

HOW TO QUEER ECOLOGY:

A lesson plan

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ONCE THOUGHT I KNEW what nature writing was: the pretty, sublime stuff minus the parking lot. The mountain majesty and the soaring eagle and the ancient forest without the human footprint, the humans themselves, the mess.

Slowly, fortunately, that definition has fallen flat. Where is the line between what is Nature and what is Human? Do I spend equal times in the parking lot and the forest? Can I really say the parking lot is separate from the forest? What if I end up staying in the parking lot the whole time? What if it has been a long drive and I really have to pee?

The problem is, the Nature/Human split is not a split. It is a dualism. It is false.

I propose messing it up. I propose queering Nature.

As it would happen, I'm queer. What I mean is this: A) I am a man attracted to men. B) Popular culture has told me that men who are attracted to men are unnatural, and so C) if my culture is right, then I am unnatural. But D) I don't feel unnatural at all. In fact, the love I share with another man is one of the most comfortable, honest, real feelings I have ever felt. And so E) I can't help but believe that Nature, and the corresponding definition of "natural," betray reality. From my end of the rainbow, this thing we call Nature is in need of a good queering.

STEP #1: LET GO OF ECOLOGICAL MANDATES.

Not so long ago, I read David Quammen's essay "The Miracle of the Geese." In the essay, Quammen says this: "wild geese, not angels, are the images of humanity's own highest self." By humanity, I can only assume that he means all humans, collectively, over all of time. "They show us the apogee of our own potential," Quammen says. "They live by the same principles that we, too often, only espouse. They embody liberty, grace, and devotion, combining those three contradictory virtues with a seamless elegance that leaves us shamed and inspired." Quammen seems to be on to something. Who could possibly be against liberty, grace, or devotion? But then he starts talking about sex. How

geese are monogamous. How a male goose will in fact do better evolutionarily if he is loyal to his mate. "They need one another there, male and female, each its chosen mate, at all times," he says. "The evolutionary struggle, it turns out, is somewhat more complicated than a singles' bar." I'm a little concerned about the evolutionary struggle thing, but I'm still tracking. Life sure is complicated. And then he says this: "I was glad to find an ecological mandate for permanent partnership among animals so estimable as *Branta canadensis*."

Boom. There it is. Geese are wild. Geese are pure. They aren't all mixed up with the problems of civilization and humanity. What we really need is to behave more like geese. If you are a male, then you must find a female. You must partner with that female, provide for that female, fertilize that female, and love that female for the rest of your life. If you are a female, well, you'll know what to do.

When I first read about Quammen's geese, I'd been out as bisexual for a year. It was around the second Bush election, and I was writing very serious letters to my conservative grandparents about my sexuality and politics. Now I know why his essay, so considerate, so passionate, so genteel, hit me in the gut. I was not natural.

STEP #2: STOP GENERALIZING.

My instinct is to give Quammen the benefit of the doubt; it was the late '80s after all. Regardless of his intentions though, Quammen's notion that Canada geese offer humans an ecological mandate not only reinforces a Nature-as-purity mythos (*against* which humans act), but at an even more basic level, his assumptions are simply inaccurate: plenty of geese aren't straight.

In 1999, Bruce Bagemihl published *Biological Exuberance*, an impressive compendium of thousands of observed non-heteronormative sexual behaviors and gender nonconformity among animals. Besides giraffes and warthogs and hummingbirds, there's a section on geese. Researchers have observed that

ONE GOOSE AT A TIME

up to 12 percent of pairs were homosexual in populations of *Branta canadensis*. And it's not because of a lack of potential mates of the opposite gender. "In one case," says Bagemihl, "a male harassed a female who was part of a long-lasting lesbian pair and separated her from her companion, mating with her. However, the next year, she returned to her female partner and their pairbond resumed."

Red squirrels are seasonally bisexual, mounting same-sex partners and other-sex partners with equal fervor. Male boto dolphins penetrate each other's genital slits as well as blow holes. Primates exhibit all sorts of queer behavior between males and males and females and females. Observing queer behavior in nonhumans is as easy as a trip to the nearest primate house, or a careful observation of the street cats, or the deer nibbling on your shrubs, or the mites on your skin.

The world itself, it turns out, is *so queer*.

Quammen assumed that geese are straight because it was easy to do. It was easy to assume I was straight, too; I did so for the first eighteen years of my life. But generalizing about the habits of both humans and the more-than-human living world not only denies that certain behavior already exists, it limits the potential for that behavior to become more common, and more commonly accepted.

STEP #3: HONK.

I don't mean to insist that there is an ecological mandate for being gay. My interest in queering ecology lies in enabling humans to imagine an infinite number of possible Natures. The living world exhibits monogamy. But it also exhibits orgies, gender transformation, and cloning. What, then, is natural? All of it. None of it. Instead of using the more-than-human world as justification for or against certain behavior and characteristics, let's use the more-than-human world as a humbling indication of the capacity and diversity of all life on Earth.

