

AN EROTIC RE-IMAGINATION OF HUMAN/NATURE RELATIONSHIP:
ECOSEXUALITY AND THE LEGACIES OF COLONIALITY IN LOVE AND SEX

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An Erotic Re-Imagination of Human/Nature Relationality: Ecosexuality and the Legacies of Coloniality in Love and Sex

Abstract

In this paper, I set out to uncover the legacies of coloniality in our understandings of love and sex by looking at ecosexuality as a conceptual framework. I argue that sex and love as defined and categorized by the logic of Western modernity stand in the way of imagining a manner of otherwise relating to others (both humans and non-human beings or matter). To imagine love and sex differently and to uncover their intertwined complexity within the pervasive discourses of coloniality, I base my approach on trans-corporeality, which problematizes 'relation' as understood in terms of subject/object binary. In the first part of this paper, I give an overview of how ecosexuality is defined and how it proposes a change in the way we see the earth — from 'as mother' to 'as lover.' After reflecting on the logic of modernity and Western coloniality to criticize the category of the human in opposition to nature, I think with Stacy Alaimo's work on queer animals. Attempting to expose the anthropocentrism in our understanding of sex acts, I engage with the implication of 'likeness' to dissect the ecosexual idea of 'having sex with nature.' Finally, in a discussion of the entanglement of sex and love and their rootedness in modernity, I bring forth both the pitfalls and the potentialities of ecosexuality for a re-imagining of love and relationality.

1 Introduction

How much are our practices of love and sex shaped by the logic of coloniality? Why should we ask this question in an attempt to re-imagine human/non-human relations? These rather large questions constitute the main concern of this paper. In what follows, I try to dissect and 'trouble' our ideas of love and sex by looking at ecosexuality as a conceptual tool in order to challenge the colonial binary (and hierarchical) logic of nature/culture, human/non-human. I believe sex and love as defined and categorized by the logic of Western modernity, which I understand as unavoidably connected to coloniality, obstruct imagining a way of otherwise relating to others (both humans and non-human beings or matter). In order to imagine love and sex differently, through the lens of ecosexuality, I first demonstrate the pervasive discourses of coloniality in our (Western) understanding of the 'human' and 'nature.' Second, I introduce trans-corporeality as a way of helping us to think in other ways about relationality with nature. Next, I discuss further the understanding of 'nature as lover' and 'sex with nature,' highlighting the problematic assumption of 'likeness.' Finally, my discussion moves toward the entanglement of love with sex, focusing on the importance of looking deeper into our understandings of love, which I argue are fused with the logic of coloniality.

In this section, I build on the work of Rebecca R. Scott, who critiques the links between love, modernity, and ecology in order to bring love into a conversation about the categories of ‘human’ and ‘nature’ in coloniality. My aim is not to discuss the viability of ecosexuality as a political movement, but to think about the ways it can help challenge the modes of relationality that define the current systems of anthropocentric exploitation and ideas of love and sex that are shaped by coloniality. As such, challenging legacies of modernity, the broader aim of the study is to think through love and sex to imagine new ways of relating. In this endeavor, I aim for a dialogue with the pressing debates on environmental ethics, critical love studies, and posthumanist feminisms.

2_Ecosexuality

A contemporary environmentalist movement popularized by the performance artists and activists Annie Sprinkle and Elizabeth Stephens, ecosexuality proposes a shift in humans’ relation to the planet. Inviting people to treat the earth ‘as a lover,’ ecosexuals aim to stand against the exploitation and abuse of lands, and to “save the mountains, waters, and skies by any means necessary, especially through love, joy and our powers of seduction.”¹ Ecosexuals highlight pleasure, eroticism, and love in their way of *being with* the world. Proposing a change in the way humans see the earth — from ‘as mother’ to ‘as lover’ — the founders of this movement utilize art, and especially performance art, for protesting, raising awareness and care towards the earth. In their “25 Ways to Make Love to the Earth,” Sprinkle and Stephens instruct those who want to be or define themselves as ecosexual via decrees which range from “kiss and lick her” to “work for peace. Bombs hurt.”² This activist movement that draws much of its force from performative acts (from marriage ceremonies between people and mountains to erotic explorations of the human body in relation to nature on-stage) has its roots in queer theory, environmental studies, and ecofeminism.³ Enforced by sex positivity and environmental activism, the ecosexual movement of Sprinkle and Stephens, despite its perceived ‘radicality’ (that resulted in a rather reactionary response), can be said to have built upon the legacies of feminist ecocritical thought.⁴

