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Queering eco-activism

Ways of organizing and uplifting conservation efforts by queer and trans eco-activists

MARICELA DEMIRJYN

ABSTRACT

This essay explores a cohort of eco-activists within the queer and trans community who specifically link social justice concerns with environmental activism. Areas of focus include climate crisis, activist eco-interventions, the development of social media platforms as eco-activist hotspots, and sites (places) of public protest. An intersectional environmentalist framework is applied throughout this paper, highlighting insights and strategies by queer and trans eco-activists of color.

How could intelligent beings seek to control a few unwanted species by a method that contaminated the entire environment and brought the threat of disease and death even to their own kind?

— Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (1964)

The above introductory quote by Rachel Carson, recognized as a queer founder of our present-day environmental movement, was originally linked to “man’s assaults upon the environment” through the contamination of “air, earth, rivers, and sea with dangerous and even lethal materials” (12). Within the context of this essay, the significance of this statement is extended to examine the *control* of a few *unwanted species* as the casting out of queer and trans community members from eco-spaces and places as identified within the nature versus unnatural dichotomy. Discourses of “nature” enforce heteronormativity by regulating and criminalizing sexuality and “marginalized persons deemed sexually transgressive,” with specific sexual identities, expressions, and practices perceived as being “unnatural” (Pellow 2018: 8). In particular, “unwanted species” is a direct reference to the othering of marginalized peoples, whether it be due to racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, and all that is controlled by heteronormative and colonial systems of power. We still fight to be recognized as *of their own kind*, namely human; however, frameworks such as queer ecology and intersectional environmentalism push us forward to witness the relationality between all beings.

The following work explores known queer and trans eco-activists who specifically link social justice concerns with environmental activism. Areas of focus include climate crisis, activist eco-interventions, the development of social media platforms as eco-activist hot spots, and sites (places) of public protest. Through the querying and queering of ecology movements, a theoretical feminist framework is applied as the basis for examining queer eco-activism. This process involves employing understandings of queer ecology, queer ecopedagogy, intersectional environmentalism, and “theory in the flesh” as located in the spaces and places of queer and trans people of color positionalities (Anzaldúa and Moraga 1983: 23).

The next section starts our journey of queer eco-activism exploration by reviewing key ideological contributions in the framing of queer ecologies and queer eco-epistemologies, as well as theories in the flesh and intersectional environmentalism. The third section engages with the varying forms of queer eco-activism expressed and developed by a generational cohort of well-known queer and trans eco-activists, specifically highlighting insights and strategies by queer and trans eco-activists of color. The final section of this piece focuses on thematic areas of interest in conservation efforts and ways of organizing as shared within the expressed queering of eco-activism.

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QUEER(ING) ECOLOGY MOVEMENTS

How we think about ecology impacts how we think about queerness, and the other way around. Some scholars and practitioners identify this as the conceptual “greening” of queer theories and the “queering” of environmental ways of understanding our world. In this case, *queering* is a method to “question the categories, definitions, divisions, distinctions, and dualities that exist and usually go unchallenged within society” (Butler 2017: 275). Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands (2005) states that, for “environmental justice advocates, questions of epistemologies are inherently linked with issues of power” (4). She specifically localizes sexism and racism as systemic forms of oppression that “negatively influence human beings’ relationships with the natural world” and recognizes “that ideas and institutions of nature are important sites in which sexism and racism are organized” (Mortimer-Sandilands 2005: 4). With this argument, Mortimer-Sandilands introduces the need for a queering of ecology, or a recognition of the value added by accessing *unnatural passions* (2005: 7). By listing examples of how the national park movement was based on a white ideal of nature and preservation efforts were connected to upper-class recreational activities, a strategy of reversing discourses by challenging heteronormative philosophies is provided to both “develop radically transformative” queer politics and showcase “elements of queer experience” to create alternative environmental perspectives (Mortimer-Sandilands 2005: 7).

How we think about ecology impacts how we think about queerness, and the other way around.

