

5-22-2016

# Queering Nature: The Liberatory Effects of Queer Ecology

Caitlin Marie Doak  
*Dickinson College*

Follow this and additional works at: [http://scholar.dickinson.edu/student\\_honors](http://scholar.dickinson.edu/student_honors)

 Part of the [Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Studies Commons](#), and the [Other Philosophy Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Doak, Caitlin Marie, "Queering Nature: The Liberatory Effects of Queer Ecology" (2016). *Dickinson College Honors Theses*. Paper 246.

This Honors Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by Dickinson Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator. For more information, please contact [scholar@dickinson.edu](mailto:scholar@dickinson.edu).

Queering Nature: The Liberatory Effects of Queer Ecology

By  
Caitlin Doak

Submitted in partial fulfillment of Honors Requirements for the Department of  
Philosophy

Dr. Susan Feldman, Advisor  
Dr. Chauncey Maher, Reader  
Dr. Jeffrey Engelhardt, Reader  
Dr. James Sias, Reader

May 13, 2016

## Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Chapter One: Queer Theory	4
Anti-Essentialism	4
Anti-Total Theory	10
Queer Theory and Queer Ecology	13
Chapter Two: Queering Ecology	15
Ecofeminism	15
Constructionism	20
The Construction of Science and Technology	24
A Queer Construction of Nature: Cyborg Theory, natureculture, and queernatureculture	29
Chapter Three: Liberation	35
What is Liberatory?	35
Solidarity/Coalition Building/Affinity	41
From Human to Non-Human Liberation	45
Conclusion	50
Issues for Further Investigation	51
Works Cited	53

## Introduction

In the introduction to an anthology on *Queer Ecologies*, Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson raise the key question of queer ecology: "What does it mean that ideas, spaces, and practices designated as 'nature' are often so vigorously defended against queers in a society in which that very nature is increasingly degraded and exploited?" (5). The question incorporates two assumptions: 1) that what is natural is right and should be protected and 2) that the natural world is exploited. This quote highlights that even today, arguments that assert that homosexuality is unnatural and therefore wrong are used to oppress the LGBTQ community. A common response, one that actually follows the same logic, is that homosexuality is found in over 1,500 species, so it is natural, and therefore right. The underlying arguments are as follows:

Against homosexuality

- (1) What is natural is right.
- (2) What is unnatural is wrong.
- (3<sub>1</sub>). Homosexuality is unnatural.
- (C<sub>1</sub>) Therefore, homosexuality is wrong.

In defense of homosexuality

- (1) What is natural is right.
- (2) What is unnatural is wrong.
- (3<sub>2</sub>). Homosexuality is natural.
- (C<sub>2</sub>) Therefore, homosexuality is right.

As you can see, these arguments share a similar structure. Right and wrong, of course, are used in a moral sense. Yet, as Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson note, at the same

time that the natural is held to be morally right and good as stated in premise 1, we see the second assumption in play: nature is degraded, forests are cut down, water systems are polluted, and human activity is changing the earth's climate. What does it mean?

Queer ecology, a relatively new field of study based in the intersections of queer theory, politics, and environmentalism, aims to answer that question. Self-declared queer ecologists apply queer theory to philosophies of the environment and/or provide a queer lens through which we can understand the environment. Queer theory and ecology at first seem unrelated; what contribution can queer theory have for ecology? On second glance, however, in addition to ordinary people naturalizing certain kinds of sex acts to give sex acts a value, ecologists are already engaging in studies of sex and sexuality:

"Well-meaning ecologists, convinced of the evolutionary pathology of same-sex sexual behavior, argued that the widespread presence of female homoerotic activity among seagulls in a particular location must be evidence of some major environmental catastrophe. As it turns out, it wasn't: the world is apparently full of lesbian gulls" (Mortimer-Sandilands 11).

Sex and sexuality are often used as indicators for environmental disruption, for example the homosexual gulls in this case, or hermaphroditic animals in others. These common examples of the intersections of gender/queer studies and environmental studies give us an entryway into queer ecology.

In this paper I undertake a philosophical investigation of queer ecology and its underlying theories and assumptions. I focus on the effects queer ecology has on the boundaries we draw to define categories and identities and ultimately argue that queer

ecology can be liberatory. In Chapter One, I explain the underlying philosophies of queer ecology that have developed out of queer theory, namely anti-essentialism and anti-total theory. Using this groundwork, in Chapter Two, I explore what it means to "queer" ecology. I explain how queer ecology engages with ecofeminism and constructionism and how science, technology, and nature are constructed in queer ecology. In Chapter 3, I then investigate the concepts of liberation and oppression to argue that queer ecology has liberatory effects and that the philosophical underpinnings of queer ecology offer a useful framework for political aspirations of liberation. More specifically, queer ecology provides us with philosophical tools to engage in queer ecological politics that can be liberatory for all beings, including humans and nonhumans, through group formation based in affinity, solidarity, and coalition building.

## Chapter 1: Queer Theory

The word “queer” has evolved over time and place. From a synonym for “odd,” to a homosexual slur, to a reclaimed, politically charged adjective, noun, and verb, the many definitions of “queer” are themselves queer. As Sharon Marcus writes, “*Queer* has become a compact alternative to *lesbian-gay-bisexual-transgender*, but it also emphasizes affinity over identity” (Marcus 196). It is often referred to as an umbrella term for all non-heterosexual identities. However, within queer theory, “queer” is often used as a verb. In this chapter I will explain what “queer” means within queer theory and how queer theory is used and is useful in relation to queer ecology. First, I turn to the word “queer” itself.

According to the Oxford Dictionaries, the verb “queer” means to spoil or ruin. Queer theory uses “queer” as a verb to blur, reject, or otherwise ruin dichotomies and binaries (queer, v). Thus, queer theory queers its subject matter. The queering of dichotomies and identities is especially note-worthy in discussions of gender and sexual identities, as queer theory emphasizes queer (adj.) sexualities. In *Queer Theories*, Donald Hall writes, “‘queer’ theories... work to challenge and undercut any attempt to render ‘identity’ singular, fixed, or normal” (Hall 15). To do so is to challenge any essentialist views of things, which brings us to the first tenet of queer theory, anti-essentialism.

### **Anti-Essentialism**

Queer theory is both a methodology and a substantive philosophy. That is, queer theory is a tool used to understand things and a philosophy explaining how the world is or, perhaps more accurately, is not. It is important to recognize that there are many

queer theories, and I do not attempt to explain all of them. However, a substantive view that is prevalent in most queer theories is anti-essentialism. Essentialism is the belief that there is a property or set of properties  $E$  which make  $X$  things  $X$ . For example, an essentialist view of "woman" may be that to be a woman is to have a womb: the characteristic of having a womb is necessary to being a woman. In this essentialist view of woman-ness, the property of having a womb is the necessary condition for womanhood: to be a woman entails having a womb. Most essentialists hold that the properties constituting the essence of  $X$  are necessary and sufficient conditions for  $X$ -hood. A weaker version holds that the essential properties are only necessary for  $X$ -hood. In either case, to say "this is an  $X$ " entails that "this has  $P$ ," where  $P$  is the essential properties necessary for  $X$ -hood.<sup>1</sup>

We can call a contrasting philosophy to essentialism anti-essentialism, a rejection of real essences. Anti-essentialists reject essential properties. For example, there are real chairs, but no single essence that unites them. That is, there exists a group of chairs, but no "universal" chair, by virtue of which all chairs are chairs. Anti-essentialists thus deny that there is a significant property  $P$  that defines  $X$ -ness and which all  $X$ 's share, which make them all  $X$ . That is, they reject essences.

The anti-essentialist, however, does not disregard differences and distinctions, for without the differences between chairs and tables, we would not have the name

---

<sup>1</sup> This is only one interpretation of essentialism. For a detailed investigation of different formulations of essences and essentialism, see Robertson and Atkins on "Essential vs. Accidental Properties."

"chair" and "table" to describe and distinguish groups of similar objects<sup>2</sup>. A rejection of essences is not a rejection of differences, which we will explore further on the following chapters. The anti-essentialist groups objects together based on relevant distinctions between differences, while the essentialist may turn such distinctions into dualisms or dichotomies. A dualism marks a strong distinction in which two categories are in opposition: a thing is either in one category or the other, and there are necessary characteristics placing things in one or the other. Stated otherwise, there are essential properties that define each side of a dualism.

A dualism that is of particular interest in the field of queer ecology is the gendered identification of mind and body. The mind/body dualism reiterates the essentializing notion that men are associated with the mind and women are associated with the body (Butler 12). The anti-essentialist stance of queer theory rejects these associations that are given as necessary characteristics of womanhood and manhood. In doing so, queer theory queers the dualisms that lend themselves to essentialism.

Anti-essentialism asserts that there are no essential characteristics in all cases. Many feminist theories articulate a non-essentialist philosophy with regards to gender, for example, in Simone de Beauvoir's statement that "one is not born a woman, but, rather, becomes one" (Butler 8). This assertion, a founding idea in the conception of the social construction of gender, which I will explore further in the next chapter, de-essentializes sex as a determining element of gender<sup>3</sup>. While queer theories maintain

---

<sup>2</sup> The rejection of universals in this sense is represented by a branch of nominalism. A nominalist anti-essentialism allows for linguistic or social "essences," in that the words we use entail certain properties, but the things themselves do not.

