

Queer Animals & Queer Liberation – An Introduction

From [Vegan Rainbow Project](#)

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The world is full of queer animals. By now, many of us have heard stories of same-sex penguin couples, some may know that sex change is quite common amongst fish, or you may have even read about the ‘leaping lesbian lizard’, the female-only species of New Mexico Whiptail lizards. And, after all, humans are queer animals too.

Over the last decades, humans have become increasingly aware of and interested in animal queerness. This has also led to heated political debates, as acknowledging queerness in other animals required many to challenge their (Western) assumptions about sexuality, sex, and reproduction.

Studies and debates on queer (nonhuman) animals have ranged from biological descriptions of animal queerness, as presented in books like Bagemihl’s *Biological exuberance: Animal homosexuality and natural diversity* and Roughgarden’s *Evolution’s Rainbow: Diversity, gender, and sexuality in nature and people*, to sociological debates surrounding questions such as the queerness of human-animal relationships[1]. Unsurprisingly, animal queerness is also discussed in the LGBTQIA+ community. Zoos have even capitalized on this by organizing events like ‘Gay Night at the Zoo’, or by announcing that “[London Zoo celebrates same-sex penguin couples for Pride weekend](#)”. ‘Gay’ penguins have even become so popular, that a [recent image film about the city of Cologne](#) – also commonly referred to as the Gay Capital of Germany – featured two bowtie-wearing penguins standing next to a rainbow flag (seen at 0:57).

Although it is impossible to cover the complexity of nonhuman or human animal queerness in just one post, this post tries to provide an introduction to some of the stories we as humans tell about queer animals, explore some of the debates surrounding animal queerness, and explain why animal liberation is a queer issue.

Animal Queerness in Science & Research

When Bruce Bagemihl published his book *Biological Exuberance* in 1999, same-sex sexual behavior had already been scientifically documented in more than 450 species of mammals, birds, reptiles, insects, and other animals[2]. In 2006, when The Natural History Museum of Oslo opened its exhibition “[Against Nature? – An exhibition on animal homosexuality](#)”, the first-ever museum exhibition dedicated to gay animals, this number was reported to be over 1000[3]. Same-sex sexual behaviors are thus far from ‘unnatural’ and have even been said to have an important part in evolutionary change[4]. Sexual interaction between different (two or more) sexes may not even play a part in the evolution of some species, as in the case of the New Mexico Whiptail lizard – a female only-species.

“Characterizations of homosexuality as “unnatural” hurts animals as well as gay and lesbian people. By denying that animals have sex for pleasure or form pair bonds that aren’t about reproduction, it’s easier to claim that animals are automatons who don’t have feelings and are not sentient individuals.” – patrice jones[5]

Queer diversity in nonhuman animals is not just limited to sexual behavior. A male clown fish can change their sex when the group’s dominant female dies, some species only have one sex, some are hermaphrodites, and some (fish) species have three sexes. Nature really is quite queer.

Despite this queerness and diversity, many biological studies show strong human, heteronormative and gender biases.[6] As previously mentioned, this can be traced back to queerness challenging general assumptions about sexuality and reproduction, and requires us to acknowledge that reproduction is just one function of sexuality.[7]

*“Attempts to define gender, sexuality, and sexual orientation through scientific animal studies influence as much as they reflect confusion about what queer sexuality engenders.” – Susan McHughes, *Queer (And) Animal Theories*, p.154*

Studies on same-sex sexual behaviors have not only sought to understand implications of same-sex sexual behavior for the evolution of nonhuman animals, but also to gain insights into human behavior. Here it is striking that many of the studies

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that, for instance Jennifer Terry described, focused on male rather than female homosexuality.^[8] In 1995, the Times published an article about a study on a cohort of *Drosophila* (fruit flies). The researchers had manipulated one of their genes, which resulted in the male flies ‘turning gay’, more precisely: exhibiting homosexual behaviors. The researchers, Oldenwald and Zhang, did not claim that a single gene turned people gay, however, it was reported that humans do have a similar gene structure. The study quickly made waves, as people discussed implications of the existence of something like ‘gay genes’ in humans. These discussions resulted in heated debates between the LGBTQIA* community and homophobic groups, which suggested that if there was a ‘gay gene’ homosexuality was a ‘genetic defect’ that could be ‘cured’.^[9] (Just to be clear here: it’s not a defect and nothing to be ‘cured’).

Nevertheless, not all scientific research seeking to understand homosexuality in other animals does so for the purpose of gaining insights into human sexuality. Some studies observe nonhuman animals for the purpose of understanding them better, whereas yet others have sought to understand homosexual behaviors in other animals for economic advantage. Back in the 90s, the two researchers Perkins and Fitzgerald studied what they called ‘male-oriented rams’. Their aim was to identify and eliminate these rams to increase ‘yield’, as these rams were less ‘effective’ for breeding, thus resulting in economic losses.^[10] Although these studies were conducted in the 90s, they are still telling of how the animal industry regards other animals as objects that serve the purpose of economic gains, and homosexual behaviors simply as a barrier to ‘efficient’ (re)production.