Continuing with queer ecology, Cameron Butler (2017) discusses the potential for broadening the framing of sustainability as a hetero-political project by including the realities of queer and trans people and communities (270). In queering the sustainability movement, the following societal practices are challenged and addressed: heteronormativity, cissexism and reprocentricity, or the centering of human procreation (Butler 2017: 271). This queering process provides space for differing perspectives and place-based positionalities by disrupting the boundaries of what is labeled as “nature” or “natural.” Overall, the desire of queer ecology is “to build broad coalitions and engage in intersectional social justice in order to achieve long-term environmental and social sustainability” (Butler 2017: 273). Queer ecology then has the potential to contribute to queer eco-liberationist solidarity by including the voices of marginalized community members, addressing the power dynamics between all beings, and valuing all land- and seascapes. The significance of queer eco-liberation solidarity is shared in the concluding section of this essay.

Mirroring the advancement of queer ecologies, queer ecopedagogies stem from a movement seeking “solidarity across several left-leaning, radical and othered educational theories in order to address a wide range of planetary concerns” (Russell 2021: 72). Joshua Russell (2021) defines ecopedagogy as an “attentiveness to queer experiences in the world(s) around us” and as a “political movement to disrupt the destructiveness of oppressive structures that threaten all lives” (8). The potential of queer ecopedagogies exists in their ability to shift facets of environmental education in general, such as in the areas of sustainability and conservation. And, “queer pedagogies might move us beyond rigid notions of identity and selfhood altogether and into the unknown” (Russell 2021: 10).

Bringing the activist slogan “the personal is political” to the digital age, researchers analyze the following four conceptual threads connected to feminist fundamentals: power, the private/public dichotomy, political action, and subjectivity (Rogan and Budgeon 2018: 2). Annette Gough’s (2021) work on transforming environmental education by listening to marginalized voices addresses these threads to highlight the possibilities of inclusivity within queer ecopedagogies and research methods (164). By applying these theoretical tenets of analysis to queer eco-activism, queering’s “subversive power” is expanded by “opening up new empirical and theoretical resources” (Gough 2021: 9).

Addressing the need to include the voices of marginalized community members, specifically people vested in queer eco-activism, is an understanding of intersectional environmentalism. Leah Thomas asserts that the “lack of representation of Black, Brown, Indigenous, Asian, low-income, LGBTQ+, disabled, and other marginalized voices” in mainstream environmental movements speaks to the need to address the interconnectedness between social justice and environmentalism as a crucial means for “attaining justice for both people and planet” (2022: 4–5). She describes *intersectional environmentalism* as an inclusive approach to environmentalism “amplifying historically

excluded voices” based on intersectional theory, as well as the principles of environmental justice (Thomas 2022: 31–32). Thomas turned to digital eco-activism during the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic and co-founded the Intersectional Environmentalist council and organization. As we move into the next section and focus specifically on queer eco-activists and their work, details on three of the original members of the Intersectional Environmentalist council will be explored.

Lastly, as a Xicana feminist and ethnic studies scholar, my positionality as a researcher and practitioner of queering eco-art activism with students of color as part of the Rocky Mountain Sustainability and Science Network provides an applied theory-in-the-flesh analytic lens to this investigation. Having been born and raised in California, while working professionally in Colorado, provides me with an embodied understanding of both places. Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga (1983) define “theory in the flesh” as the witnessing of the physical realities as experienced by marginalized communities leading to the creation of “a politic born out of necessity” (23). In the section below, a framework drawing from queer ecology, queer ecopedagogy, intersectional environmentalism, and theories of the flesh will uncover the ways queer and trans environmentalists, with a focus on communities of color, embody and engage with queer eco-activism.