<sup>3</sup> There is an ongoing debate in feminist and queer circles about the distinction between sex and gender. Some theorists clearly separate sex and gender in order to resist

similar positions about gender, queer theories often claim anti-essentialism not just in regards to gender, sex, and sexuality, but anti-essentialism as a philosophy for understanding the world. Although there are an abundance of queer theories, any use of queer theory hereafter always includes an anti-essentialist philosophy.

Growing from its anti-essentialism, queer theory, as a set of substantive views, rejects strict categories and rigid identities. The reasoning works this way: Anti-essentialism lends itself to a suspicion of strict categories because if there is a defined boundary between A and B, there must be some conditions that are necessary and sufficient for A-ness and some conditions that are necessary and sufficient for B-ness. Strict categories and rigid identities often exist in dualisms, for example, man/woman, male/female, heterosexual/homosexual. This is in contrast to a continuum, or fuzzy distinction, for example, between hairy and bald. While hairy and bald are in opposition to each other, it is hard to define where exactly bald ends and hairy begins. Moreover, the amount of hair someone has exists on a continuum: it is possible, even usual, for people to be somewhere in-between hairy and bald. Unlike in deciding whether someone is bald or hairy, under a framework of rigid identities, for each category, there are identifiable grounds to decide whether a thing is an A or B. That is, there are essential characteristics that determine which category a thing is in. Thus, strict categories often assume some form of essentialism. Queer theory, as an anti-

---

essentialism, while others claim that such a distinction, while de-essentializing gender, reasserts biological essentialism of sex. In this paper, by "sex" I mean the sex assigned at birth, and by "gender" I mean one's personal identity and cultural assignments of masculine or feminine. Female, male, and intersex will refer to sex, and man, woman, trans, and gender queer will refer to gender.

essentialist philosophy, “queers” such strict distinctions and categories; queer theory thus involves “queering” as a distinctive method.

Remembering our dictionary definition of “queer,” to queer something is to ruin essentialist views of things and ruin dichotomies. Ruination can result from several actions: a dichotomy can be ruined by proving that the respective parts of the dichotomy do not exist, for example, in the dichotomy of nature/culture, one could deny that nature and culture exist; one could show how the parts of a dichotomy are not actually dichotomous, and one could queer the parts themselves. To queer gender is to ruin the gender binary, and the gender binary can be ruined in a myriad of ways. Although “queer” and “queer theory” typically concern gender and sexuality, queer theorists have been “queering” history, literature, and yes, ecology.

We can see an example of how queer theories use “queer” as a verb to ruin essentialist views in Judith Butler's work on queering gender. At the beginning of her book *Gender Trouble*, Butler questions whether the concept of “women” exists outside of oppression, in a manner that suggests the political grouping of “women” attempts to essentialize what it means to be a woman. Defining the category of “women” separates gender identity, analytically and politically, from other relevant identities that determine power structures, which ultimately “make the singular notion of identity a misnomer” (Butler 4). A woman is not merely a woman, but has many layered identities that cannot be neatly separated and pulled apart. In this regard, queer theory offers a critique of some feminist philosophies, like that of Marilyn Frye, who asserts that “at every race/class level and even across race/class lines, men do not serve women as women serve men” (Frye 88). In this assertion, Frye assumes a universal

womanhood. Queer theorists like Butler argue that discussions of oppression cannot focus on singular identities because identities are not singular, but blurred together. Hall clarifies this issue by writing "the point of queer theories generally is that we are not all 'really' any one thing" (Hall 101). We are a multitude of identities, and the distinctions between them are anything but clear. Thus, there can be no universals that articulate the essential properties of any given identity.

Part of Butler's project is to explain how sex, gender, and sexuality interact within the "heterosexual matrix" (Butler 151n6). The heterosexual matrix assumes a system of binaries, most notably the strict and unchanging distinctions between male/female. Male/female is equivalent to man/woman in the heterosexual matrix which holds that sex determines gender which determines sexuality: namely, female--> woman--> attracted to men, and male--> man--> attracted to women. Queer theory queers the dichotomies of male/female and man/woman by upsetting, or queering, the heterosexual matrix.

Interestingly, although Butler upsets the heterosexual matrix, she does not do this by radically separating sex and gender from each other. In some feminist theories, sex and gender are defined as completely separate entities. Eve Sedgwick, who opposes this view, notes that in such theories, "compared to chromosomal sex, which is seen... as tending to be immutable, immanent in the individual, and biologically based, the meaning of gender is seen as culturally mutable and variable, highly relational... and inextricable from a history of power differentials between genders" (Sedgwick 28). That is, sex is an unchangeable given, but not a necessary or a sufficient characteristic to determine any gender.

Butler and Sedgwick both question sex as an unchangeable given. Butler writes, "If the immutable character of sex is contested, as perhaps this construct called 'sex' is as culturally constructed as gender; indeed, perhaps it was always already gender, with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all" (Butler 10). Both Butler and Sedgwick note that the sex binary is not an accurate representation of sexual diversity. Butler continues, "It would make no sense, then, to define gender as the cultural interpretation of sex, if sex itself is a gendered category" (10). In the heterosexual matrix, gender and sex are both fixed categories. Gender constructionism queers gender, yet even sex, that "immutable" and biologically fixed category, can be queered. Butler's description and disruption of the 'heterosexual matrix' and Butler's and Sedgwick's investigation of sex and gender exemplify how queer theory queers identities.

### **Anti-Total Theory**

Another substantive claim of queer theory, resulting from queering presuppositions, is that there is no total theory. A total theory is a theory that completely explains how the world is, holding true for everything. Total theory presupposes a set of privileged descriptors which can be used to generate the true description of the world. These privileged descriptors would naturally be taken to mark dichotomies and constitute essential properties. Contesting the latter through queering essentialism undercuts the idea of a total theory. Thus, queer theory is incompatible with total theory.

Moreover, queering upsets totalizing theories by ruining the clear-cut truth claims it tries to make. That is, queer theory rejects any truths requiring stable and

clear-cut distinctions: queer theory necessitates blurry distinctions. Not only is queer theory incompatible with total theory, but queer theory is anti-total theory, rejecting all claims to universal truths.

So far, in this chapter, I have shown how queer theory as an anti-essentialist doctrine can be used to queer identities, dichotomies, and dualisms. I also maintain that queer theory holds that there is no total theory. This raises an apparent problem: it seems that queer theory maintains anti-essentialism always, and necessarily so, in which case anti-essentialism becomes an essential characteristic of queer theory. This results in what appears to be a paradox: for a theory to hold the substantive view that there are no essences in conjunction with the view that there is no total theory is paradoxical, since to say there are no essences is an assertion of a theory that is getting close to total. However, I am not ready to dismiss queer theory as internally inconsistent, for I believe returning to the methodology of queer theory will help resolve this apparent paradox.

One way we can avoid this supposed paradox is to put forth a weaker version of anti-essentialism. Rather than rejecting that essences exist, queer theory could advocate for a cautious skepticism with regards to claims about essences. Thus, queer theory's "anti-essentialism" is not incompatible with its claims to be anti-total theory. However, without a strong claim of anti-essentialism, we allow for essences to exist for some things and not for others. For example, we may agree that humans do not have essences, but water does. Or, we should merely question claims of essences, but accept that some essences are real. As we will explore later on, queer ecology seeks to queer these distinctions that we draw. A strong claim of anti-essentialism ensures that for all

things, there are no essences, which will become important to the aims of queer ecology. Thus, a weaker version of anti-essentialism, while it avoids the paradox, may not be the best way to remedy this problem.

I believe that an emphasis on the use of "queer" as a verb in queer theory can resolve the paradox. Although I have separated queer theory as a methodology from queer theory as a set of substantive views, the insistence on using queer as a verb blurs, or "queers," this distinction as well. The meta-substantive view that "queer" is a verb prescribes that queering is an action that can and should be performed on dichotomies and total theories. As a methodology, queer theory queers things. The substantive views offered by queer theory are not stagnant and require that queer theory be used as a methodology, to queer its own views and methods and the distinction between the two. Let me explain.

In queer theory, queer is something one does. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler argues, "gender is always a doing" (Butler 25). That is, I do not dress, speak, walk, and otherwise perform woman-ness because I am a woman, but rather I am a woman because I do these things. Rather than existing as a woman, I am constantly doing acts of being a woman. Similarly, queering is a doing. This analogy of queer as a verb to gender as a verb is not meant to merely describe what it means to be a non-heterosexual person, for queer theory expands far outside of sexual identities. To say that "queer is always a doing" is to say that queer theory is always queering. The substantive views offered by queer theory and the methodology that stems from them queer any and all subject matter of queer theory. A substantive view of queer theory is that "queer" is a verb, so queer theory is always a doing. Queer theory thus queers the

distinction between a methodology and a substantive view. A methodology is how a theory is used, while a substantive view is a claim a theory makes. The meta-substantive view that queer is a verb and can and should be something queer theory does blurs the distinction between how a theory is used and the claims a theory makes.

