

# Queering Environmental Education

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## **Abstract**

*We wish to initiate discussion on the possibilities for queering environmental education. As a verb, “to queer” means more than simply adding gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgendered content to environmental education. Rather, queering has, at its heart, the project of problematizing heteronormativity, essentialized identities, and the heterosexualization of our theories and practices. In this paper, we provide a brief introduction to queer pedagogy, point to the unique ways in which environmental education can contribute to the disruption of heteronormativity and the problematization of identity and of experience, and describe efforts to queer environmentalism in new social movements and cultural productions.*

## **Résumé**

*Nous aimerions amorcer une discussion sur la possibilité d'une éducation environnementale queer. La constitution d'une éducation environnementale queer ne signifie pas uniquement ajouter un contenu gay, lesbien, bisexuel et non conformiste sexuel à l'éducation environnementale. Au cœur de cette notion, nous retrouvons plutôt un projet fondamental : celui de poser les problèmes de l'hétéronormativité, de l'essence des identités et de l'hétérosexualisation de nos théories et pratiques. Dans cet article, nous présentons une introduction à la pédagogie queer. Nous indiquons les moyens uniques grâce auxquels l'éducation environnementale peut contribuer à remettre en cause l'hétéronormativité et la problématique des identités et de l'expérience. Enfin, nous décrivons des façons de favoriser une éducation environnementale queer dans les nouvelles productions culturelles et les nouveaux mouvements sociaux.*

When some of Deborah Britzman's colleagues first heard about her work in what was then the emerging field of queer pedagogy, she recounts their surprise: “it is as if the listener cannot believe her or his ears, it is as if I had spoken in another language. One difficulty that borders these conversations is that for many of my colleagues, questions of gay and lesbian thought are, well, not given any thought” (1995, p. 151). The three of us find ourselves in a similar position. With the exception of a small group of feminist outdoor educators (Bell, 1996, 1997; Bradash, 1995; McClintock, 1994, 1996; Mitten, 1997; Warren & Rheingold, 1996), environmental education has been overwhelmingly silent about the ways in which our theories, practices, and research have been heterosexualized.

While critical environmental educators have noted their concern over the marginalization of certain voices, sexuality has yet to make it on to the lists of identity markers worthy of mention (eg., Courtenay-Hall & Lott, 1999; Gough, 1999a, 1999b; Payne, 2001). For example, Hart, Jickling and Kool (1999) ask: “Where are the silences about issues related to race, gender, culture, environment and so forth?” (p. 118) Optimistically, queers probably enjoy membership in the “and so forth” community, but as we will argue in this paper, there is much potential in explicitly and actively “queering” environmental education. Following the lead of scholars who have illuminated the possibilities created when queer theory, ecofeminism and environmental thought come together (Gaard, 1997; Sandilands, 1994, 2001a, 2001b), we hope that sharing aloud some of our speculations may shatter this silence, encourage reflection, and generate discussion.

### Nouns, Adjectives, and Essentialism

To begin, it is important to remember that the word “queer” is contested and thus problematic. Commonly used as a pejorative, it has been defiantly reclaimed. For some, “queer” signifies a noun or adjective and acts “as a mere alternative, or more convenient short-form to the lengthy ‘lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and transexual’” (Luhmann, 1998, p. 142; see also Tierney, 1997). For others, however, the word can also be a verb which “signif[ies] actions, not actors” (Britzman, 1995, p. 153; see also Bryson & de Castell, 1993).

In queer pedagogy, the shift to the agential form of the word denotes a broadening of scope, from educating *about* queers and *their* struggles with homophobia to sustained interrogation of how all of us construct our identities. Those working in queer pedagogy are well aware that there is no one true queer (or any other) identity immune from the influences of other categories such as race, class, gender or ability (Goldman, 1996; Sumara & Davis, 1999). As Susanne Luhmann (1998) suggests:

Beyond proudly reclaiming a marginal space, against merely adding authentic or likable portrayals of lesbian/gay icons to an otherwise straight—and already overcrowded—curriculum, against claiming normalcy for lesbians and gays, queer theory looks at the process of subject formulation (ironically) by asking: How do normalcy and abnormalcy become assigned subject positions? How can they be subverted? How can the very notion of a unified human subject be parodied and, jointly with other discourses, radically deconstructed into a fluid, permanently shifting, and unintelligible subjectivity? (p. 146)

