer theorists take up this compulsory orientation for and toward children in various ways, sometimes presenting our cultural obsession with “the Child” as problematic and overtly heteronormative. Noreen Giffney takes up Lee Edelman’s highly polemic work, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, in a posthumanist turn away from this cultural obsession with “the Child ... the ultimate symbol of what it means to be human” (2008, p. 60). Edelman suggests that it is not historical children or their experiences that we are obsessed with culturally, but rather, the spectre of innocent childhood which society pulls from the past and places into an ever-escaping future. In a sense, cultural rhetoric which presents and upholds the promises of tomorrow “for our children,” masks an underlying neoliberal and conservative political desire to remove everything which is queer, or out of line with heteronormative cultural values (Edelman, 1998).

This culture of “the Child” positions heterosexuality and heterosexuals as the obvious, biologically-mandated producers of culture, with queers being condemned, or at best, serving the dominant culture’s interests through a proscribed “homonormativity.” Lisa Duggan (2002) provides additional insights into the effects of this process, explaining how neoliberal forces in North American politics have created a “new homonormativity,” defined as: “a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption” (2002, p. 179).

This is particularly troublesome for an ecopedagogical movement that seeks to question cultural assumptions and forces that only serve to sustain global, capitalist imperialism and erase the uniqueness of embodied experiences and practices of diversity. Suddenly all “queers” want to do is reproduce and be active and successful in the so-called “free” market economy. This is not to suggest that LGBTQ individuals are not interested in children. In fact, a large drawback of Edelman’s own argument is that many queer-identifying individuals *are* interested in reproduction, adoption, and child rearing. The problem lies in the ways such activities are tied fundamentally to a consumer-oriented culture, one that has profound implications on the health of our diverse families, communities, and our planet (Chisholm, 2010).

I suggest that these discourses indicate some ways in which queer experiences and natures can be (dis)orientating: they challenge what appears to be the

normal, naturalized course of a human life, that is, sexual reproduction in a heterosexual (or heterosexual-looking) family. José Estaban Muñoz—who takes up a utopian position in this debate—argues instead that queerness refers to that which does not yet exist, a “sort of ontologically humble state ... in which we do not claim to always already know queerness in the world” (2009, p. 22). I agree with Muñoz that this muddying of queer experience, which is fundamentally (dis)orientating, allows us to best combat the kinds of neoliberal political values that represent queerness as simply a same-sex version of consumer-based, heterosexual family life (2009). Another effect of Muñoz’s emphasis on queerness as an unknown “horizon” of possibilities is that it allows us to consider queer experience beyond the confines of anthropocentrism. His humility before the “queerness” of the world, along with Ahmed’s emphasis on the historical, action-based relation between embodied subjects and the objects that exist within their horizons, draws us away from the view that a queer orientation describes what one simply “is,” and reminds us that orientations are actually performed by diverse subjects in relation to others. I suggest this provides a celebratory invitation for those who identify as queer to share their narratives, experiences, and desires *but also* encourages us to imagine or engage with a wider diversity of (dis)orientating experiences that are wondrous, unexplainable, and even unwelcome within various communities.²

Toward a Queer Ecopedagogy

“I wasn’t surrounded by any role models...”

“There wasn’t a positive thing that I ever heard about anyone being a gay or lesbian...”

“If you were gay then you had to be either an artist or a make-up artist or you worked retail. You kind of had a job that wasn’t necessarily considered masculine.”
Various Officers, ‘It Gets Better – Royal Canadian Mounted Police’