THE QUEEN IN ALL OF US

In a podcast episode of “Unlikely Stories,” hosted by [Outdoors.org](#), Wyn Wiley/Pattie Gonia, an educator and environmentalist drag queen created after hiking in the Rocky Mountains in heels, shares their story. Titled, “The Queen in All of Us,” Wiley/Gonia states that if we identify as queer and as a person of color, “we all participate in drag” as a way to exist in hetero-white spaces (Outdoors1 2021). They go on to elaborate on their definition of queer ecology as a conceptual tool used to disrupt “every single binary, every single box,” and as a means of understanding that there is “no straight or queer” or “male or female” in this world. Wiley/Gonia’s interpretation of queer ecology alongside their queer eco-activism ties together the relationship between theory and practice. It also offers us a way of recognizing that our social locations and positionalities provide us with a “critical sphere of knowing and feeling,” thus making the potential of queer eco-activism even more significant (Figuroa 2002: 325). As Wiley/Gonia states, there is a “truth of self” and powerful being in all of us—a Queen in all of us.

As Luke W. Cole and Sheila R. Foster (2001) demonstrate in their research focusing on the rise of the environmental justice movement, the experience of activists and advocates within justice movements is viewed as building upon two qualities: self-confidence, and increased capacity. Cole and Foster share that these two qualities “dialectically build on each other in a way that transforms the personal and collective experiences of power relations” by residents in marginalized communities (Cole and Foster 2001: 153). Additionally, Cole and Foster witnessed “movement fusion,” which they identified as “the coming together of two (or more) different social movements in a way that expands the base of support for both [all] movements by developing a common agenda” (2001: 164).

Environmental advocacy linked to social media platforms provide us with a unique perspective from which to approach the study of queer eco-activism. Specifically, these platforms assist us in witnessing the performance of queer eco-activism firsthand, thereby linking praxis to theory and theory to praxis in a tangible way. In a recent study focusing on how conservation and outdoor organizations used social media platforms as a means of “communicating nature” and facilitating local nature experiences, researchers discovered that the use of these technologies influenced “people’s engagement with the natural environment” in terms of “their sense of place and connection with nature” (Arts, et al. 2022: 1293). Specifically, the authors’ findings indicate that social media provides a space for interweaving engagement with the outdoors by creating interactions between the natural world online and offline.

If we identify as queer and as a person of color, “we all participate in drag” as a way to exist in hetero-white spaces.

Staging the model for queer eco-activism is Pattie Gonia, as mentioned earlier. She identifies as a backpacking queen and various social media sites promote pictures of her in heels and dresses while hiking or rock climbing. Using various sites, such as Instagram and TikTok, Gonia poses in dresses made from garbage as embodied drag

protest statements against climate change. She.They also poses in nature holding humorous signs, including “Mother Nature is a Lesbian” and “The Planet is Hotter than my Boyfriend,” to bring attention to environmental issues and to encourage the visibility of queers in nature. As a social media influencer, Wiley/Gonia has started an environmental LGBTQ+ job board, hosts group hikes, and is making a documentary focusing on ocean plastics. Recently, Wiley/Gonia cofounded the Outdoorist Oath, which provides online workshops teaching “a model to approach allyship for planet, inclusion and adventure” (Outdoorist Oath 2023). She.They is an original member of the Intersectional Environmentalist council and states the following:

Intersectional environmentalism lets us weave in our humanity, our culture, our queerness and our color, into environmental work.... If you look at any space where people are making change, you will find queer people. You will find people of color. You will find Indigenous people. And you’ll find women (Sessoms, n.d.).