The classification of people based on their sexual orientation is a relatively new phenomenon in Western culture. Following the work of Michel Foucault (1980) and gay, lesbian, and feminist movements, Jonathan Ned Katz (1996, 1997) notes that the first public use of the word “homosexual” was in 1869

and that it first appeared in the *Oxford English Dictionary* in 1901. During this period in Western culture, a taxonomy of sexual “species” was developed and described in medical texts whereby “heterosexual reproduction came to be understood as a biologically inscribed *norm* from which a proliferation of sexual deviations *differed*, thus not only naturalizing sexual categories but offering a scientifically authorized hierarchy through which control of sexual ‘minorities’ could be justified” (Sandilands, 2001a, p. 33). Rita Felski (1998) playfully offers the image of “earnest Victorian scholars labouring over lists of sexual perversions with the taxonomical zeal of an entomologist examining insects” (p. 1). A similar taxonomy of “race” was also developed, with whiteness as the biologically inscribed norm (Dei, 1996).

Dorothy Nelkin and Susan Lindee (1997) suggest that “[b]iological arguments have long served to justify social inequalities by casting the differential treatment and status of particular groups as a natural consequence of essential, immutable traits” (p. 309). For example, the alleged smaller brains of women and the alleged large genitalia of blacks were offered as evidence of their inferiority. Nelkin and Lindee make a compelling argument that the ongoing search for genetic differences between groups is prone to yet another version of essentialism.

For Luhmann (1998), one of the primary goals of queer pedagogy becomes, then, the identification and undermining of “the very processes by which (some) subjects become normalized and others marginalized” (p. 143-144). It is our contention that environmental educators are in a unique position to do precisely that because heteronormativity (and other such essentialist projects) depend upon very particular constructions of what counts as natural. A dominant narrative within Western society is that heterosexual reproductive sex is natural because it contributes to the perpetuation of the human species. Yet, as Greta Gaard (1997) notes, “[a]rguments from ‘nature,’ . . . are frequently used to justify social norms rather than to find out anything new about nature” (p. 122). Indeed, the “heterosexualization of nature” (Sandilands, 2001b, p. 179) has been well-documented.

Donna Haraway (1989), in her groundbreaking examination of primatology, convincingly demonstrated the various ways in which the lives of primates were [mis]interpreted through particular cultural lenses. For example, gorillas were portrayed as existing in nuclear families (p. 33, 41) and chimpanzees as heterosexually monogamous (p. 78). Behaviours and relationships which did not support such narratives rarely made it into public discourse. Further, as Bruce Baghemi (1999) asserts, evidence contrary to the heterosexist norm was:

. . . often hidden away in obscure journals and unpublished dissertations, or buried even further under outdated value judgments and cryptic terminology. Most of this information, however, simply remains unpublished, the result of a general climate of ignorance, disinterest, and even fear and hostility . . . . Equally disconcerting, popular works on animals routinely omit any mention of

homosexuality, even when the authors are clearly aware that such information is available in the original scientific material. (p. 87)

While the climate has changed somewhat and research on other animals which specifically names and theorizes practices that do not fit the heterosexual norm are finally appearing in both academic and popular literature (Baghemi, 1999), non-reproductive sex is usually explained in terms of how it contributes to evolutionary fitness. For example, male baboons engaging in same-sex affairs are seen to be cementing alliances that may help them fend off aggressors in the future and the menage à trois arrangements of some Greylag geese is thought to provide more food for hungry young. It should come as no surprise, then, that research conducted by Paul Vasey (1998, 2002) on female Japanese macaques engaging in same-sex behaviour for pleasure is rightly seen as cutting edge work and has generated much media coverage such as a magazine article in *Equinox* (Vasey, 2000) and an interview in the documentary, *Out In Nature* (Loyer, Menendez, & Alexandresco, 2000) which recently aired on the Discovery Channel.