Like the officers above, many of us may recall feeling directed toward certain futures as children. Well-meaning parents desire that their children become doctors, lawyers, carry on family businesses, or simply that they grow up happy, with a family and children of their own. (I wanted to become a veterinarian.) In addition, various culturally significant “role models” engage us in our youth, invigorating our fantasies about fame, achievement in sports, wealth, or, hopefully, environmentalism. These forces are strong, and as the quote above suggests, for LGBTQ youth there are often a limited number of directions one seems destined for, even today. For example, I knew at a very young age that I was gay and I still wanted to live in the woods and spend my time with animals, though I had no literary or real-life role models to suggest this was possible for a homosexual man. Before coming out, I was sheltered from queerness in Catholic school,

only learning about it as a sin. As a family, we watched the 90's sitcom *Ellen*, and I remember when Ellen DeGeneres came out of the closet. We watched *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, but none of those gay people ever seemed much like me. I remained confused for a long time. Popular culture, and even modern political discourses, have worked hard to outline LGBTQ livelihoods that are socially acceptable, silencing those who feel compelled to live in non-reproductive, non-consumer oriented ways; in short, LGBTQ lives are acceptable when they become less "queer." This section seeks to combat these forces by returning to the experiential quality of queerness and holding it in tension with the struggles of LGBTQ and ecological politics. The resulting dialogical approach I am calling "queer ecopedagogy," a thoughtful approach to knowledge and action that is committed to muddying the waters of educational discourses, pedagogical projects, and cultural narratives that work to promote or silence what lies beyond the boundaries of "natural" or "normal."

Queer ecopedagogy draws upon two synchronized approaches to knowledge and action.³ First, in an embodied, experiential sense, queer ecopedagogy seeks to inspire "educators to return their pedagogical gazes to the 'wild' primordiality of the body and how it is positioned and reflected in increasingly 'cultured' versions of time, space, and nature" (Payne & Wattoo, 2009, p. 18). I have already suggested that Ahmed's queer phenomenology critically attends to the (dis)orientation of a queer body in relation to particular cultural lines concerning life choices, sexual objects, and personal and societal futures. As such, there is promise in extending this investigation into ecopedagogy's concern with the "'wild' primordiality of the body" and its deconstructions of culturally-mandated temporal-spatial orientations. For queer pedagogues, this is similar to Deborah Britzman's suggestion that thinking through queer education and its implications involves "thinking through structures of disavowal within education, or the refusals—whether curricular, social, or pedagogical—to engage a traumatic perception that produces the subject of difference as a disruption, as the outside to normalcy" (1995, p. 152).

This suggests more than simply including tales of gay penguins into our biology curricula, though certainly that might be an initial step. It might mean investigating how and where such queer desires arise in our own and in other species, and interrogating those human and more-than-human (Abram, 1996) cultural and institutional apparatuses that seek to control or interpret such behaviours (see Sturgeon, 2010). Van Manen's existential themes of relationality, history/time, embodiment, and spatiality are all embedded within such unique cases. We might present the physically forced separation of an endangered gay African penguin couple—named Buddy and Pedro—at the Toronto Zoo as another example of the evidence of queer desire in the animal kingdom, thus making human sexual orientation somehow "natural" and permissive. Beyond that, educators may challenge students to imagine experiencing such desires and engage with the temporal and spatial implications of such orientations.

Secondly, the queer ecopedagogy I propose is associated with broad, educational movements interested in addressing “the cosmological, technological, and organizational dimensions of social life” that contribute to our ongoing social and ecological crises (Kahn, 2010, p. 27). The ecopedagogy movement in general seeks solidarity across several left-leaning, radical, and othered educational theories in order to address a wide range of planetary concerns. Kahn reminds us that ecopedagogy is “connected to a utopian project—one to change current human, social, and environmental relationships” (Antunes & Gadotti, as cited in Kahn, 2010, p. 18). Queer experience, as it is being conceived here, ought to be considered part of this movement toward liberationist solidarity. We must attend to queer experiences, to unique, embodied, temporal and spatial (dis)orientations, in a manner that lends itself to inclusivity and participation in historical narratives and new utopian visions.