Holding the tenets of anti-essentialism and anti-total theories, the views of queer theories are views that require action and are not meant to be accepted as a total truth. The substantive view that there are no essences is not meant to make a claim about how the world is, but rather how the world is *not*, and accepting that there are no essences requires queer theorists to investigate assumptions and supposed dualisms. Anti-essentialism influences the methodology of queer theory, and the methodology of queering things reinforces the view of anti-essentialism. Thus, the queered relationship between substantive views and methodology can at least somewhat settle our worries of an internally inconsistent philosophy. Anti-essentialism need not be accepted as a total theory, but rather it can be adopted as a methodology for engaging with the world.

### **Queer Theory and Queer Ecology**

Queer ecology applies queer theory to ecology and philosophies of the environment. To apply queer theory is to queer something, so what is the thing in queer ecology that is queered? The obvious answer is that queer ecology queers ecology. *Ecology* is the study of the environment and the relation of organisms and the human understanding of the nonhuman world. Queer ecology, when ecology is the subject matter that is queered, uses queer theory to highlight the disjuncture between how humans frame the non-human world and what actually happens in the non-human kingdom. We see this exemplified by the hundreds of same-sex sexual encounters

among non-human animal species detailed in Bruce Bagemihl's *Biological Exuberance: Animal Homosexuality and Natural Diversity* (Marcus 198). In this interpretation of queer ecology, what is queered is the study of the environment and the science used to understand the environment. Bagemihl's work shows that sexual acts that are deemed "queer" occur in nonhuman animals and "queer" sexual characteristics are present in nonhuman living things. The natural world is already queer, and the subject matter of queer theory, the thing that is queered, tends to be human interpretation and understanding. Yet, there is a stronger version of queer ecology in which the things themselves in the environment are queered. This view is prominent in Donna Haraway's cyborg theory.

Lastly, and most importantly for the purposes of this paper, queer ecology queers the dualisms prominent in ecological thought, such as nature/culture, natural/unnatural, and human/non-human. That is, queer ecology queers the philosophical assumptions about a dualistic world. I explore all of these subject matters and how queer ecology treats them in the next chapter. The subject matter of queer ecology determines the effects of queer ecology, so in doing queer ecology, it is important to understand what it is that is being queered.

## Chapter 2: Queering Ecology

### Ecofeminism

Queer ecology grows from ecofeminism as well as queer theory. Just as there are a multitude of queer theories, Karen Warren explains in an anthology on *Environmental Philosophy* that there are many ecofeminisms, stemming from the many varying feminisms (Warren 254). However, she writes, “there is something all ecofeminists agree about; such agreement provides a minimal condition account of ecofeminism: there are important connections between the domination of women and the domination of nature, an understanding of which is crucial to feminism, environmentalism, and environmental philosophy” (256). Notably here, Warren writes that the important connections are between the *domination* of women and the *domination* of nature. In the following paragraph, she asserts, “woman-nature connections are the backbone of ecofeminism” (256). The distinction between these statements is important and an understanding of how they are different illuminates separate branches of ecofeminism. The two branches of ecofeminism I am concerned with here are: an essentialist branch, one in which the women-nature connection is celebrated; and a non-essentialist branch, one in which the women-nature connection is rejected. I write that the second branch here is non-essentialist because a rejection of the women-nature connection alone is not sufficient to claim that it is anti-essentialist. Anti-essentialism, as I portrayed in the previous chapter, entails a rigorous rejection of all essentialism, requiring more than rejecting a single instance of essentialism. There are certainly many nuanced ecofeminisms, but here I am concerned with how

ecofeminism interacts with essentialism and queer theory. I hope to reveal the possibility of a third branch, an anti-essentialist ecofeminism.

In *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, Val Plumwood asks, "Is ecofeminism inevitably based in gynocentric essentialism?" (Plumwood 8). Some ecofeminist literature, and certainly more colloquial enactments of ecofeminism, seems to argue that there is some inherent women-nature connection: from being a woman alone one is closer to the earth. Such arguments are deeply tied to "Mother Earth" imagery, which does seem to relate to gynocentric essentialism: The ability to bear children is inextricably linked to nature and the earth, and the ability to bear children is a necessary characteristic of being a woman. Ecofeminist philosophies that celebrate the women-nature connection and include the idea that to be a woman entails being closer to the earth are essentialist philosophies because they rely on essentialized understandings of both woman and nature.

However, if we take the important connection involved in ecofeminism to be the parallel between the domination of women and the domination of nature, it is possible to derive a non-essentialist if not an anti-essentialist ecofeminist philosophy. In this view, it is the conflation of women with nature that is the cause of the oppression of both. That is, the oppression of women and the oppression of nature are mutually reinforcing: because of essentialist notions conflating women and nature, to devalue and oppress one is to devalue and oppress the other. So, non-essentialist ecofeminists want to break the presumed connection between women and nature and instead focus on overcoming the joint oppression.

Plumwood identifies many gendered dualisms that together form what she calls the master identity or master model, and it is through an investigation of this theory and two ways of engaging with this theory that I will illuminate the possibility of an anti-essentialist ecofeminism and how dualisms relate to essences. Plumwood explains the master model in this way:

“The framework of assumptions in which the human/nature contrast has been formed in the west is one not only of *feminine* connectedness with and passivity towards nature, but also a complementary one of exclusion and domination of the sphere of nature by a white, largely male elite” (Plumwood 22-23).

The master model is a system of dualisms that privilege the master identity, the dominant part of each dualism.

An analysis of the master model shows how dualisms work together and reinforce the intersecting oppressions of women, nature, and people of color. In the master model, women, nature, and people of color are devalued. Plumwood, giving yet another “essential feature of all ecological feminist positions,” writes that ecofeminism “[gives] positive value to a connection of women with nature which was previously, in the west, given negative cultural value and which was the main ground of women’s devaluation and oppression” (8). While I find her description of a positive value assigned to the connection of women with nature problematic, I agree that ecofeminist positions revalue the parts of the dualisms devalued in the master model. However, I see at least two ways in which ecofeminist thought can engage with the master model: rejecting the values, or rejecting the dualisms. To reject the values without rejecting the dualisms upholds essentialism, while rejecting the dualisms rejects essentialism.

We can interpret Plumwood in each of these ways. First, as Plumwood highlights, ecofeminist theory can reject the supremacy of the master identity, that is, reject the notion that the masculine, rational, white, oppressor identity is of greater value than the dualistic counterparts, while celebrating the women-nature connection. On this interpretation, Plumwood manages to uphold the dualisms in the master model; it is merely a revaluation of the natural and the feminine, without a critique of the dualisms and the essentialist claims made about women and nature. Plumwood explains the master model and rejects it by reversing the valuation, but not the dualisms. However, consider the second possibility.

An anti-essentialist engagement with the master model also rejects the notion that the oppressor identity is of greater value than the dualistic counterparts, but then rejects the dualisms that create the master model as well. Greta Gaard explicitly utilizes a queer theoretical approach in her engagement with Plumwood's master model in "Toward a Queer Ecofeminism." Adding to the list of supposedly essential characteristics of all ecofeminisms, Gaard contends, "at the root of ecofeminism is the understanding that the many systems of oppression are mutually reinforcing" (114). She concurs with this interpretation that focuses on the connection between overlapping oppressions, yet she rejects the interpretation of ecofeminism in which women and nature are connected in an essentialist fashion. She brings a distinctively queer and sexuality focused approach to Plumwood's theory by discussing heterosexism as another domination present in the dualisms imposed by the master model and comparing the devaluation of women and nature to the devaluation of the erotic (116). She writes,

"From a queer ecofeminist perspective... we can examine the ways queers are feminized, animalized, eroticized, and naturalized in a culture that devalues women, animals, nature, and sexuality. We can also examine how persons of color are feminized, animalized, eroticized, and naturalized. Finally, we can explore how nature is feminized, eroticized, even queered" (Gaard 119).

However, merely discussing queer oppression does not alone queer ecofeminism.

Gaard quotes Mortimer-Sandilands: "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'" (115). Gaard critiques ecofeminist philosophy as generally doing just that: adding a dualistic domination and acknowledging the interdependence of dominations without dismantling the dualisms themselves. Queer theory does not merely revalue what is queer (adj.), but rather queer theory queers (v.) the structures that devalue queerness and other oppressed identities. Gaard argues that a queer ecofeminism must acknowledge the workings of these dualisms in the master model and work to queer, or ruin, its strict dichotomies. That is, a queer ecofeminism must reject not only the master model, but the dualisms underlying it as well. As we continue to interpret queer as a verb, Gaard's move toward a queer ecofeminism constitutes a queering of ecofeminism. Thus, an anti-essentialist ecofeminist position, one that holds anti-essentialism as a worldview and is not merely non-essentializing, is a queered ecofeminist position that aligns with the philosophical endeavors of queer ecology to queer the dualisms prominent in ecological thought. Queered ecofeminism's rejection of essences and total theory does not entail a rejection of the reality of things, and to show this I turn to a discussion of constructionism.