Certain critiques on ecosexuality remind us of the obstinacy of anthropocentrism when it comes to imagining new, different relationalities towards the earth and non-human life, a point that is important to acknowledge in an endeavor to think with eco-

sexuality as a conceptual framework. Inge Konik and Adrian Konik for example problematize the taxonomic classifications of ecosexuals (e.g. aquaphiles, aerophiles) as well the “tactical anthropomorphizing” used by Sprinkle and Stephens in their calling the earth a lover.⁵ They argue that this taxonomy reproduces the categoric knowledges of modernity. However, their argument that ecosexuals anthropomorphize the earth by calling it a lover leaves the way love is understood unquestioned. I argue that ecosexuality can offer a space to think of different ways to relate to nature and undo or redo the idea of the human as nature’s superior (without dismissing the question of human responsibility in the face of the environmental crisis). However, in order to enable that space, it is necessary to discuss what we understand of love, and whether love in relation to nature is anthropocentrizing/anthropomorphizing or not. While certainly ecosexuality as a movement or the way that it is practiced, can be critiqued and deconstructed from many angles, the focus of this paper is on the potential that ecosexuality has as a theoretical tool or a conceptual framework that can help us engage with material-discursive practices of love and sex, paying specific attention to their roots in coloniality/modernity. In ecosexuals’ understanding, erotic and sexual relation⁶ with the world as a source of pleasure and joy they want to highlight in environmental activism is part of loving the world. “We just want people to love the Earth more,” says Sprinkle.⁷ Looking at their performative and activist practices, one sees then that erotics is part of this love as much as care, compassion, and dedication. In their “25 Ways to Make Love to the Earth,” Sprinkle and Stephens write: “Ask her what she likes, wants and needs — then try to give it to her” and “If you see her being abused, raped, exploited, protect her as best you can.”⁸ As we see here, as much as sex is at the center of ecosexuality it is also defined by loving and caring characteristics. In this sense ecosexuality as a conceptual framework can reveal a different type of entanglement of love and sex: one in which sexuality is not understood as heteronormative and reproductive; where erotics does not serve this specific kind of sex; and where love is not thought of in relation to possession and appropriation, nor in a mononormative relationality. While this way of relating could hold the potential to challenge the nature/culture binary, it is first important to disentangle sex and love from the colonial logic of Western modernity.

3_Logics of Modernity and Coloniality

In order to unearth some of the complexities found in modern understandings of love and sex, I will first flesh out what I refer to as coloniality and modernity. Acknowledging the historical depth and complexity of these terms and without tracing their entire historical and theoretical legacies, I hope to demonstrate their role in the conceptualization of love and sex within the context of ecosexuality. More specifically, I argue that what counts as human as well as how the human/non-human divide is connoted must be questioned through the lens of their entanglement with modernity/coloniality if one is to do justice to a critical reconceptualization of love/sex through ecosexuality. Different from colonialism (as a historically and politically situated phenomenon), I focus on the notion of coloniality as conceptualized by Nelson Maldonado-Torres, in that it

refers to long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labor, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations. Thus, coloniality survives colonialism. It is maintained alive in books, in the criteria for academic performance, in cultural patterns, in common sense, in the self-image of peoples, in aspirations of self, and so many other aspects of our modern experience. In a way, as modern subjects we breath [sic] coloniality all the time and everyday.⁹

It is this reality of coloniality as that which has ‘survived colonialism,’ that lies underneath and keeps shaping the understanding of both love and sex and of the hierarchical divide between humans and nature. These legacies of coloniality that are alive in intersubjective relations and epistemological practices are central to this paper as well as the relevance of coloniality as an ever-present paradigm when thinking about ‘the human’ in opposition to nature. What I refer to as coloniality or logic of coloniality is closely interlinked with Western modernity, as the epistemologies of modernity shape and are shaped by social, economic, and political mechanisms of coloniality. As Rolando Vázquez writes:

From a decolonial perspective modernity cannot be thought without its underside coloniality. [...] [M]odernity designates the affirmation of ‘the real,’ ranging from the material to the symbolic, whereas coloniality designates the denial and disavowal of all that belongs to the outside of that ‘reality.’¹⁰

The complexity of the entangled mechanisms of coloniality and modernity are beyond the scope of this paper. However, I invite the reader to remember that every time I speak of modernity, I imply its complicity with coloniality and vice versa.