Returning to Buddy and Pedro, I suggest that the larger story is perhaps more queer than the simplistic notion of “gay penguins,” considering that members of an endangered species—likely because of anthropogenic pressures—were forcibly separated from their objects of affection in order to propagate their species by the very animals who threatened them in the first place! Consider too, that the LGBTQ community in similar instances around the world rose up in protest of such movements (Sturgeon, 2010). Media coverage of the events make various suggestions about the “naturalness” of penguin sexuality, claiming there is no such thing as a “gay” penguin (Esselink, 2012), or that scientific evidence declares “that when a female shows up, that often spells the end for same-sex male bonds in penguins and other animals. And vice versa for same-sex female pairings” (Vincent, 2011). Perhaps it is our own cultural obsession with narratives of identifying possible LGBTQ animals that is (dis)orientating and queer. Subjectively, we cannot help but compare animal relationships with our own human ones, and our anthropomorphizing makes us uneasy. This perceived familiarity with animal life or behaviour is disorientating, raising important queer and posthumanist questions about human-animal relations and the futures of individual and species lives (see Alaimo, 2010).

Further inquiry into queer desires—whether in literary or in qualitative social investigations—is necessary and invited. Such work not only draws out possibilities for a more robust, diverse vision of queerness and queer utopias; it challenges narrow representations of LGBTQ identity and its orientations toward homonormative, consumer lifestyles. In effect, we need to broaden our definition of who or what counts as “queer,” make explicit who gets to participate in pedagogical investigations and imagining of utopian futures, and challenge the assumption that “natural” or “normal” queers are or ought to be well-groomed, wealthy, valuable, and human participants in a neoliberal, consumer society. Such assumptions strip LGBTQ youth of the possibility of imagining queer *ecotopias* for themselves and for those with whom they share our multispecies world. The “It Gets Better Project,” while nobly seeking to stem the tide of teen suicides, perhaps only perpetuates the distance between

queerness and nature in presenting the ideal queer life as one of material well-being or even, in many cases, a homonormative lifestyle modeled on straight relationships, marriage, and children. It also effectively naturalizes bullying for LGBTQ youth, suggesting it is simply another trial to overcome, rather than the result of ideological, political, and educational structures that minimize diversity. We cannot ask LGBTQ youth to take on individual responsibility for ongoing issues with bullying, violence, and legal struggles; and by suggesting that their assumed suffering will end in a particular vision of happiness, we fail to address the full spectrum of queer experience.

A queer ecopedagogy seeks out the margins in our educational endeavours, exploring uniqueness and diversity among ourselves, each other, and the more-than-human world. Without seeking to foreclose what it means to participate in a queer ecopedagogical inquiry or practice, I leave the possibility open that much of the work we engage in as environmental educators needs queering—to explore the (dis)orientations of our technologically-mediated bodies, to seek out and include “othered” voices, and to prop up those who fall “out of line” with exclusionary and oppressive models of education and politics. What we need is to foster, invite, and celebrate an attentiveness to those pedagogical experiences that are, simply put, *queer*. Perhaps such invitations really will truly make things better, by questioning whose experiences and stories are given attention in our orientation toward a shared future, for *all* beings.

Notes

- ¹ The Centre for Suicide Prevention’s 2012 report on LGBTQ youth briefly articulates a similar concern about such future-oriented messages, writing: “This is of course cold comfort for many youths stuck in the never-ending present. And it does not take into account many adults who continue to struggle with their sexuality long into their adulthood” (p. 3). While their report is geared toward risk assessment and prevention among community organizations and schools, I believe this concern is relevant for anyone interested in queer pedagogy. On the other hand, I do not wish in any way to diminish the very practical importance of the “It Gets Better Project,” and its messages of hope.
- ² Ahmed also explores disorientating experiences among persons of colour in *Queer Phenomenology*, drawing important questions about the experiential diversities that exist within and between the highly problematic homogenization of various socio-cultural identity groups.
- ³ I am particularly excited and influenced by the growing field of “queer ecology,” which I think provides many insights into the kinds of content—literary, scientific, and political—that we might engage with more specifically in queer, ecopedagogical work (see Mortimer-Sandilands & Erickson, 2010). Still, I want to focus on these overall *intentions* of a queer ecopedagogical project here, rather than provide specifically queer content for environmental education lessons.

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