## Constructionism

In the last section I showed that anti-essentialism is at the core of a queered ecofeminism. As we saw, ecofeminist philosophies reconstruct our conceptions of what it means to be a woman and what nature is. The ability to reconstruct implies a previous construction. What does it mean for a concept or for a thing itself to be constructed? Moreover, especially in feminist and ecofeminist writing, the construction in question is *socially* constructed. In this section, I will explore constructionism and how a social constructionist position is not necessarily anti-realist and is an important piece of queering ecology and nature.

Sally Haslanger writes, "social construction has come to be associated with a broad anti-realism, anti-objectivism about kinds, and anti-naturalism" (Haslanger 183). However, she continues, "there is a central form of social construction- a form most often employed by feminist and race theorists when discussing the ontology of gender and race- that is compatible with important forms of realism, and objectivism about kinds, and naturalism" (183). Haslanger unpacks all of these words and ideas in her book *Resisting Reality*.

Haslanger writes, "a realist about a domain D maintains that claims purporting to describe D are truth-apt, that is, the claims are the sort of thing to be either true or false, *and* at least some of them are true" (198). Thus, an anti-realist position takes the form of either non-cognitivism, in which claims about D are not truth-apt, or error theory, in which all claims, though truth-apt, are false. Anti-realism as it is used in the context of social constructionism generally falls under error theory, for example: race is socially constructed and races do not exist. So, it is false that "'Whites, on average, hold

greater wealth in the United States than Blacks'" because "the terms 'Whites' and 'Blacks' do not refer" (198).

Haslanger's constructionism is not in opposition to realism about things or kinds. She wishes to maintain that race is socially constructed but real without necessitating that any and all claims about race are false. To do this, she shows that a category of F's can be both objective types and socially constituted (204). Haslanger notes, "objective types are types that can be found in the real world," or that they are metaphysically objective. Claims about such socially constructed F's are truth-apt and at least some of these claims are true.

Ian Hacking argues for a similar view of constructionism, and stresses the importance of deciphering the *what* that is being constructed (Hacking 68). Hacking argues that it is not very interesting or controversial to put forth that ideas are constructed, for they are vacuously so; after all, people come up with ideas, and they would not exist without someone thinking them (69). Haslanger's explanation of mind-dependence shows why: she writes, "the only kind of mind-dependence is ordinary mind-dependence in which the mind in question is an ordinary human mind that exists in the natural world, interdependent with other natural things" (213). That is, my ideas are dependent on my mind in a strong sense such that my mind and the society it is in constructed my ideas. But that does not make the objects of these ideas unreal. The social construction of ideas does not entail that the things the ideas represent are not real.

Haslanger expounds upon this position by an example explaining differences and distinctions. When she sorts her daughter's clothes to separate clothes that her

daughter will keep and clothes her daughter will give away, Haslanger makes *distinctions* based on particular *differences* in the clothes that are important to the task at hand, such as her daughter's style and size. Categories mark distinctions, and while these distinctions are dependent on Haslanger and her daughter and their interests and purposes, the differences in things are not contingent on Haslanger's purposes. The distinctions that Haslanger and her daughter make, say between clothes good enough to be donated and those too worn and faded to be thrown away, are obviously constructions, yet surely the clothes themselves are real enough. Is the category of clothes with holes somehow more real than the category of clothes to be thrown away? As far as Haslanger and her daughter are concerned, the constructed categories contingent on their purposes are just as real.

Distinctions, then, are constructions: "what distinctions we draw and what differences correspond to them depend on the purposes of sorting in that context" (Haslanger 191). Considerably more complicated than distinguishing between clothes, Haslanger considers how we differentiate between sexes and what differences matter in the context of sex (192). The construction of the categories of sexes is merely the construction of ideas of sexes, and says little about whether sex itself is constructed.

Hacking considers the meaning of construction in its ordinary use, that of building out of pre-existing materials (Hacking 49). Take, for example, the desk in front of me: my desk was plainly constructed out of wood. Yet, the mere fact that someone or something built my desk in no way suggests that my desk is not real; it is real enough for me. The ordinary use of the word construction is most definitely compatible with

realism, and Hacking argues that the meaning of "social construction" is not far off from the ordinary meaning of construction<sup>4</sup>.

Returning again to my desk, I accept that my desk is both real and constructed. What matters to me, as the user of the desk, is how well it was constructed. This is what Bruno Latour calls "matters of concern," which regard "the way all beings are manufactured" (*Politics of Nature* 244). Latour is a constructionist in all cases, arguing that all things are manufactured or constructed. However, he, like Haslanger and Hacking, also refuses to accept that constructionism and realism are incompatible. Everything is constructed, which says little to nothing about whether a particular thing is real, but some things are constructed better or worse than others.

Carolyn Merchant provides one interpretation of how nature was and is constructed in her book *The Death of Nature*. She argues that the scientific revolution helped in the process of constructing a mechanized nature (Merchant 20). Moreover, this construction is a major factor in the domination of both women and nature. Merchant elaborates throughout her book how this construction came to be and makes clear that this is a poor construction of nature.

Accepting constructionism as put forth by Haslanger, Hacking, and Latour presents an opportunity to reconstruct. If our "concepts of nature and women are historical and social constructions," as Merchant purports they are, then our concepts do not have to be the way they are (Merchant xvi). That is, they are not unchangeable, or essentially so. A constructed view of the world aligns with the substantive views of

---

<sup>4</sup> Bruno Latour takes issue with the concept of "social" constructionism, which he addresses at length in his book *Reassembling the Social*. Specifically, he argues that the social is not a material from which things can be constructed, nor is it a force that can itself construct.

queer theory in that categories and identities are not rigid and there are no necessary characteristics that define categories. A queer ecological view identifies the current, poor constructions of nature, sexuality, sex, and gender and attempts to reconstruct them by queering them. With this understanding of constructionism, I explore how science and technology are constructed.

### **The Construction of Science and Technology**

In the previous section I outlined what it means to say that a thing is constructed. In this section I will explain specifically how science and technology are constructed and reconstructed. Our scientific method could be different, and in fact has developed over time into what is today accepted as the best approach to science. Good science tries to eliminate research bias and confounding factors as much as possible to ensure that the results are accurate; this is well-constructed science, in Latourian terminology. Bad science fails in these respects.

Donna Haraway and Joan Roughgarden each identify what they consider to be bad science. Haraway begins her book *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women* with an acknowledgement of "the degree to which the principle of domination is deeply embedded in our natural sciences" (*Simians* 8). She provides examples of scientists, often white men, whom she finds guilty of plastering sexist gender assumptions on the nonhuman animals they study. For example, Clarence Ray Carpenter, in experimenting with rhesus monkeys, removed the "alpha male" from a social group. Haraway identifies and investigates how assumptions intrinsic to the scientific theories Carpenter was using resulted in this construction of his experiment. She writes, "The control experiment of removing other animals than the dominant males was not done

because it did not make sense within the whole complex of theory, analogies to individual organisms, and unexamined assumptions" (18).

The examples Haraway provides illuminate the process of poorly constructed science, as a result of commitment to what she calls the "anti-liberation core of knowledge and practice in our sciences" (8). Roughgarden, an ecologist and evolutionary biologist, critiques the theories themselves that are accepted in this core of knowledge. She specifically addresses Darwin's Sexual Selection Theory, a theory which offers "universal templates" for males and females: "Darwin imagined that males come to be the way they universally are because these males are what females universally want, and the species is better off as a result" (Roughgarden 165). A modern version of Darwin's sexual selection theory uses the template, *cheap sperm, expensive egg*: that is, eggs are "worth more" and so females are more selective in mating, whereas sperm is cheap and abundant and therefore always competing with each other. However, Roughgarden notes that Darwin's writing does not support this argument; Darwin instead saw equal total energy expenditure by each sex in reproductive effort over a lifetime (168). Nonetheless, Roughgarden adamantly disagrees with Darwin's theory itself and its modern interpretation because there are too many unexplained exceptions to the universal template (169). The primary exception, the "final torpedo" as Roughgarden deems it, is homosexuality (171). The presence of homosexuality undermines the argument that mate selection is based primarily on reproduction and that males are competing with each other for the sole purpose of impregnating a female. The purportedly universal template of males and

females cannot really be universal if a significant number of individuals do not conform to the template.

