

OUTING BIOLOGY: FINDING A PLACE FOR THE NATURAL SCIENCES IN QUEER DISCOURSES

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Abstract

This paper critically responds to Stacy Alaimo's "Eluding Capture: The Science, Culture and Pleasure of Queer Animals" (2010), from *Queer Ecologies* by Bruce Erickson and Catrina Mortimer-Sandilands. Here, I focus on how the author addresses the relationship between social sciences and natural sciences, how social structures impact the ways in which we understand and interpret scientific data, and how she suggests we embrace the concept of "Naturecultures" in order to move forward in recognizing that heteronormative accounts of life, while dominant, are not the only possible lenses through which nature and sex can/should be seen. I explore Alaimo's arguments against various different accounts of "same-sex" sexual activity in nature, whilst also reiterating that she does not wish to use animal sex as a form of validation for the LGBTQ+ community, reducing its mere existence to that of biological essentialism and erasing any possible discussions of gender/sexual fluidity by doing so. Instead, she cleverly uses rhetoric regarding animal sex and their perceived sexuality to expose the intrinsic heteronormativity that permeates even the supposedly "empirical" biological sciences. In this essay, I examine Alaimo's discussion of sexuality in non-human animals and make the argument that biological/ecological understandings of life are irrefutably drawn from pre-existing, Humanistic social structures.

Keywords: naturecultures, biopolitics, sexuality, queer

In the context of discourses surrounding LGBTQ+ identity politics and queer theory, biology and/or natural sciences can be somewhat controversial. Biological essentialist views of queer identities, while sometimes attempting to preach equality by rectifying innate queer tendencies in animals and humans alike, have often resulted in reductionist claims to sexual and gender identities. Those who propose a biologically deterministic viewpoint claim that queerness is "fixed" in our DNA and forever unchanging, ignoring the potential for fluidity within our identities and behavior over our lifetimes. The article "Eluding Capture: the Science, Culture, and Pleasure of 'Queer' Animals" (2010) by Stacy Alaimo takes on the task of balancing nuanced conjecture towards sexuality and gender, while examining the study of queer animals in the biological community. She cleverly avoids making any reductionist claims towards identity based solely upon the existence of queerness and observable queer behavior in animals. Instead, she focuses on how queer animals have been catalogued and described within the scientific community, and the interplay between this phenomenon and existing ideologies within society.

The author makes several interesting points regarding the role social norms play in perceptions towards non-heteronormativity in non-human animals, leading her readers to understand that even empirical, scientific research is not immune to social ideology. Alaimo showcases that we should not use biological evidence of same-sex relations to prove the legitimacy of LGBTQ+ identities, nor should we use it to ascertain that

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identities are stagnant and/or based upon observable sexual behavior. However, we can engage with scientific discourse to see how narratives in biology have proven to stem from a heteronormative ideology, and then work to correct this issue and become more inclusive in terms of what groups get studied and why. If we are able to achieve this feat, then we can begin to more thoroughly understand not just biology more thoroughly, but the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion as a societal function as well.

Biopolitics influences more than just how scientific findings are interpreted; it also influences what phenomenon is deemed worthy of study in the first place. Alaimo emphasizes that “scientific accounts of queer animals insist that heteronormativity has damaged and diminished scientific knowledge in biology, anthropology, and other fields” (Alaimo, 2010, p. 54). This implies that the innate focus scientific research places on reproductive animalistic sexuality has greatly diminished our understanding of the operations of the animal (as well as human) world. This phenomenon of ignoring and/or misrepresenting same-sex acts in animals is very much apparent in the approach Jonathan Marks has taken in his study of bonobos. In Marks’ 2002 book, he writes “One of the outstanding hallmarks of human evolution is the extent to which our species has divorced sexuality from reproduction.” (Marks, 2002, p. 110). He only mentions same-sex genital-stimulation between female bonobos as being “exceptional” or outside the otherwise reproductively-focused, “normal” sex of the bonobos. This is significant because it demonstrates Marks’ avoidance to classify non-heteronormative, reproductively focused activity as “normal”, despite it occurring frequently enough to be worthy of mentioning. This idea that

bonobos are capable of same-sex attraction deviates from the long-held notion of the scientific community that humans are the only creatures of which sexuality and sex has been differentiated.

Alaimo contends that Marks, along with other biologists, tend to avoid categorizing animals as being capable of having a “sexuality,” although this really just implies that their default sexuality is heterosexual. This categorization allows them to more easily make distinctions between human and non-human animals, but inadvertently leads to an aggressively heteronormative worldview of ecology. Alaimo also makes use of a very interesting analysis of queer behavior in animals by Cynthia Chris (2006). While she acknowledges and applauds her attempts to address the lack of recognition that wildlife documentaries give to same-sex behavior in animals, she is also critical of Chris’ assertion that “if animals do something, they do it because of genetic programming” (Alaimo, 2010, pg. 58). This conflation between biological determinism and sexuality implies that sexual behavior is unchanging, with no potential for fluctuation. In these instances, Alaimo tries to bring focus to the misrepresentations that queer sexuality is subject to within the realm of natural sciences, so that we can work towards a possible solution to this separation between human queerness and animal sexuality.