This ‘real’ that is affirmed by modernity is also the realm where the ‘universal’ human is constructed from the experiences and economic, cultural, social, and political practices of the colonizer. This means that the Western man (the colonizer in the frame of colonialism) comes to signify the universal category of ‘Man.’ This ‘Man,’ theorized in depth by Sylvia Wynter, designates the genre of the human who is — at least symbolically — cis male, heterosexual, white, and Western. What Wynter has done by theorizing “genres of the human,” not one version of which can represent the multiplicity that humans form, helps us to see that “[i]n the context of the secular human, black subjects, along with indigenous populations, the colonized, the insane, the poor, the disabled, and so on serve as limit cases by which Man can demarcate himself as the universal human.”¹¹ In the context of ecosexuality, this universal human — who is in fact ‘Man’ if we follow Wynter — can offer another layer of criticality in the endeavor to look at the relationalities of love and sex. As Wynter herself also writes:

all our present struggles with respect to race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, struggles over the environment, global warming, severe climate change, the sharply unequal distribution of the earth resources . . . – these are all differing facets of the central ethnoclass Man vs. Human struggle.¹²

Building on Wynter as well as Mignolo and Fanon, Madina Tlostanova problematizes the distinction between ‘anthropos’ and ‘humanitas,’ the former being object to the latter’s knowledge production. Similar to the binary of human and the animal, anthropos signifies the “biological being or human in the guise of animals presumably untouched by culture,” while humanitas occupies the realm of civilization, culture, sophisticated emotion, and thought.¹³ This binary that formed the dominant ontology when it comes to science, philosophy, etc., is a product of Western epistemologies, i.e. certain ways of producing knowledge about the world and people from a certain space and time. Tlostanova writes:

The classification of human beings, on which modernity/coloniality has always depended, needs a system of knowledge in which they would be sustained and justified, because this classification of human beings as not quite rational, mature or developed, not sufficiently masculine, not quite sexually normal, not quite sane or healthy, stemmed not from the object, not from these othered selves as such, but from the knowing subject and the system of knowledge in which this subject operates.¹⁴

In defining the ‘other’ for the purposes of maintaining the subject position, the logic of coloniality sets the rigid norms against which ‘anthropos’ is valued and produced al-

ways in hierarchical opposition to the ‘humanitas.’ This binary logic not only constitutes and co-exists with the dominance — epistemic as well as economic, political, and cultural — of the Man (Western, white, heterosexual, able-bodied) over those ‘othered selves’ who could be or ‘had to’ be, colonized; it also frames how ‘human’ has been positioned in relation to nature and the non-human world. The project of colonialism depended on the notion of human as superior to nature and to everything that can be ‘reduced’ to the status of nature. As Tlostanova discusses, this opposition of human (culture) and nature, which is both a product of and an impetus behind “global coloniality,” has also manifested itself in “the common idea that modernity switched exploitation from human beings to nature.”¹⁵ As the exploitation of humans is certainly intact, although in different forms and localities, the logic of modernity still manifests itself with regards to nature as the other of the human or a background for its superiority and excellence. Building on how the human/non-human binary is enmeshed within the paradigm of coloniality, I now turn to a reconceptualization of nature in order to move beyond these constraints of coloniality in thinking about love and sex relationalities.

4_Looking for Other Ways to Relate to Nature

To re-think nature is key to how ecosexuality can offer itself as a critical conceptual tool that can help re-imagine love and relationality in responsible, non-appropriative, and non-hierarchical ways. In order to do so, I introduce the theoretical concept of trans-corporeality. As previously mentioned, it is important to acknowledge the discourses that long dominated how nature is seen and treated along with colonized and subjugated people that were put in the realm of ‘less than human,’ i.e. nature. As Alaimo writes of “the contradictory, ubiquitous, and historically varied meanings of ‘nature’”:

Nature, as a philosophical concept, a potent ideological node, and a cultural repository of norms and moralism, has long been waged against women, people of color, indigenous peoples, queers, and the lower classes. Paradoxically, women, the working class, tribal peoples, and people of color have been denigrated because of their supposed “proximity” to nature, even as queers have been castigated for being “unnatural.”¹⁶

Even when contradictory, discourses around nature have been used for dominance and abuse while the binary of nature/culture has served a certain epistemology that fueled the colonial projects of the West.

In my critique of the entangled imaginaries of love and sex within the logics of coloniality which are still at work in our understanding of the human as species — as well as human as idea — and the environment, Stacy Alaimo’s trans-corporeality constitutes the basis for thinking about relationality at work in this entanglement. Trans-corporeality allows for a different imagining of the human-nature relationship that shines a light on the inseparability of the two. This is not to simply say humans are part of nature, but to pay attention to the complexities that arise from such connection that troubles notions of agency, responsibility, and various ways of relating (dominance, care, appropriation, capture, love, and so on). In “Trans-corporeal Feminisms and the Ethical Space of Nature,” Stacy Alaimo argues for the inseparability of human materiality and ‘nature.’ She proposes trans-corporeality as

the time-space where human corporeality, in all its material fleshiness, is inseparable from “nature” or “environment.” Trans-corporeality, as a theoretical site, is a place where corporeal theories and environmental theories meet and mingle in productive ways. Furthermore, the movement across human corporeality and non-human nature necessitates rich, complex modes of analysis that travel through the entangled territories of material and discursive, natural and cultural, biological and textual.¹⁷