Many environmental educators already consider the unpacking of various constructions of nature vital to both their theory and practice (Bell & Russell, 1999; Fawcett, 2000; Gough, 1993; Selby, 1995). Much pedagogical effort, for example, has been expended on disrupting reductionist accounts of the lives of other animals and the construction of nature as “Other” and solely a resource for humankind. Surely, then, an examination and challenging of the heterosexualization of nature and the implications of such heterosexualization is within our purview?

Further, environmental educators influenced by ecofeminism and environmental justice have been very interested in the ways in which various constructions of nature, race, and gender intersect and oppressions are linked (Bell & Russell, 1999; Selby, 1995). Bell and Russell (2000), for example, have explored the pedagogical implications of the anthropocentric fear of being too closely linked to nature. Historically, exploitation of particular human groups such as women, blacks, indigenous peoples, and queers has been justified on the basis of these groups being deemed to be closer to nature, that is animalistic, irrational, savage, or uncivilized. (See also, Bishop, 1994; Gaard, 1997; Haraway, 1989; Selby, 1995).<sup>1</sup> Julian Carter (1997) recounts that in the early 20th century, people engaged in “sexual perversion” (that is, enjoying sexual relations outside heterosexual marriage) were considered “evolutionary throwbacks” (p. 155).

### Problematizing Experience and Redefining Environmentalism

Recently, more attention has been paid in environmental education to the problematization of the experiences we offer in practice and describe in research reports (Gough, 1999a, 1999b; Payne, 2001; Russell, 1999). Those

concerned with the educational implications of environmental racism and environmental justice have done a particularly fine job of demonstrating that the people with whom we learn and teach arrive with a diversity of backgrounds, influences, and desires (Bak, 1995; Lewis & James, 1995; Taylor, 1996). Once such diversity is acknowledged, experience cannot be universalized, that is, assumed to be interpreted in the same way by all people at all times. In recognition of this, some outdoor experiential education programs have offered special programs for queer youth to create safe spaces to address their unique concerns (Bradash, 1995; see also Kivel, 1997).

Recognizing diversity also serves to expand ideas of what counts as environmentalism. Again, in general, those working in the environmental justice field have led the way (Lewis & James, 1995; Taylor, 1996). A queer example is EcoQueers, a Toronto organization which provides “space for those looking for nature walks, camping trips and gardening tips, but also for folks wanting to challenge more critically the objectives of gay liberation and gay discourse” (Gosine, 2001, p. 36). Such organizations, Andil Gosine (2001) asserts, directly challenge stereotypes such as the gay man oblivious to or disinterested in environmental concerns: “to be gay and male, the story goes, is to fully indulge capitalist consumption” (p. 35).

While the presence of queer environmentalists has often been overlooked or unnamed<sup>2</sup> (how often do we hear about the sexual orientation of Rachel Carson or Henry David Thoreau, for example?), as Sandilands (1994) suggests:

It is not enough to point to “one-in-ten” environmentalists, as if the mere presence of gay bodies at blockades of logging roads were a significant form of inclusion or conversation. It is not enough simply to add “heterosexism” to the long list of dominations that shape our relations to nature, to pretend that we can just “add queers and stir.” (p. 21)

Again, as with the desire within queer pedagogy to destabilize essentialist identities of all people, not just queers, experience also needs to be problematized in a general way. Joan Scott (1991) argues that we need to focus on the “discursive nature of experience” for it “is at once always already an interpretation *and* in need of interpretation. What counts as experience is neither self-evident nor straightforward; it is always contested, always therefore political” (p. 37).

Feminists working in and theorizing about outdoor experiential education have been at the forefront of our field in this regard. For example, Martha Bell (1997) critiques essentialist notions of gender in outdoor education theory and practice, pointing to the heteronormativity of enforced gender roles. She critiques the underlying macho ethos of much outdoor education where “the practices that define the competent outdoor education instructor [are] already masculine [and] Eurocentric” (1996, p. 152; see Eyre, 1993 and Griffin, 1997 for a similar analysis of physical education theory and practice). Karen Warren and Alison Rheingold (1996) describe an exercise they use to

disrupt the underlying heteronormativity of the prescription of traditional gender roles. On canoe trips, they facilitate a role playing exercise in which:

... only the women (who are playing masculine roles) are allowed to handle the canoe, tie it on top of the van, and paddle out to the island. The men's role (playing the feminine role) is to be supportive and encouraging. While the gender-bending exercise usually creates some extreme stereotypic actions by the students, when we process the experience . . . , students are usually astounded by their reactions and the issues raised. (1996, p. 126)

While such exercises risk further reifying gender roles, when well facilitated, they can provide a space whereby “masculine” and “feminine” and heteronormative gender role socialization can be unpacked. Why, for instance, is a male guide who excels at campsite cooking considered “gay” and a female guide adept at portaging considered a “dyke”?