(Note: Similar – albeit differently motivated – arguments were and sometimes still are also used for the persecution of homosexuals, for example under the German Nazi regime, where homosexuality was regarded a menace to ‘national reproductive capacities’, which had to be eliminated.^[11])

In summary, there appear to be many different reasons for why humans would conduct research on the queerness of other animals. However, none of them justifies the suffering nonhuman animals are subjected to by being put into cages, studied, genetically changed, killed, and dissected. There is no reason to look towards nonhuman animals to better understand human queerness and even less need, to subject them to experiments out of human curiosity.

Queer stories of penguins

The human interest in (queer) animals is however not only limited to science. Growing up, I watched a lot of nature documentaries, and just like many other children, I really enjoyed going to the zoo. As a child, I didn’t question the information I was given, nor the way in which it was presented. However, representations are never ‘neutral’. Representations always seek to tell a story and thus serve social, cultural, or political purposes; either consciously or unconsciously.^[12] Stories of our relationship with nonhuman animals usually tell a story about speciesism, the prejudice and discrimination against individuals based on their species membership.^[13]

In placing nonhuman animals in cages that seek to represent their ‘natural habitat’, we tell a certain story about them. And sometimes, we use them to tell stories about ourselves.

„Unbeknownst to them, animals help us tell stories about ourselves, especially when it comes to matters of sexuality.“ - Jennifer Terry, “Unnatural Acts” in Nature, p.151

Specifically, the mainstream media has used gay penguins to tell stories about rainbow families.^[14] (Here the terms ‘gay’ or ‘lesbian’ are used when speaking about male-male and female-female penguin relationships. However, as these identities are human constructs, they cannot easily be ascribed to other animals).

The story of Roy and Silo, two male chinstrap penguins in New York City’s Central Park Zoo, even became so popular, that their story was made into two children’s books. The books tell the story of a happy rainbow family, as Roy and Silo successfully hatched an egg (there now is another book about two penguin fathers devoid of a zoo context).

While the story of Roy and Silo hatching an egg and raising the chick Tango as their child is a beautiful story for rainbow families, it’s problematic to make it the only story we tell about them. It’s problematic, because it normalizes penguins being held captive in zoos, and because it implies that these gay penguins are ‘good gays’ because they live as **Queer**

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monogamous couples who raise children.[15] While there is nothing wrong with living this way, it is not the only way to live in ‘good’ same-sex relationships, neither for penguins nor humans.

In telling stories about gay penguins who ‘find love’ (in captivity) and live happily-ever-after with their chosen partner, some humans even go as far as organizing penguin weddings. In 2019, the two penguins Ferrari and Pringle were ‘married’ in a ceremony organized by humans – wedding video included.[16] It wasn’t the first ‘penguin wedding’, and sadly it is unlikely that it will be the last event of this type, which projects human habits and rituals on to other animals. Why would penguins want to get married under human conventions? We will never know, what these penguins really think or feel, what they identify as in terms of sexuality and gender, or the kinds of relationships they want to have. In marrying them, we propose that they are ‘just like us’, while simultaneously using them for human amusement. So, whose story do we really tell, when we marry these ‘love birds’?

In any case, the reality of the individual penguin’s life is missing from the story. Penguins in cages are never free, yet we use them as extras in telling stories of queer liberation. How can we celebrate sexual diversity and freedom when we are happy that those who we celebrate live in cages?

Why animal liberation is a queer issue

There is also quite a different side to the relationship between queer humans and nonhuman animals. Queer people have advocated for the rights of other animals for a long time. I got introduced to the topics of 'queering animal liberation' or 'why animal rights is a queer issue' by talks like [Queering Animal Liberation](#) by patrice jones and [Queering Animal Liberation: Why Animal Rights is a Queer Issue](#) by Christopher-Sebastian McJetters. However, the connections between these movements go way back to when YouTube or the internet weren't even a thing.

Lesbians in particular have been closely associated with vegetarianism, even to the degree that it has been implied that being a lesbian necessarily means being a vegetarian.

Pop-culture has picked up this notion, for instance in the movie *But I’m a Cheerleader* and the 2014 film *Pride. But I’m a Cheerleader* tells the story of Megan, whose parents send her to conversion therapy camp. Although Megan herself thinks that she is heterosexual at the beginning of the film, her parents and friends present her with ‘evidence’ on what they call her homosexual tendencies; her interest in vegetarianism being one of them. Megan trying to make her family eat tofu then becomes a reason for 'convicting' her of being a lesbian.

In the film *Pride*, vegetarianism is covered in a short conversation between a woman from the miner’s village and a lesbian couple from *Lesbians and Gay Men Support the Miners* (and later *Lesbians Against Pit Closures*), where she asks them if it was true that all lesbians were vegetarians, to which they both reply “we’re vegans”.