Alaimo’s new materialist approach stresses the necessity to trouble the binaries of coloniality. As she theorizes, to resist the “rigid distinctions between ‘mind’ and ‘matter,’” trans-corporeality offers the ground to imagine a different relationality than hierarchical human/non-human opposition.¹⁸ It also provides the space to look carefully at the intersections of discourses about nature and colonial practices of meaning making when it comes to relationality and in this case sexual/erotic relationality. The need to imagine a different relationality, a different ‘worlding’ has become an urgent quest in academic knowledge practices in the last decades (see Thiele, 2014 for a discussion of worlding in a post-humanist framework¹⁹). The emergence of works that engage with indigenous knowledges, new materialisms, posthumanist ethics, and decolonial and postcolonial theory in challenging the systemic injustices and violence of structures such as coloniality, capitalism, patriarchy, sexism, and racism is worth noting. As Tallbear and Willey put it in their “Critical Relationality: Queer, Indigenous, and Multispecies Belonging Beyond Settler Sex & Nature”: “Our ability to imagine nature and relationality differently are deeply enmeshed, and this imaginative work is vital to the re-worlding before us.”²⁰ In the same text, we see that Tallbear and Willey recognize the potentiality of ecosexuality as it “prompts us to deconstruct the concept of ‘sexuality.’”²¹ They also

show us that it is important to acknowledge the knowledge of indigenous cultures and people when it comes to relating to nature differently than in our current mode of modernity:

Ecosexuality is theoretically generative for an Indigenous Studies analysis of sex and relations, precisely because it is not necessary for Indigenous people who have much longer-standing intimate relational frameworks to guide relations with lands and waters.²²

While this paper does not attempt an engagement with indigenous knowledges on human-nature relationality, it is important to remember that ecosexuality is not the only framework that engages differently with human-nature relationality. In my reading, ecosexuality does however urge us think more seriously about sexuality, love, and their place in our broader relationality to the earth and to more-than-human life.

5_Sex with Nature and Queer Animals

One of the theoretically compelling aspects of ecosexuality is the fact that it speaks explicitly of ‘having sex with nature.’ From a material-discursive perspective, looking at ecosexuality can help question what we understand of sex acts and how it is linked to our ideas of loving, which I suggest cannot be thought about separately from the logics of coloniality and Western modernity. In order to discuss what ecosexuality reveals about our ideas on sex, the nature/human binary, and love relationalities, it is useful to clarify ‘sex’ in the frame of this discussion. In her now seminal work where she develops the notion of “fingeryeyes,” Eva Hayward thinks with Monique Wittig with regard to her critical position vis-à-vis heterosexuality becoming heteronormativity:

“Sex,” as Monique Wittig has argued, refers to both bodily activity and identity, but under the sign of heteronormativity, has been conflated with reproductive activity, which has in turn led to the hypostatization of “sexes,” identities defined by their relation to this activity. Wittig points out that this metonymic making of sex — which takes parts for wholes — naturalizes sexual difference and normalizes heterosexuality.²³

In this brief analysis, Wittig and Hayward show that how sex as an act is understood has shaped how humans as well as non-human animals are positioned in the system of heteronormativity. Therefore, a critical thinking of sex (as an activity) in relation to love, nature, the human, modernity, and so on cannot ignore the heavy presence of heteronormativity in the understanding of these terms and their complex relations with each other. Part of the ‘human’ (‘Man’ as I previously argued) then, is defined as he-

terosexual; and this human's sexual activity is closely connected to how it is defined as the modern subject.

Keeping this critical definition of sex in mind, we can look at how sex and eroticism are understood and presented by ecosexuals themselves. Under the title "We Make Love with the Earth" of the *Ecosex Manifesto*, Sprinkle and Stephens write about how they engage lovingly and erotically with the earth:

We shamelessly hug trees, massage the earth with our feet, and talk erotically to plants. We are skinny dippers, sun worshippers, and stargazers. We caress rocks, are pleased by waterfalls, and admire the Earth's curves often. We make love with the earth through our senses.²⁴

As Sprinkle's and Stephens' performances would also show the same understanding of sexual/erotic relationships with the earth as does this short description, ecosexuals do not posit sex and pleasure in engaging with the earth through a metaphoric relationship. There is a literalness to their eroticism, which is demonstrated through the underlining of senses and bodily acts when relating to the earth.