Bruce Bagemihl, like Roughgarden, is a biologist. Roughgarden cites Bagemihl's *Biological Exuberance* to provide examples of sex and sexual diversity. In this book, Bagemihl scientifically documents over 450 species of nonhuman animals including mammals, birds, reptiles, and insects that exhibit sexual and gender diversity, effectively proving that the universal template are not in fact universal. This book exemplifies Roughgarden's final torpedo, the presence of homosexuality. In his introduction, Bagemihl notes, "virtually no terminology for animal behavior—particularly sexual behavior, is entirely free of human associations" (4). Like Haraway, he is actively aware of how our preconceptions infiltrate into science. While he chooses to use familiar terms rather than create a new jargon, he is careful to explain and qualify them, "such that they become uncoupled from their anthropomorphic connotations" (4)<sup>5</sup>. An aim of both *Biological Exuberance* and *Evolution's Rainbow* is to highlight sexual and gender diversity in the nonhuman world, and both realize the ramifications of such work in the human world.

As scientists themselves, Bagemihl and Roughgarden are careful in their science, and certainly argue for a better science. Bagemihl notes a "quiet revolution in biology" and explains how a shift in theory is already underway; a better science is already under construction (245). Perhaps because Roughgarden's project is to challenge accepted theories while Bagemihl's project is to scientifically account for diversity,

---

<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, in Roughgarden's introduction, she writes, "I'm quite willing to anthropomorphize about animals. Not that animals are really like people, but animals are not just machines either... I've tried to strike a balance here" (Roughgarden 4).

these biologists differ on how they frame their work, work that I see as queering ecology, literally. Roughgarden, in her critique of Darwin's theory, clearly advocates for a change in scientific theory itself. Bagemihl writes, "Biological Exuberance is not a theory or an 'explanation' designed to supplant previous ones; rather, it is a fundamental shift in perspective, an alternative vision of something we thought we understood. Through this concept, we seek not so much to add new facts to existing knowledge, but to add a new pattern of knowledge to existing facts" (245). Both of these biologists provide a queer lens to the study of nonhuman animals and a queer interpretation of science, one that acknowledges the constructed nature of science, knowledge, and facts.

Roughgarden, Bagemihl, and Haraway all include a historical interpretation of science in their work. Carolyn Merchant provides another historical interpretation of science and its construction of mechanized nature. As mentioned earlier, in Merchant's historical interpretation of science, science and the technology developed through science are tools used in the oppression of women and nature. Moreover, she deeply links the oppression of women and the oppression of nature through the use of technology: "as woman's womb had symbolically yielded to the forceps, so nature's womb harbored secrets that through technology could be wrestled from her grasp for use in the improvement of the human condition" (Merchant 169). Merchant argues that the Scientific Revolution marks a new conception of the world and nature, namely, that the world is a machine (20). It is the construction of the world as machine both conceptually and literally that, for Merchant, underlies the oppression of women and nature.

Merchant identifies science and technology, and the Baconian method in particular, as the cause for the mechanization of nature, the view of the world as a machine. Merchant writes, "The Baconian method advocated power over nature through manual manipulation, technology, and experiment. But mechanism as a worldview was also a conceptual power structure" (216). Mechanism represents rationality, objectivity, and order: "nature is subject to law-like behavior and therefore that the domain of science and technology includes those phenomena that can be reduced to orderly predictable rules, regulations, and laws" (229). For Merchant, this is the hallmark of domination- to control, and she contends that the domination of women emerged through this same intertwined history.

Merchant's story about the use of technology, however, ignores the many ways in which technology can be and is used to liberate. Haslanger notes how birth control is an example of humans controlling "nature," specifically our biology (Haslanger 212). Yet, few feminists would argue that birth control is an oppressive technology; birth control is widely understood as a tool of empowerment and liberation. Birth control is nonetheless a technology that, by definition, *controls* an aspect of the natural world. Haslanger explains how humans exercise control over the natural world not strictly as dominators, but as actors in a "causally interdependent system" (212). She continues, "although clearly natural forces play out within the social domain, it is also the case that we- as individuals and societies- have influence within the natural domain. Understanding how and where to act in order to counteract existing unjust conditions is crucial for effective social change" (213). Humans can exist as a part of the natural

world and heavily influence and perhaps even control other aspects of the natural world without necessarily operating as dominators, as Merchant's model suggests.

Birth control is one example of a technology that is used for liberation. Donna Haraway makes a stronger claim about technology: she argues that technology is a part of a liberation project not because certain instances of technological use have aided in liberation, but because technology calls into question the strict dichotomies of male/female, culture/nature, human/animal, and organism/machine, and the queering of these is liberatory. Haraway problematizes our conception of what is "natural" through her cyborg theory, effectively queering nature itself. I turn now to cyborg theory to investigate how it embodies queer ecology.

### **A Queer Construction of Nature: Cyborg Theory, natureculture, and queernatureculture**

Haraway explains and advocates for cyborg theory in "A Cyborg Manifesto" (*Simians* 149). Cyborg theory incorporates the adamantly queering techniques of ruining distinctions and blurring identities. A cyborg is a partial creature, one that cannot be essentialized to one thing. A cyborg is part human, part animal, part machine, both natural and cultural. Cyborg theory is Haraway's reconceptualization of ourselves in a post-gender, cyborg world in which multiple identities exist in a cyborg state. Her use of cyborgs, which invokes technological and mechanical imagery, to exemplify this theory emphasizes the positive role of technology in queering ecology, the environment, and ourselves. Furthermore, cyborgs themselves, as nonbinary and queering identities, reiterate anti-essentialism and the rejection of dichotomies.

One of Haraway's initial tasks in her development of cyborg theory is breaking down the boundaries between the Animal and the Human and the Organism and the Machine in order to queer these dichotomies and show how we are already living in a cyborg world. These two dichotomies are especially interesting when examined in conjunction with one another because in one dichotomy, contrasted with nonhuman animals, the human is part of Culture, while in the other, contrasted with machines, the human is part of Nature. Thus, humans already exist in a cyborg state, even when forced to be in essentializing dualisms. Haraway argues that biology and evolutionary theory have "reduced the line between humans and animals to a faint trace;" that is, modern science has shown how close human and nonhuman animals are biologically, upsetting the clear distinction between what makes us separate from the animal kingdom. Further, she contends that modern technological developments show that the distinction between organism and machine is no longer as clear as it was in pre-cybernetic machines. Our machines now have life and movement. Modern technology has also broken down the distinction between the physical and non-physical, especially with regards to miniaturization. Our technology is growing physically smaller, yet expanding into the non-physical realm. She writes, "Modern machines are quintessentially microelectronic devices: they are everywhere and they are invisible" (153). Cyborgs too transgress the boundaries of the physical and the non-physical.

The collapse of these three distinctions works in conjunction with Haraway's anti-essentialism to form her argument for cyborg theory. Haraway writes, "There is nothing about being 'female' that naturally binds women" together in one group (155). More than simply rejecting essentialized identities, Haraway collapses identities into

cyborgs: "reconstructing the boundaries of daily life, in partial connection with others, in communication with all our parts" (181). Haraway clarifies, "a cyborg body is not innocent; it was not born in a garden; it does not seek unitary identity and so generate antagonistic dualism without end (or until the world ends)" (180). Haraway not only reconstructs science and technology, but she reconstructs the self as a cyborg

In Haraway's later essay, "The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness," she introduces her concept of "natureculture," "the implosion of nature and culture," through the exploration of humans and dogs as companions ("Companion Species" 16). This essay builds on her rejection of the nature/culture dualism. She argues that what we believe to be natural can just as well be cultural, and vice versa. For example, the line between natural selection and artificial selection is fuzzy at best: at what point did human breeding of dogs become artificial and not natural? The use of natureculture, as opposed to a different term that bears no resemblance to nature and culture, emphasizes that in Haraway's philosophy, the rejection of dualisms involves the blurring, or perhaps queering, of dualisms, rather than a total rejection of the concepts themselves. Haraway's view contrasts with Latour's philosophy in maintaining nature and culture as concepts, as blurred and radically new as natureculture purports to be. In contrast, Latour maintains that nature and society are aspects of an "old regime" that we must completely leave behind (*Politics of Nature* 238). Haraway's natureculture is a result of collapsing dualisms without rejecting the categories that make up dualisms.

David Bell latches on to the ambiguity of natureculture in his essay "Queernaturecultures." While he argues that nature itself is a cultural construction, he

notes that the term natureculture "does not simply want to erase nature and call everything culture" (Bell 143). Rather, it asserts that nature is cultural, and culture is natural. He uses Haraway's natureculture in the context of sex, specifically in how sexualities and sex acts are "naturalized." I interpret Bell's use of naturalism in both the statistical and the normative sense of the word. In the statistical sense, naturalism refers to something that occurs in the natural world without human manipulation, for example: homosexuality exists in nonhuman animals and therefore homosexuality is natural. In the normative sense, naturalism refers to being proper and in accord with the so-called natural order of things, for example: homosexuality is not proper and therefore unnatural. The normative sense of naturalism imposes moral assessment on what is naturalized.

The statistical and the normative sense often work together, as we saw in the initial arguments about homosexuality in the introduction. Historically and recently heterosexual sex acts were naturalized in the sense that heterosexual sex acts were taken to be the statistical norm, and from this naturalization took on a normative sense in which non-heterosexual sex acts were demonized and oppressed as 'not natural.' That is, from what was considered statistically normal, heterosexual sex acts became naturalized in the normative sense: one ought to engage in heterosexual sex acts, and not homosexual sex acts. However, homosexual sex acts too have been naturalized through the heralding of same-sex sex acts in nonhuman animals as evidence that homosexuality is natural, supposedly naturalizing sex acts in order to liberate sexual minorities. The prevalence of homosexual sex acts in nonhumans naturalizes

homosexuality in the statistical sense, which become a positive normative assessment of homosexual sex acts.