Heteronormativity has been actively enforced in outdoor and adventure education. For example, Denise Mitten (1997) describes the transition of Outward Bound from an all-male bastion to a mixed-gender organization. Resistant at first to hiring female staff, some males expressed concern that “Amazon types” (code word for lesbians) would be hired; it should be no surprise that queers hired at that time often remained in the closet (Mitten, 1997). This is an example of “lesbian baiting” whereby women working in the field, regardless of their sexual orientation, are labeled as lesbians in an effort to discredit them, provoke denials, or encourage adoption of more traditional gender norms (McClintock, 1996; Mitten, 1997; see also Griffin, 1997 who offers strikingly similar examples of lesbian baiting in physical education and athletics). Lesbian baiting only works, of course, in homophobic contexts. Mary McClintock (1996) rightfully asks “[w]hy does lesbian baiting happen in outdoor and adventure education?” and responds that “the primary reason is that wilderness, the outdoors, and outdoor activities have traditionally been considered an arena for men to prove and exhibit their masculinity” (p. 244).

Another avenue for problematizing experience and perhaps disrupting heteronormativity involves focusing on our bodies. In environmental education, Philip Payne (1997), in particular, has pointed to the possibilities of using our bodies as a source of and site for knowledge production. (See also Russell & Bell, 1996). Building on this existing work on embodiment in environmental education, we can see the potential in investigating Sandilands' (2001b) ideas regarding how the sense of touch is shaped by cultural influences and desires. She writes:

Sensory pleasure is both culturally enabled and culturally constrained; we learn our attractions to other humans—and other species, landscapes, or organisms—in the midst of powerful, socially and culturally specific conventions that not only shape our ideas of desirability but influence how our bodies respond to the presence of a potentially desirable or undesirable Other. (p. 171)

Deconstructing what constitutes attractiveness, or lack thereof, could be pedagogically rich. Why, for example, do some species, like the great apes, elephants, whales and tigers fall under the category of what E.O. Wilson dubbed “charismatic megafauna” and are thereby readily seen as worthy of protection? Why are some species, like snakes or dandelions, not? In a related vein, why are some humans considered attractive in particular contexts and others are not? By queering environmental education, we can engage in such comparative discussions and investigate how attractiveness can be filtered through a heteronormative lens.

Our bodies can also be seen as sites of resistance. Kim Fry and Cheryl Lousley (2001), reporting on their experiences with and as eco-grrls, note the ways in which these young women challenge traditional gender roles. “The caricature of an eco-grrl,” they write, “wears Mountain Equipment Co-op clothes with a backpack and hiking boots, complemented by unshaven legs, no makeup and a bandanna covering her hair” (p. 25). Adopting a uniform more commonly associated with lesbians allows eco-grrls “to reject and subvert overwhelming beauty pressures and the male gaze” (p. 25).<sup>3</sup> Further:

. . . their politics have become more playful, more performative and more directly aimed towards the culture industry than environmentalism has ever been. While this performative politics may be the result of the extraordinary influence popular culture has on adolescent identity formation, eco-grrls demonstrate the need for a sophisticated understanding and deployment of cultural politics in environmentalism today. (p. 28)

There are other examples of popular culture being used to subvert traditional gender roles. “Radical Cheerleaders” are a growing presence in political protests in support of social and environmental justice. Gregory and Dinner (2001) describe one such male cheerleader: “Corey puts on a black shirt and red skirt and sticks plastic pompoms into the makeshift stirrups of a pair of combat boots . . . Corey joins the radical squad, a group of 25 young men and women with sexy legs and defiant grins” (p. 26). These youth have taken a “conservative icon” and “hijacked [it] into a form of political theatre” (p. 26).