Pinar Sinopoulos-Lloyd is another queer eco-activist with a connection to Colorado, and is the co-founder of Queer Nature, an organization that is learning, teaching, thinking, and writing about place-based skills and “ecological consciousness” (Queer Nature, n.d.). Sinopoulos-Lloyd identifies as a “nonbinary queer trans person of color environmentalist and conservationist from Colorado with Huanca, Turkish, and Chinese ancestry” (Kanga 2022). They are also one of the original members of the Intersectional Environmentalist council, and “their work is guided by their relationship with queerness, hybridity, neurodivergence, Indigeneity and belonging” (Hanna 2022). Through Queer Nature, Sinopoulos-Lloyd offers a variety of workshops, such as “The Ecology of Power & Privilege: A Nature-Based Approach to Anti-Oppression Work” and “Queer Stealthcraft: A Survival and Stealth Lab for 2S & LGBTQ+ Folks—Apprenticing to the Arts of Blending/Shapeshifting/Drag with the Non-Human World in a Container of Play, Refuge, and Ceremony,” as well as contracted custom courses. Additionally, they have cofounded Indigequeers using Instagram to create a space for “centering nonbinary, 2S [Two Spirit], trans Natives in the outdoors” (Thorson 2022).

Intersectional environmentalism lets us weave in our humanity, our culture, our queerness and our color, into environmental work.

In a similar fashion, queer eco-activist Isaias Hernandez is the third original member of the Intersectional Environmentalist council featured in this essay. Hernandez is known for his.their work on social media as an environmental educator focusing on sustainability and environmental justice. Primarily reaching his.their viewers via Instagram, Twitter and their website, “Queer Brown Vegan,” Hernandez creates regular blog entries and posts using these social media platforms, as well as collaborating on a variety of projects. One such project, “Eco Learners,” includes a free downloadable e-book promoting visual learning as an introduction to environmental education. Another project titled “Alluvia Magazine” is geared toward “uplifting voices of BIPOC environmentalists across the world” (Queer Brown Vegan, n.d.). Hernandez is also involved in the zero waste movement and has shared in past interviews that growing up in Los Angeles led to understanding zero waste as a means of survival, such as collecting cans across the neighborhood as a way of making money (Dunn, n.d.).

Rikki Weber, a queer woman of color who comes from California, asserts the following:

I have made it a point to insert my whole identity into my work. I hope that my visibility and the visibility of other LGBTQ+ identified people helps strengthen the environmental movement by allowing us to express our differences and use them to find the commonalities in the ways that we can disrupt systems that were built to oppress us (Hanna 2022).

Weber works for Earthjustice, a non-profit environmental law organization administering legal aid to “protect people’s health, to preserve magnificent places and wildlife, to advance clean energy, and to combat climate change” (Earthjustice n.d.). As a member of the Earthjustice office in San Francisco, Weber created a group for queer employees and for LGBTQ+ environmentalists. Her social media presence and queer eco-activism is recognized in

numerous blogs and media platforms, as is the overall presence of Earthjustice. For example, she is listed as one of the “7 LGBTQ Environmentalists to Celebrate Every Day of the Year” (Rosenberg 2021), and as one of the “50 LGBTQ+ Environmental Activists from Around the World” (myGwork, n.d.).

Another notable queer eco-activist woman of color, listed as one of the “14 Inspiring Eco-Minded LGBTQ Folx to Follow on Instagram,” is Breanne Acio, the founder and chief executive officer (CEO) of Sēkr. Acio’s work centers on outdoor traveling and experience. Specifically, Sēkr is a vanlife app designed to combine a “passion for the outdoors” with a “love of collaboration and connection” as a means of inspiring outdoor travel and fueling a sense of adventure (Sēkr, n.d.). As CEO, Acio strives to work with partners, such as Leave No Trace Center and Tread Lightly, to “educate followers on responsible stewardship in the outdoors” (O’Reilly 2021). In addition to creating a technology platform for simplifying outdoor travel planning, Acio is also the co-founder of the website The Ladies’ Van with her wife, Lacey Mayer. Both Acio and Mayer are former teachers from California who decided to travel in their van as a way of de-stressing their lives, and began documenting their life on social media to disrupt the “stigma associated with van life and show people it is a choice rather than a necessity” (Fenwick Elliot 2017). In an interview, they share their pride in having helped many people “get outside” to pursue their dreams, especially “with a big focus on underrepresented communities” (O’Reilly 2021).

The concluding section of this essay will provide an overview of strategic themes in conservation efforts as demonstrated by the above-mentioned queer and trans eco-activists, and how they correlate with the potential of queer eco-liberationist solidarity.