Bell argues that naturalizing sex acts, whether heterosexual or otherwise, "rests on the denial of culture beyond the human," something he rejects (Bell 143). For example, in the case of naturalizing homosexuality, it is only through observations of same-sex sex acts in nonhumans that homosexuality can be considered natural and not cultural or, as it is usually phrased, not a choice. Notice how in these arguments, nature and culture exist in a dualism, a strict dichotomy in which things can only be one or the other. This assumes that sex in nonhumans do not have cultural aspects. Bell posits that culture does not necessarily have to entail "human;" after all, the strict division between human animals and nonhuman animals may not be as strict as we thought.

Furthermore, Bell argues, any naturalization of sex acts and sexuality, homosexual, heterosexual, or otherwise, attempts to essentialize sexuality. He writes, "Wary of the uses of scientific discourses of sexuality, and equally wary of the problematic fixity of identity categories, queer theory and politics have proven resistant to claims to biological or natural explanation of sexuality" (139). Bell resists essentialism in sexuality and argues that sex acts are both natural and cultural in the ambiguous sense of natureculture. Queernatureculture emphasizes the ambiguity of queer sex acts as they relate to our conceptions of natural and cultural. The concepts involved in cyborg theory, natureculture, and queernatureculture collapse the dualism of Nature and Culture and the dichotomies that stem from it. In doing so, Haraway and Bell resist essentialism and strict identities, effectively blurring boundaries and

identities. This raises the worry, however, that difference may be erased. In the next chapter I confront the issue of difference and why it matters for liberation politics.

### **Chapter 3: Liberation**

When identities are queered to the extent that Haraway and Bell wish to queer identities, a worry arises that the blurred identities will entail a loss of difference. The loss of difference is a danger of queering identities because, as I will explain, it may render oppressed groups invisible, and further oppressed. Through a deeper investigation of difference, liberation, and oppression, I argue that the blurred identities that result from queer theory can in fact be liberatory. In what follows, I will examine interpretations of oppression and liberation to make this case.

#### **What is Liberatory?**

"Liberatory" is the adjective to describe something that leads to "liberation," the noun. Just as with my investigation of the word queer, I first want to explore the dictionary definition of the word liberation. The Oxford English Dictionary defines liberation (n) as "freedom from restrictive or discriminatory social conventions and attitudes." Something that is liberatory creates this freedom. If the strict boundaries placed on beings through essentialism and reinforced through the master narrative restrict those beings, and if queer ecology queers these boundaries and in so doing, eases those restrictions, then queer ecology is liberatory.

As I understand it, liberation alleviates or fights oppression. That is, if something is said to be liberatory, it assumes a pre-existing condition of oppression. Thus, we cannot understand liberation and what it means to be liberatory without understanding oppression. I take as a starting point "Five Faces of Oppression," in which Iris Marion Young offers five sufficient conditions for oppression: If a group suffers from at least one of the categories of exploitation, marginalization,

powerlessness, cultural imperialism, or violence, then the group is oppressed. Therefore, for something to be liberatory, it must fight against one of these five categories, or perhaps other, unidentified forces, that oppress a specific group.

Young notes that the notion of oppression assumes the presence of groups, and that “oppression refers to structural phenomena that immobilize or diminish a group” (42). Thus, oppression in Young’s account can only be understood in relation to social groups. Young explains that social groups are formed in relation to other groups (43). Importantly, Young argues, “though some groups have come to be formed out of oppression, and relations of privilege and oppression structure the interactions between many groups, group differentiation is not in itself oppressive” (47). Young makes no claims as to what causes oppression, and outright denies that the formation of groups themselves create oppression. While groups are necessary for oppression to occur, grouping together is not an oppressive act alone.

According to Young, experiencing “cultural imperialism,” one of the sufficient conditions for oppression, “involves the paradox of experiencing oneself as invisible at the same time that one is marked out as different” (60). That is, one’s identity and experiences are ignored and diminished, rendering a group invisible and erasing their narrative, yet still marking out that group as different, even as a problem. For example, the stories and experiences of immigrants to the U.S. are forgotten and ignored, while people marked as “immigrants” are marked as being different and are limited from full participation and acceptance in society. A group can experience both invisibility and being marked as different at the same time when their experiences and identities are ignored yet they are not the “norm;” it is often *because* an identity is not the norm that

their experiences are not represented. Cultural imperialism is exemplified by Plumwood's description of the master model: there is a master identity that is the norm, the one true human form, and everything else is "othered." This othering at once renders groups invisible, yet marked out as different.

Following Young's argument, this is sufficient to claim that the othered groups that are not represented in the master identity are oppressed in relation to the group taken to be the norm, the standard being. That is, women are oppressed in relation to men, nature is oppressed in relation to culture, non-white "othered" races are oppressed in relation to white people. Of course, different groups experience cultural imperialism differently and certainly many oppressed groups experience multiple faces of oppression.

bell hooks has another interpretation of what it means to be oppressed. She writes, "being oppressed means *the absence of choices*" (hooks 5). An important difference between this conception of oppression and Young's conception is that the absence of choices is not a necessary or even sufficient condition of oppression, but rather a possible but not invariable characteristic of oppression. The absence of choices may be a characteristic of some of the five faces of oppression; for example, in instances of sexual violence against women, an individual woman is deprived of choice. So, a characteristic of something that is liberatory may be to provide choices. However, these must be a certain kind of choice, for the very systems that some may call oppressive sometimes seem to provide an overwhelming number of choices. For example, Wal-Mart provides me with many choices, yet a Wal-Mart employee and the people who make the products I get to choose from may be oppressed through what

Young identifies as exploitation. Furthermore, my choice between many different types of cereal does not liberate me from oppression. The choices taken away in oppression and given in liberation are specific choices that are directly linked to Young's five faces of oppression. A queer person who fears violence may not have the choice (or rather, a choice with good options) to be out in certain spaces, and to be given such a choice, to live without fear of violence, is surely an example of liberation. Linking hooks's characterization of oppression with Young's sufficient conditions, something is liberatory if it provides choices that are taken away by any of the five faces of oppression. As a starting point, something that is liberatory must not be oppressive, and must fight to overcome oppression.

I stated earlier that a possible danger of queering identities is the loss of ways of marking difference. Eliminating categories of difference does not eliminate oppression, but rather it eliminates the possibility for an oppressed group to overcome oppression. Thus, something that eliminates ways of marking difference is not liberatory. For example, one response to the #BlackLivesMatter movement is #AllLivesMatter. Asserting that *all* lives matter diverts attention from the unique experience of being black in the U.S. This response eliminates distinctions marking difference, suggesting that we all face the same struggles, and silences black voices, rendering the black experience invisible. This is because when we discuss *all* people, the figure we refer to is the master identity, and thus white. The paradox is that by eliminating categories of difference, the experiences of "othered" groups are erased yet these "othered" groups are still marked out as different as targets of racism and discrimination.

Recall Haslanger's clothes piles: differences exist independent from our categories. One shirt may be yellow while another is pink, just as some people have white skin and some people have black skin. Haslanger made distinctions between differing clothing items based on her and her daughter's intents. Likewise, #BlackLivesMatter activists mark distinctions based on important differences in the ways people experience police brutality. By claiming All Lives Matter, the differences in these experiences are not eliminated, but our ability to discuss this difference is. Eliminating categories marking difference does not confront or destabilize the master identity, but rather silences those who do. Therefore, for queer ecology merely to be not oppressive, it must not eliminate categories marking difference. For it to be liberatory, it must actively fight against oppression, confronting and destabilizing the master identity.

Queering categories has this effect. Rather than eliminate categories of difference, it queers them. Queering our conceptions of race, gender, and other dualisms does not eliminate difference, but rather adds ambiguity and intersectionality to our understanding. That is, by queering our understanding of race, we can investigate multi-racial experiences and experiences of overlapping identities such as gender and sexuality. It would be impossible to discuss and address the murders of trans women of color if these categories marking difference did not exist. An example of how difference is maintained in queer ecology is Haraway's "natureculture:" the entities of nature and culture and their unique dispositions are still held in the phrase natureculture, but they are no longer opposing each other in a strict dualism.