Yet another example is the production of “zines” (a play on “magazine”). Typically low-budget, home-spun publications that are regularly quite radical in their political positioning, zines originated in the punk scene and are often taken up by various politically motivated groups and individuals as a forum for discussion of ideas, issues, politics and emotions through art, poetry, and prose. Sarick (2001) reports on the production of one such zine by a group of workers from the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival. Particularly concerned about the treatment of transgendered people at the women-only event, the group created a zine filled with provocative images and words which questioned and purposely destabilized what counted as “woman,” “man,” and “nature” in that context. This cultural production process was not only educational for

the group working on the zine, but also for attendees of the following summer's Festival. The zine was made available for review and/or purchase, and Sarick received much positive feedback regarding the space the zine created for critical reflection and discussion about the ways in which "nature" was used to construct gender and regulate social relations at the Festival.

These last few examples demonstrate the ways in which some activists are playfully and readily destabilizing identities, analyzing interconnections of oppressions and issues, and working across differences. One particular consequence of these efforts appears to be a willingness to engage in coalition building. While social movements in the past have been understood largely as collectives of people with similar identities and politics (e.g., Clark, Grayson, & Grayson, 1975), today there is growing interest in and commitment to coalitional politics (Sandilands, 1999). As Lauren Corman (2001) suggests in her analysis of the overlapping concerns regarding labour and animal conditions in factory farms and slaughterhouses, "coalitions are about using as many tools as possible to dismantle interrelated forms of oppression, oppressions that work together and support each other" (p. 94).<sup>4</sup> As environmental educators who understand social and environmental justice to be intimately intertwined, we agree with Corman and assert that there is much to be gained in learning from and with others engaged in related struggles.

## Conclusion

Simply put, we argue that queer pedagogy can enrich environmental education theory and practice.<sup>5</sup> Queer pedagogy's insightful probing of the perils of essentialism are invaluable to the investigation of the role of identity in environmental education. The unpacking of the heterosexualization of nature and of what constitutes attractiveness offers new challenges to those interested in the educational implications of various social constructions of nature. Naming and resisting homophobic tactics such as lesbian baiting and training a critical eye on the ways in which our practices reinforce heteronormativity helps ensure that our educational interventions are safe for and relevant to all participants. The abandonment of traditional gender roles by eco-grrls, the disruption of heteronormativity in the midst of the Radical Cheerleaders' social and environmental justice efforts, and the playful destabilization of identities in the zine produced by Michigan Womyn's Festival's workers provide hopeful examples of ways in which linked oppressions can be named and resisted. We assume that there are many other possibilities for queering environmental education and we hope this paper will spark new ideas, foster dialogue, encourage critical analysis of our theory and practice, and inspire future research.



## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The irony of queers being at once unnatural and animalistic has not gone unnoticed (Gaard, 1997).
- <sup>2</sup> Silence about sexual orientation may have been, in part, strategic. For example, Roderick Nash (1982) recounts how proponents of the Hetch Hetchy Dam attempted to tar the reputation of wilderness preservationists by defining them as “short-haired women and long-haired men” (p. 169). (We are grateful to Anne Bell for bringing this example to our attention.)
- <sup>3</sup> It may not, however, necessarily lead to a disruption of consumerism. As Lousley (1999) commented, “The appropriation of the masculinist wilderness discourse seemed to provide the girls . . . with the space to reject the codes of beauty which dominate high school social relations . . . [It] was not a rejection of consumerism, however, as they literally bought into the burgeoning wilderness recreation market” (p. 301).
- <sup>4</sup> See Sandilands (1999, p. 99-124) for a thoughtful discussion of the insights ecofeminism and queer theory offers the theory and practice of coalitional politics.
- <sup>5</sup> We also assume that queer pedagogy can be enriched by insights from environmental education as well, but that is beyond the scope of this particular paper. See Bell and Russell (2000) for a discussion of the profound anthropocentrism of critical pedagogy and the ways in which dialogue with environmental education could be mutually beneficial.

## Acknowledgments

We wish to thank Anne Bell, Janet Dymont, and two anonymous reviewers for their astute editorial suggestions. Conversations with Cate Sandilands and Paul Vasey have contributed much to the formulation of our ideas.

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