So many of us humans are queer. Across all social, political,

and physical boundaries, 2 to 10 percent of people take part in nonheteronormative behavior. Beyond the scope of sexuality, humans are capable of any number of imaginable and unimaginable behaviors. That I do not eat bull testicles does not mean that that behavior is any less human than my eating of baby back ribs. Why then, if I cohabit with another man, sharing the same bed, yes even having sex in that bed with that man, am I somehow less human?

A goose is a goose is a goose.

STEP #4: ACKNOWLEDGE THE IRONY.

In a review of Peter Matthiessen's book *The Birds of Heaven: Travels with Cranes*, Richard White indicts the "relentless and blinkered earnestness" of nature writing. White claims that because of its "reluctance to deal with paradox, irony, and history, much nature writing reinforces the worst tendencies of environmentalism." White points out that Matthiessen's unflinchingly sincere narrative baldly contradicts the circumstances: "The birds are immortal, timeless, and they transport us back into the deep evolutionary past," writes White. "But then Matthiessen gives us the details. He is sitting in a loud and clattering helicopter during this particular trip to the Eocene."

If you depict cranes as pure and ancient, with no place in this modern world, then you must ignore all those species that have done quite well in the rice paddies. Writing about nature means accepting that it will prove you wrong. And right. And render you generally confused. Nature is mysterious, and our part in the pageant is shrouded in mystery as well. This means contradiction and paradox and irony. It means that there will always be an exception. Nature has always humiliated the self-congratulatory scientist.

Let's stop congratulating ourselves. Instead, let's give a round of applause to the delicious complexity. Let us call this complexity *the queer*, and let us use it as a verb. Let us queer our ecology. Cranes can be ancient, but they can also be modern. Might their posterity extend past ours?

We've inherited a culture that takes its dualisms seriously. Nature, on the one hand, is the ideal, the pure, the holy. On the other hand, it is evil, dangerous, and dirty. The problem? There's no reconciliation. We accept both notions as separate but equal truths and then organize our world around them. Status quo hurrah! Irony be damned.

ecology. But as Zapatista leader Subcommandante Marcos told Pierluigi Sullo from the forest of southeast Mexico (and probably from a table in a house in a village in that forest), "I sincerely believe that you are not searching for a solution, but rather for a discussion." He's right.

So what discussion am I looking for?

EVEN NATURE—DEFINED IMPOSSIBLY AS THE NONHUMAN—

Take sexuality, for instance:

We have come to believe, over our Western cultural history, that heterosexual monogamy is the norm, the *natural*. People who call gays unnatural presume that Nature is pure, perfect, and predictable. *Nature intended for a man and a woman to love each other*, they say. *Gays act against Nature*. And yet: we rip open the Earth. We dominate the landscape, compromising the integrity of the living world. We act as though civilization were something better, higher, more valuable than the natural world.

Our culture sets Nature as the highest bar for decorum, while simultaneously giving Nature our lowest standard of respect. Nature is at our disposal, not only for our physical consumption, but also for our social construction. We call geese beautiful and elegant and faithful until they are shitting all over the lawn and terrorizing young children. Then we poison their eggs. Or shoot them.

What I'm getting at is this: those who traditionally hold more power in society—be they men over women, whites over any other race, wealthy over poor, straight over queer—have made their own qualities standard, "natural," constructing a vision of the world wherein such qualities are the norm. And in so doing, they've made everyone else's qualities *perverse*, *against Nature*, *against God*. Even Nature—defined impossibly as the nonhuman—becomes unnatural when it does not fit the desired norm: *the gay geese must be affected by hormone pollution!*

A man who has sex with a man must identify himself by his perversion, by his difference. If straight is the identity of *I am*, then gay becomes *I am not*. Women are not men. Native people are not white. Nature is not human.

Instead of talking about nonconformity, I want to talk about possibility and unnameably complex reality. What queer can offer is the identity of *I am also*. I am also human. I am also natural. I am also alive and dynamic and full of contradiction, paradox, irony. Queer knocks down the house of cards and throws them into the warm wind.

STEP #5: DON'T FEAR THE QUEER.

If theses were still in vogue, I would tell you my thesis is queer

Well, first, one that is happening at all. I've met many kind people (aren't we all sometimes?) who are so afraid of being politically incorrect that they don't speak at all—well, at least not about race or gender or sex (this on top of the three taboos of religion, politics, and money). How do I know how I should refer to Indians? Or blacks? Or gays? Or bums, for that matter? It's just all so complicated now. Queer, then, remains a gesture of hands under the table. A wink.