Perceptions towards biology and scientific research within queer discourses have been met with heavy debate in the past, and not without reason. In Pfeffer’s article on female partners of transgender men and their experiences with changing identities, she writes that “equal rights discourses resting primarily upon biologically essentialist notions of group differences between ‘the sexes’ and ‘the races’ are both flawed and problematic” (Pfeffer, 2014, p. 4). The participants

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in her study proved that the “Born This Way” attitude towards sexuality, while attempting to bring about understanding of LGBTQ+ identities, is problematic in the sense that it implies that we do not change our identities as we grow and evolve as a people. Many of her participants demonstrated this conundrum changing how they chose to label themselves, upon their partner’s gender transition. However, Alaimo proves that biology itself is not necessarily the enemy of queerness and/or fluidity, but rather that biology and scientific research is really subject to the ideologies of those working on it. We can observe this point in how Alaimo handles the response of the scientific community towards lesbianism in seagulls.

In response to the (unfactual) claim that lesbian relationships between seagulls were a sign of grave danger for the wellbeing of the entire species, she states that “the assumption that heterosexuality is the only natural sexual form is clearly not an appropriate benchmark for ecological research” (Alaimo, 2010, p. 54). She goes on to argue further that “if conservatives are hell-bent on damning homosexuals” (Alaimo, 2010, p. 55), they will interpret biological evidence of queer behavior in animals in whatever way best corresponds with this ideology. Biology, or rather the study of queerness in nature itself is not the problem being highlighted here. Lesbian seagulls do not represent the validation of same-sex relationships, nor do they represent the downfall of traditional family values. The problem here is that social norms and ideology are clouding the empiracy that one should treat these queer animals with while studying them.

In response to this lack of real empiracy, Alaimo sees the introduction of biology to the concept of “Naturecultures” by Donna Haraway (Alaimo, 2010, p. 60) as a potential solution to the

heteronormativity that other approaches have taken to explaining sexuality in animals. The author urges biologists to avoid the assumption that humans are the only beings that have a culture, or can be influenced by their society. “Naturecultures”, as Alaimo defines it, means that “sexual activity is always indivisibly material and social” (Alaimo, 2010, p. 60). It means that sexually encompasses more than sexual acts, but how society labels those acts as well. Furthermore, Bagemihl observes that female bonobos actually develop tools to aid in masturbation, leading him to the conclusion that

the pursuit of sexual pleasure may have contributed, in some measure, to our own heritage as creatures whose tool-using practices are among the most polymorphous of any primate (Bagemihl, 1999, p. 71).

While Alaimo acknowledges that this assertion is still somewhat problematic in that it uses linear narratives towards humanism to explain the development of tools and culture in primates, she also adds that

Only a slight shift here is needed to read these examples of tool use and language development as part of particular animal naturecultures in which the pursuit of sexual pleasure is one of the most quintessentially “cultural” sorts of activities. (Alaimo, 2010, p. 61).

Alaimo is making the argument here that, if biologists can conceptualize animals as having their own culture and societies, then this will prevent animals from being seen solely from a humanistic, heteronormative lens, and force scientists to acknowledge that animals are not necessarily as separate from humans as we would like to believe. Furthermore, she seeks to prove

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with Haraway's "Naturecultures" concept that sexuality is twofold: it encompasses both the sex acts at hand, as well as how society defines and categorizes those activities. The masturbatory aids developed by the bonobos is often characterized as miscellaneous in terms of sexual activity, but it is important to question why it is not used as evidence that bonobos may have their own sexualities and sexual cultures. Naturecultures prove that science cannot ignore parts of nature that they deem as irrelevant, just because it does not reflect the dominant ideology within their own society, and that it must engage with queerness is they wish to truly understand how animals operate in terms of culture. Nature cannot be separated from culture, as they both enact on one another in terms of how all life is perceived.

The author of the article in question makes a very informed case as to how the natural sciences, particularly biology, can be incorporated into queer discourses. It is important to understand that the sciences, like any other area of study, have long been subject to societal perception in who/what is deemed relevant for study, the relationship between perceptions towards subjects of study and the dominant social structure within the society perpetrating the study, and finally, how science must move towards acknowledging animals as having their own culture and society. If science can acknowledge that non-human animals have their own culture, it forces us to acknowledge that dominant social ideologies are not necessarily morally-upright, just because correspond to what is deemed "natural." While many biologists have focused primarily on sex between animals as being reflective of heteronormative and reproductively-

sound, increasing evidence has shown that this is not really the case for many organisms. The "queering" of biology then, must force us to acknowledge that science is not necessarily an exact truth, or a discipline without inclination from ideology. It is important that social sciences and natural sciences alike work to improve their understandings of queerness, leading to a more tolerant society in which humans are respected not on the basis that they are just like animals, but on the basis that diversity is part of what makes up all of life as a whole.

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