So, what is the *something* that is liberatory, that is, what thing(s) can the adjective “liberatory” apply to? Is a philosophy capable of liberating? Does something that is liberatory necessarily have to liberate? Queer ecology is a liberatory theory in that it queers boundaries and thus provides room for individuals to have more freedom and choice conceptually, which can translate into more freedom and choice in action. To claim, “queer ecology is a liberatory theory,” is to assume a prior condition of oppression: individuals are liberated from oppressive concepts through the queering of boundaries. However, a philosophy by itself cannot give more freedom and choice. We cannot simply think away oppression. Queer ecology, then, cannot liberate anything because it is a way of interpreting the world, the way I have explained in this paper. However, queer ecology is a liberatory theory: the way of understanding or interpreting the world purported by queer ecology offers a framework in which the categories through which we understand ourselves and other beings do not have strict boundaries. The ideas put forth by queer ecology are freeing, liberatory ideas because they provide new conceptual possibilities, but these ideas themselves do not liberate. They do, however, allow those who think these ideas to discern these new possibilities and put them into action. A theory like queer ecology can, I argue, be an element of liberation, and perhaps a useful tool towards liberation, but it cannot liberate on its own.

### **Solidarity/Coalition Building/Affinity**

Although queer ecology and the theories it encapsulates do not liberate beings, they offer tangible ways in which queer ecology can be put into practice to liberate

ourselves through queer ecological politics. Specifically, the concepts of solidarity, affinity, and coalition building can be used to form political groups that act towards liberation. As I mentioned, Young makes clear that while oppression requires social groups, the mere existence of social groups does not oppress. Recalling the earlier discussion of essentialism, when an individual is placed in a category based on predetermined, necessary characteristics, the choice of whether or not to be in that category is absent. In the prevalent example of biological essentialism of gender, a person with a vagina is necessarily a woman and cannot choose their own gender<sup>6</sup>. In this instance of group formation in which individuals do not have the choice to be or not to be in the group, the lack of choice is an indicator of oppression because the inability for a person to choose their gender is due to cultural imperialism and results in the marginalization of trans and gender nonconforming individuals. Queer ecology is based in anti-essentialism, and thus offers choices in terms of what categories and identities individuals want to claim, remembering that queering categories does not erase differences in things. Yet, it is not queer ecology or the theories it holds that give people the choice of identifying how they want to identify. Rather, queer ecology theoretically offers these choices as possibilities; the idea of gender anti-essentialism is liberatory, but more must be involved for liberation, and this involves politically organized social groups.

Note that in this example, the mere fact that the grouping of people into the gendered category of women occurs does not oppress people, but rather it is the way in which group formation occurs, namely, in an essentializing fashion. Moreover, the

---

<sup>6</sup> I use the pronoun "they," conventionally considered the plural pronoun, to indicate neutral gender.

group labeled “women” is not the group that is oppressed in this situation; the oppressed group involves those who are excluded: the group of trans people. That this is easy to overlook is another example of cultural imperialism: due to the lack of choice in gender identity, trans people are rendered invisible, for they do not exist in the gender binary, yet are still othered and marked for being different. Social groups may be necessary for oppression to exist, but they then must also be necessary for liberation. Thus, dissolving social groups is not adequate to fight oppression. However, we can intentionally form political groups to fight oppression, and this is where the liberatory theories offered by queer ecology can be applied to work towards liberation.

Queer ecology, and queer theory more generally, are liberatory theories in that they conceptually provide choices that address and combat cultural imperialism. Yet recall the danger of theories that eliminate difference: doing so eliminates the possibility of liberation. Haraway offers group formation based on affinity as a solution to the problem of eliminating difference, a solution that reflects Gaard’s coalition building. Chaone Mallory uses Sally Scholz’s anti-oppression philosophy in conjunction with Val Plumwood’s ecofeminist philosophy to advocate in favor of a philosophy based on solidarity. These three ideas of group formation through solidarity, affinity, and coalition building all argue for anti-essentialist constructions of identity which offer liberatory choices while maintaining difference.

To return again to the question of ecofeminism and whether ecofeminist theories ought to be based in a women-nature connection or its rejection, how might we form an anti-essentialist yet difference-affirming, queer ecofeminist political grouping? Gaard writes, “Our parallel oppressions have stemmed from our perceived associations.

It is time to build our common liberation on more concrete coalitions” (Gaard 132). Identity based groups are, for Gaard, Butler, and Haraway, linked to oppression, yet as we learned from Young, it is the formation of these groups and not the groups themselves that are oppressive. In this quote, Gaard is specifically addressing the parallel oppressions between women and nature. She reaffirms ecofeminist beliefs that the oppression of women and the oppression of nature are linked, but she rejects the essentialized part of this link, which claims: women and nature are jointly oppressed through the essentialized aspects that equate women with nature. While she rejects this essentialism, she does not reject any notion of commonality. Gaard argues for a coalition based on a common liberation rather than essentialized ties that allow for a common oppression, that is, coalitions that are chosen and not forced by essentialism.

In line with Gaard's coalition building, Haraway advocates for forming groups based on affinity: "related not by blood but by choice" (*Simians* 155). Relations "by blood" allude to essentialist notions of what it means to be the identity that is assigned, identities that are pre-determined. Instead, identity and the resulting grouping should be based on choice and affinity that allows individuals to identify themselves on their own terms and form coalitions based on a shared goal of liberation. A coalition for liberation considers all aspects of identities rather than pulling apart supposedly singular identities. For queer ecology, an anti-essentialist stance on identities and coalitions for liberation inform queer ecologists on how humans should relate to the environment and include the environment in political goals of liberation.

In “Val Plumwood and Ecofeminist Political Solidarity: Standing with the Natural Other,” Mallory provides the following quote from Val Plumwood: “[A]n appropriate

ethic of environmental activism is not that of identity or unity (or its reversal in difference) but that of *solidarity*- standing with the other in a supportive relationship in the political sense” (Mallory 3). The solidarity that Mallory uses to explain Plumwood stems from Scholz’s philosophy, in which standing in solidarity “entails a willingness and commitment to *act*” (10). Thus, to stand in solidarity is always a doing, just as queer is always a doing.

Mallory emphasizes a key component of solidarity theory, that the solidarity group is often not the same as the oppressed group and may even be or include part of the oppressor group (11). Mallory thus also articulates, like Haraway and Gaard, that an anti-essentialist stance with regards to identity does not entail eliminating difference. Remembering Haslanger's clothes piles, the differences between clothing items exist, and Haslanger and her daughter made distinctions and created separate piles based on what was important in that situation. Constructing social groups also maintains difference.

A coalition is an alliance. Alliances, of course, involve separate entities that come together. As I stated above, according to Gaard, since the many forms of oppression are linked, the varying oppressed groups must join together to form more “concrete” coalitions to fight all oppression (Gaard 132). That is, we must form intentional coalitions, coalitions that can support us in fighting oppression. This coalition, however, ought not to be limited to oppressed people, especially since, regarding queer ecology, the oppressed includes the nonhuman world. Plumwood and by extension Mallory ardently argue that humans can and should stand in solidarity with the nonhuman: She writes,

“We ‘stand with’ the natural other not paternalistically, or because we believe the natural other is incapable of political subjectivity, or because it is presumed to lack language, rationality, speech, or agency, or out of the egoistic and culturally-appropriative motivations that characterize some ecophilosophies that undergird environmental activism. Rather, we stand with the natural other because doing so recognizes that Earth others... are agential, purposeful subjects with ‘excellence of their own’” (Mallory 13).

Humans can form groups based on affinity as Haraway describes and stand in solidarity with the nonhuman world and with oppressed groups we are not a part of, while forming a coalition toward liberation.

### **From Human to Non-Human Liberation**

Political groupings invoked in queer ecological politics, that is, groups based on affinity, coalition building, and solidarity, are capable of liberating. However, we still need to clarify further who or what precisely liberates, and who or what is liberated. In a simplified case in which all of the actors in a political group are human and they are fighting for themselves, then the members of the political group are both the liberators and the liberated and act in self-liberation. For example, while men ultimately acceded to women’s demand for the vote, men did not liberate women: the suffragettes liberated women like themselves.

It gets more complicated when the liberated and the liberators are not the same people. Surely queer ecology ought to support a more queer composition of groups in which the boundaries between liberated and liberator is blurred. However, it may become problematic if a group of oppressors claim to liberate the oppressed, for

example, when white Americans claim to “liberate” sex workers in poorer countries. Liberation may provide more choices, yet when oppressors attempt to liberate the oppressed, they often take away choice and autonomy. To avoid these problems, we can make the claim that liberation done well is self-liberation. Promoting liberation through self-liberation still allows for queered boundaries between the liberated and the liberator through the concept of solidarity.

Queer ecological politics can work towards liberation through solidarity. A white person who stands in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement does not liberate black people but rather gives up their space so that black people can speak for themselves, and liberate themselves. Plumwood’s discussion of the master narrative explains how different systems of oppression work together. Later theorists have added to her narrative, to include issues of sexuality, gender identity, race, etc. more explicitly. Thus, in queer ecological politics, an individual person can fight for liberation on behalf of their own identity while simultaneously standing in solidarity with other people. In a sense, then, the categories of who is liberated, who liberates, and who stands in solidarity is also queered. Queer ecology provides the theory and framework for people to claim their own identity and group together based on affinity to liberate themselves, and stand in solidarity with other groups also liberating themselves.