QUEER ECO-LIBERATIONIST SOLIDARITY

What I am calling “queer eco-liberationist solidarity” is housed in queer ecology movements and intersectional environmentalism. In recent works, environmental racism and colonial understandings of gender and sexuality have been identified as separate points of axes (of intersectionality) for eco-activists’ efforts. However, to fully engage in queer ecology movements from an intersectional environmentalist purview, it is paramount that we witness and acknowledge the praxis of critical queer environmental justice as theories in the flesh embodied by queer eco-activists of color. By doing so, we will be one generation closer to achieving queer eco-liberationist solidarity. In essence, “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” (Russell 2021: 72).

This will lead us to our potential of creating a “sustainable critical consciousness” through collective agency and “action that aims to dismantle and transform” oppressive structures in our communities and in nature (Miller 2017: 855). Moreover, a “queer critical consciousness” is deemed useful for all communities by providing opportunities for creative resistance, as “resistance itself can expand knowledge and practices of environmentalism (Hogan 2010: 236–237). This comes at a time when Julie Sze (2020), founding director of the Environmental Justice Project, says we are “in a moment of danger,” and it is during this time that there is potential for queer eco-activists to link together and “spark imagination and hope” (23). Sze views environmental justice as involving ways of living in the world across time and space in tandem with an ongoing praxis of decolonial systemic resistance. Furthermore, she recognizes that cultural production and creativity are necessary for us to imagine a remaking of our world (Sze 2020: 19).

Julie Sze, founding director of the Environmental Justice Project, says we are “in a moment of danger” and that there is potential for queer eco-activists to link together and “spark imagination and hope.”

Critical conservation efforts in our time include reducing air, water, and land pollution; facilitating the conservation of natural resources for our future generations; protecting biodiversity; supporting sustainability efforts; restoring ecological balance; and undertaking climate change initiatives. Queer eco-activism addresses these aspects of conservation by taking on environmental racism, promoting Indigequeer understandings of our relationship with nature, providing an intersectional lens on environmental education, and, lastly, embodying the praxis of queer eco-epistemologies. Current queer and trans eco-activists deploy a variety of methods to organize and uplift our

conservation efforts using four core themes: social media outreach, inclusivity with respect to multiple identities, interactive queer eco-pedagogies, and connectivity regarding all living beings and the planet.

Coming back to Mortimer-Sandilands' queering of ecology, if nature becomes an institutionalized site, such as a national park, where sexuality and other axes addressed by intersectional environmentalism are impacted, then how do we organize and uplift conservation (2005: 6)? Queer eco-activism addresses this question by using "ideas of nature and natural spaces as sites of resistance" (Mortimer-Sandilands 2005: 20). It's in these spaces where we can generate "visions for transforming our social and political world in ways that ameliorate environmental injustices" (Figuroa 2002: 311).

Queer eco-activism uses "ideas of nature and natural spaces as sites of resistance."

In Robert Figuroa's (2002) work on environmental racism, he indicates that we are obligated to hear the diverse voices supporting the cry for environmental justice, and address the "grassroots dynamics" of the movement (314). The same advice is applicable to our current queer eco-movements, specifically by witnessing and listening to the voices of queer and trans eco-activists of color representing our Black, Brown, Indigenous, Latinx, disabled, and intergenerational communities. "A queer ecological futurity would be one that situates our actions as meaningfully connected to possible imagined futures, but does not use those futures to justify harm in the present" (Butler 2017: 281). Queer eco-liberationist solidarity builds upon this ideal by engaging with practices of loving existence, sustainability, and justice for all beings and all elements. We follow in the footsteps of Black, Brown, and Indigenous queer eco-activists who are building collective power, healing, and recovery with our Land and traditions in the form of kinships (Page 2023: 195–196). These kinships will be the basis for uplifting our future conservation efforts and organizing in our fight for queer eco-liberation solidarity.

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