In the recent past, conversationalists have at least had the weather to fall back on. But the record heat of late with its strange winds of change have whipped away that golden ticket of banality too. So people stop talking, at least about difference, or flux, or complication, altogether. And the floor is left to those who are the loudest and quickest, and who never had any intention of complicating their conversation with anyone or anything that doesn't conform to their tidy but limited worldview.

STEP #6: ENJOY THE PERFORMANCE.

The problem with unnameably complex reality is that it's really hard to pin down and even harder to write about. Yet anyone who gives a damn about the ecological health of life on Earth knows that there's no time for dillydallying.

In the late nineteenth century, a Danish scientist named Eugen Warming first used the term *ecology* to describe the study of interrelationships between living things. Henry Chandler Cowles, a doctoral candidate at the University of Chicago, brought ecology across the Atlantic with the 1899 publication of his treatise on the succession of the plant life of the Indiana Dunes. Instead of static forests and static lakes and static prairies, Warming and Cowles recognized that these features of the physical world were in flux. As Cowles wrote in his introduction, "Ecology, therefore, is a study in dynamics."

Queer ecology, then, is the study of dynamics across all phenomena, all behavior, all possibility. It is the relation between past, present, and future.

Yes, we need to act. But we also must recognize that any action is also a performance, and possibly in drag. Any writer who chooses the more-than-human world as subject must

acknowledge both the complexity and paradox contained within the subject of nature, as well as the contradictions wrapped up within the writer's very self. Such a writer will write about the parking lot and the invasive knapweed and the unseasonably warm weather and how he or she is undeniably mixed up in the complications. The poet James Broughton calls it "the mystery of

My father and I made eye contact, then looked up from the parking lot into the trees where the cranes had gone. Then we both went off to pee. 🐾

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BECOMES UNNATURAL WHEN IT DOES NOT FIT THE DESIRED NORM.

the total self." Henry Chandler Cowles called it ecology.

It is the relation within the human and the natural and the god and the geese and the past, present, future, body-self-other. A queer ecology is a liberatory ecology. It is the acknowledgment of the numberless relations between all things alive, once alive, and alive once again. No man can categorize those relations without lying. Categories offer us a way of organizing our world. They are tools. They are power.

Acknowledge the power. Acknowledge the lie.

STEP #7: I'M DONE WITH STEPS.

Not so long ago, my father and I drove out of the city of Chicago going east on the Skyway.

On a map, the eastern boundary of the city is clean. It curls southeast along the shore of Lake Michigan, then cuts south at Indiana as straight as a longitudinal line. On the other side of the state line are Whiting, East Chicago, and Gary, towns that only gamblers and family members visit. Everybody else just lives there.

In reality, the eastern boundary of the city has no boundary at all. It continues its concrete, steel, and electrical-line unfurling along the southern shore of the great lake of Michigan. We were two white men, hurtling on four rubber wheels down the concrete Skyway, a corridor of semis and freight trains and transistors and faceless industrial complexes blinking out toward the lake.

I don't recall what my father and I were talking about. I do recall looking out the window onto the gray April sweep of the old glacial lake bed.

Then I saw the geese. More of them than I had ever imagined could gather. V after V after W after I after V. One after another, each flock waved several hundred feet above the ground. It was spring, and they all flew east along the metal and concrete corridor. They flew along the shore of the lake.

Less than half an hour later, we reached the Indiana Dunes. There were trees: oaks mostly. We opened our car doors to the calls of sandhill cranes. They were calls neither ancient nor modern. They were calls from the deepest present. As we stood in the parking lot, the car engine still pinging, the half-dozen cranes swung across the opening above us and out of sight.

Coastal Nevada Zoo and Animal Studies Program

Here at the Coastal Nevada Zoo, the goal of our program is the yield of animals viable under the new conditions. It's a work in progress.

As you see in the Africa Pavilion, we have sustainable herds of gray zebras and short-necked giraffes. A few mini-elephants lived past infancy, but we lost them. We had one vegetarian lion; it wasn't my idea to place him in the former petting zoo. Next morning we had bones and sated sheep.

The aquarium may be phased out for lack of funds. Our placid sharks would stop swimming and drown; the reef our corals built is handsome but microscopic. We've kept a few of the long-legged penguins that won't go near the water and one blue whale that's bigger than a breadbox. The North American Pavilion is closed: The leprosy-resistant armadillos died of flu, the bears refuse to move. The Rabbit House is a big draw—people love to watch them fight. This way, please, and don't forget your masks and umbrellas. Too many pigeons here, shoving and stretching for spilled kibble, water, we can't get rid of them. I've tried. That burbling noise they make, their imbecile round red eyes, the droppings, the fleas, and they're fat but always hungry, same as they ever were.

—Sarah Lindsay