However, so far this formulation of liberators and liberated assumes that all actors are human. Queer ecology blurs the boundaries of the human and the nonhuman and emphasizes how the oppression of nature/the nonhuman is intricately related to other systems of oppression. Can nonhumans even have choices to be provided or taken away with regards to Young's five faces of oppression? Can nonhumans fight for

liberation? Mallory argues that they can, but perhaps not in the ways we can with language. She writes, "human forest defenders, through their non-violent obstruction of logging practices, it could be said are standing in solidarity with the trees and inhabitants of the forest" (Mallory 14). That is, humans, the privileged group, utilize their privilege to create the space for the trees to be heard. Not in the sense that the trees speak for themselves, but in that the "political wants" of the trees cannot be ignored.

What are the political wants of trees, and can trees even have political wants? To adequately address how nonhumans can be liberated necessitates an understanding of how nonhumans are oppressed. Consider exploitation, another of the five faces: Young explains that exploitation "occurs through a steady process of the transfer of the results of the labor of one social group to benefit another" (49). This interpretation of exploitation stems from Marxist theories in which social groups are defined by economic class. Young shows how the groups oppressed by exploitation can extend beyond economic class distinctions to include women. However, feminist interpretations of exploitation queer traditional conceptions of labor and wages. I argue that we can understand exploitation of nonhumans in similar ways: Nonhumans, whether individual animals or the earth itself, provide labor that benefits humans. Moreover, this labor is often forced, unpaid in the sense that nonhumans do not receive benefits from laboring, and is specifically harmful to such nonhuman laborers. Thus, liberation of nonhumans might entail their enjoyment or benefit from laboring, to be able to exist without being exploited: something they would choose if the language of choice made sense when applied to them.

The anthropocentric language I used to describe standing in solidarity with the nonhuman world, and liberation of nonhumans, is problematic. How can trees be heard? Do trees have political wants? Can trees have wants or choices of any kind? These are questions for further investigation, surely, but for my purposes here I think it is possible to interpret the political wants of trees (and all other nonhuman beings) from their observed conditions of thriving and not thriving. When nonhumans are exploited, they do not thrive: they provide benefits to humans while simultaneously destroying nonhuman options to thrive.

While queer ecological politics are messy and rather queer, and leave us with difficult questions about agency, queer ecological politics put the theories advocated by queer ecology into practice. In doing so, what is liberatory about queer ecological theories can effectively translate into liberation. Queer ecology provides us with the theoretical framework to choose our own identities and to form coalitions based on affinity to liberate ourselves. Since oppressions intersect, by standing in solidarity with other groups, we support other advances in liberation, thus liberating all beings.

## Conclusion

Queer ecology is the application of queer theories, especially the tenet of anti-essentialism, to queer the environment and the dualisms involved in ecological thought. In this paper I developed an interpretation of queer ecology that queers our understanding of nature, sex, science, and technology that collapses the dualism of Nature and Culture and the subsequent dichotomies that stem from this overarching dualism. A queer interpretation of ecology blurs boundaries of identities and opens the possibility to theoretically reconstruct ourselves and the world around us. In this way, queer ecology is liberatory: it provides a theoretical framework in which we can reimagine a world with more choices concerning identities. While this theoretical framework itself cannot liberate, it provides the philosophical tools to construct our own identities, to form political groups based on solidarity and affinity rather than common essences, and to build coalitions to work towards common liberation. Although queer ecology uses anthropocentric terminology and attempts to apply distinctively human concepts and actions to nonhumans, it provides the framework to bring the nonhuman world into our sphere of concern. If we understand that the oppression of others, including nonhumans, is interrelated to the oppression of ourselves, it is clear that we must work together to overcome oppression. I say this not in a selfish sense, that we should only care about the plight of others because we have a personal stake in it, but rather that we can join together to fight all oppression out of care for each other. A queer ecological perspective focuses on alleviating oppression and thus offers a starting point for an environmental ethic that focuses on environmental justice.

## Issues for Further Investigation

In the chapter on liberation I briefly touched on the issue of nonhumans, political wants, and agency, but in no way could I adequately answer these questions. While standing in solidarity with the nonhuman as a way of doing political ecology sounds great, and as much as Mallory argues that we can stand in solidarity with nonhumans and that nonhumans have agency, I have not come anywhere close to proving that solidarity and anti-oppression theory can easily and swiftly be applied to nonhumans. I hastily adopted a metaphor assuming that nonhumans are agents with political "wants" of some sort, and this needs much more argumentation.

Furthermore, I have explored the ways in which queer ecology offers a liberatory philosophy, but I have not taken some of the ideas in queer ecology to their full extent. For example, I mentioned that one thing that queer ecology can queer is the environment itself. If queer ecology queers the environment, is such queering always liberatory? Is any queering of the environment liberating? If to queer is to ruin, surely it is not liberatory to ruin the environment. What are the effects of interpreting these foundational aspects of queer ecology literally?

Similarly, what happens when the culture/nature dualism is queered to its fullest extent, in which humans and nonhumans are all part nature and part culture? Is there then no distinction between the human driven climate change we are witnessing now and the previous changes the earth has endured over billions of years? Moreover, if there is in fact no difference, then should we do anything about climate change? The same goes for the sixth mass extinction and all of the other ways in which humans degrade nature. My view is that queer ecology is liberatory, and the field of queer

ecology is born out of environmental concern, but if an interpretation of queer ecology can be used to justify inaction on environmental issues or even environmental destruction, something has gone very wrong in queer ecological theories.

Further philosophical work is necessary to ground these ideas in a strong argument. Despite these gaps and possible problematic consequences, I think that a queer ecological framework provides an important new framework for discussing and addressing environmental issues. Environmentalism's history with social justice and anti-oppression has not always been built on understanding and compassion. Further investigation into how queer ecology may help mend environmentalism's relationship with environmental and social justice can strengthen philosophical arguments for a liberation approach to environmental work.

## Works Cited

- Bagemihl, Bruce. *Biological Exuberance: Animal Homosexuality and Natural Diversity*. New York: St. Martin's P, 1999. Print.
- Bell, David. "Queernaturecultures." *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire*. Ed. Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson. Bloomington: Indiana U, 2010. 134-45. Print.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble*. New York: Routledge, 1999. Print.
- Frye, Marilyn. "Oppression." *Feminist Theory: A Philosophical Anthology*. Ed. Ann E. Cudd and Robin O. Andreasen. Malden, MA: Blackwell Philosophy Anthologies, 2005. 84-90. Print.
- Gaard, Greta. "Toward a Queer Ecofeminism." *Hypatia* 12.1: 114-37. Digital file.
- Hacking, Ian. *The Social Construction of What?* Cambridge: Harvard University, 1999. Print.
- Hall, Donald E. *Queer Theories*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003. Print.
- Haraway, Donna. *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness*. Chicago: Prickly Paradigm, 2003. Digital file.
- . *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*. New York: Routledge, 1991. Print.
- Haslanger, Sally. *Resisting Reality*. Oxford: Oxford U, 2012. Print.
- Hooks, Bell. *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. Cambridge: South End P, 2000. Print.
- Latour, Bruno. *Politics of Nature*. Cambridge: Harvard U, 2004. Print.
- . *Reassembling the Social*. New York: Oxford University, 2005. Print.

"liberation, n." *OED Online*. Oxford U P, Web. 28 Apr. 2016.

<<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/107877?redirectedFrom=liberation#eid>>.

Mallory, Chaone. "Val Plumwood and Ecofeminist Political Solidarity." *Ethics & the Environment* 2.14 (2009): 3-21. Digital file.

Marcus, Sharon. "Queer Theory for Everyone: A Review Essay." *Signs* 31.1 (2005): 191-218. *JSTOR*. Web.

Merchant, Carolyn. *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution*. New York: Harper, 1989. Print.

Mortimer-Sandilands, Catriona, and Bruce Erickson. "Introduction: A Genealogy of Queer Ecologies." *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire*. Ed. Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson. Bloomington: Indiana U, 2010. 1-47. Print.

Plumwood, Val. *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*. London: Routledge, 1993. pdf file.

"queer, v." *Oxford Dictionaries*. Web. 28 Apr. 2016.

<[http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american\\_english/queer](http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/queer)>.

Robertson, Teresa, and Philip Atkins. "Essential vs. Accidental Properties." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2016 Edition). Ed. Edward N. Zalta. Web. 14 May 2016. Forthcoming URL =

<<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2016/entries/essential-accidental/>>.

Rodriguez-Pereyra, Gonzalo. "Nominalism in Metaphysics." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Ed. Edward N. Zalta. Web. 28 Apr. 2016.

<<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/nominalism-metaphysics/>>.

Roughgarden, Joan. *Evolution's Rainbow*. Berkeley: U of California P, 2004. Print.

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Epistemology of the Closet*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1990.

Print.

Warren, Karen. "Introduction: Ecofeminism." 1991. *Environmental Philosophy: From Animal Rights to Radical Ecology*. Ed. Michael E. Zimmerman. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1993. 253-267. Print.

Young, Iris Marion. *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. Princeton: Princeton U P, 1990.

Print.