The [Vegan Society](#) has defined veganism as “*a philosophy and way of living which seeks to exclude—as far as is possible and practicable—all forms of exploitation of, and cruelty to, animals for food, clothing or any other purpose; and by extension, promotes the development and use of animal-free alternatives for the benefit of animals, humans and the environment. In dietary terms it denotes the practice of dispensing with all products derived wholly or partly from animals.*”

Unlike sexual orientation or gender identity, living vegan is a choice for most of us (and one that does not result in systemic oppression), but there is still a lot that connects them; both with respect to challenging societal norms and fighting for social justice.

“*Veganism calls into question preconceived notions of what a “proper” diet consists of and, hence, how life is properly lived in contemporary Western liberal societies*”. [17] - Rasmus Simonsen, *A Queer Vegan Manifesto*, p.52.

Many queer vegans have described how being ‘queer’ and ‘vegan’ do involve some form of coming out when meeting new people, and that they sometimes chose not to disclose one or the other as they fear stigmatization and hostility.[18] ([here](#) you can read some stories of queer vegans that Leah Kirts collected). In most of today’s Western

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society, neither being queer nor vegan is considered to be the ‘norm’. In addition to challenging norms of a ‘proper’ diet, veganism also rejects the gendered notion that eating meat is a trait of masculinity. As Carol J. Adams described in *The Sexual Politics of Meat* [19] refusing meat then involves taking a stance against patriarchal culture, a culture which oppresses both queers and nonhuman animals (and so many other, including nature [20]).

Patriarchy creates hierarchies of oppression that puts white-heterosexual-cis men on top of the pyramid, thereby necessarily defining anyone else as ‘other’ and ‘lower’. Many groups of humans as well as nonhuman animals are oppressed under the imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy (as bell hooks would describe it). Like us, nonhuman animals should have autonomy over their own body, their life, and their choices of sexual partners, which are all fundamental rights we are fighting for.

Just like queer liberation, animal liberation is a fight for social justice. Ethical veganism is an expression of this fight, and an act of solidarity with other oppressed animals. Ethical veganism then not only means not consuming anything derived from the exploitation of nonhuman animals. It also means making a real effort to achieve (food) justice by excluding or ethically sourcing products that we know cause great harm to other humans (see projects such as the [Food Empowerment Project](#), [A Well-Fed World](#), [Chilis on Wheels](#), or [Food Not Bombs](#) for ways on how we can achieve food justice).

As a community, we need to recognize that mechanisms of oppression such as – but not limited to – homophobia, transphobia, sexism, racism, ableism, ageism, classism, and speciesism, work in similar ways, are interconnected and therefore must be combated together. Many queer vegans already actively advocate for the need to include nonhuman animal liberation as part of our own fight for LGBTQIA+ rights. This is illustrated by books like [Queer and Trans Voices: Achieving Liberation Through Consistent Anti-Oppression](#), edited by Julia Feliz Brueck and Zoie Zane McNeill, which was published earlier this year. [21] (You can read more about Consistent Anti-Oppression [here](#), or in [our interview](#) with Julia Feliz.) By now, there are also quite a few LGBTQIA+ run sanctuaries that show us a glimpse of a world where all living beings can live free from harm and discrimination (you can find a list here [here](#)).

Final words

This text tried to provide an introduction to animal queerness and an overview of some of the (human) debates surrounding this topic. There is a lot more to be said, especially with respect to interconnections with other forms of oppression like racism, sexism, or ableism, which do inform our own biases towards nonhuman animals and other humans. These biases also show in the heteronormativity even queer vegans apply to other animals.

This bias becomes quite evident in patrice jones' talk [Queering Animal Liberation](#), where she shares a story of two male ducks she helped care for at [VINE Sanctuary](#) in the US. She kept separating the two because she thought they were fighting, but they kept circumventing fences to find their way to each other. After a while patrice realized that the ducks were no enemies but quite the opposite: sexual partners. This story is illustrative of the ways in which so many of us have internalized heteronormativity, and how we harm others by ignoring their queerness.

The story is also a reminder to look beyond what we regard as obvious, but rather sit back and observe, because: when we tell stories about others, we must not only be prepared to talk but also to listen closely. We must listen to other animals, even though – or specifically because – we do not share their language. However, this should not stop us from sharing their stories, as talking about ‘queer’ nonhuman animals or ‘queer’ behavior shown by other animals not only highlights stories of diversity but also provides some lesser-known insights into the lives of those who we often think of as ‘other’.

Lastly, we should always keep in mind that storytelling (including this post) is never neutral, which is why we need to be aware of and critically reflect on our biases. Overcoming these biases can help us to understand others and embrace diversity with empathy. And that would be a valuable lesson for all living beings.

To close with the words of Audre Lorde, self-described black, lesbian, mother, warrior, poet: "*It is not our differences that divide us. It is our inability to recognize, accept, and celebrate those differences.*"

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Note: Our [resources section](#) has more texts, talks, interviews, and other sources on queer nonhuman animals, queer vegans, and queering animal liberation.

Following this article, we will highlight some of our fellow queer animals on our social media platforms.

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