Coloniality and modernity hierarchically position the human not only as the master of nature, but also as the epistemological center of how to make sense of the planet and other animals. In my attempt to re-think sex and love with the aim of challenging this logic of anthropocentrism and colonialism — the hierarchical binary of *humanitas/anthropos*, among others — by looking at ecosexuality as a conceptual tool, I work with the notion of 'likeness.' In the wording of ecosexuals who refer to the earth 'as lover,' I find the use of the preposition 'as' to be crucial. Inspired by feminist theorists like Sara Ahmed²⁵ and Eva Hayward,²⁶ among others, who engage closely with language (and specifically with likeness, metaphor, and metonymy) and the ways in which it shapes our thinking practices, I see 'likeness' as a critical entry point to disentangling the human/nature relationality within the frame of ecosexuality and its 'earth as lover' approach. With the purpose of seeing the entangled rootedness of love and sex in the binary and human-centric legacies of coloniality, I work to uncover an implicit 'likeness' in the ways in which 'having sex with nature' is commonly understood. In other words, 'earth as lover' can come to signify this 'lover' to be 'like a *human* lover,' underlining an inability to imagine love outside of the anthropocentric imaginary. I critique this interpretation of 'as' in terms of likeness, which would make it behave similarly to a metaphor where "a word or phrase is applied to an object or action to which

it is not literally applicable.”²⁷ I argue that in ecosexuality loving and sexual relation is literal, not me-taphorical, nor defined by ‘likeness.’

The complexities of ‘likeness’ in the framework of ecosexuality is inspired by a discussion in a university classroom of a Gender Studies program in which I took part. Not unlike the common public reaction towards ecosexuality, something which as a brief survey over the internet would show is usually seen as a sort of perversity or a ‘quirky’ new identity, the other participants in the classroom tended to show a mixture of shock, disgust and criticism (along with occasional giggles) upon the encounter with ecosexuality of Sprinkle and Stephens. After a screening of a short video clip where Sprinkle and Stephens introduce their ecosexual documentary, I observed the classroom’s reaction to some ecosexual acts (such as playing with dirt while naked, kissing rocks or caressing trees). Hearing questions about agency,²⁸ consent, ownership, control, and violence (especially in the sense of penetration) prompted me to wonder whether these concerns over ecosexuality were linked to an anthropocentric (which is also heterosexist as previously discussed with Wittig and Hayward) understanding of sex. What seemed to be taken for granted in these comments was an assumption of ‘likeness’ in the erotic relationality of ecosexuals; for example, rocks and trees were observed from within an anthropocentric framework of love and sex.

The discomfort that emerged in confronting sex and erotic acts in a certain way made it necessary to question how much the intellectual as well as affective legacies from coloniality have shaped our understandings of erotic and sexual relationships, which appeared with more urgency upon an encounter with a human/nature relationship otherwise. Could my peers be asking questions about agency of the trees, violence of penetration, or consent in ecosexual acts because of seeing ‘sex with nature’ to be *like* human sex? And could this move which assumes ‘likeness’ suggest that erotic sexual activity was implicitly reserved for the human realm — the same human that is superior to the categories of nature, animal, and all that is not ‘Man’? Of course, I do not suggest that this classroom represented the totality of reactions towards a phenomenon such as ecosexuality. However, it does make it visible that in the point of encounter with transgressive sexual acts and claims to love, even in an environment sensitive and critical to human domination and exploitation, many still struggle with making sense of the ‘human’ in relation to ‘nature’ *especially* within the frames of complex phenomena such as sex and love. This assumption of ‘likeness’ is one of the possible reasons behind the

ambiguous discomfort ecosexual acts produce; since applying anthropocentric understandings of sexuality as well transgression *on* nature portrays a sensual human-nature relationality ‘like’ human sex. This is why I propose an understanding of ecosexuality as a conceptual tool that operates not through ‘likeness,’ but rather as a framework that can make us question altogether what counts as sexual encounter and how to think of relations outside the paradigm of subject and object, active and passive. Only when imagined outside of ‘likeness’ (as they advocate for treating the earth ‘as your lover’ and not ‘as if’ your lover), ecosexuality can challenge attributing sex acts to the realm of the human, ossifying the “proper object choice” in sex acts.²⁹ I argue that this ambiguity/uncertainty upon facing the ‘sex acts’ of ecosexuals stems from the ways in which sex as an act is discursively and scientifically constructed.

In order to maintain the figure of the ‘humanitas’ in opposition to the ‘anthropos,’ the human in opposition to the animal, sex acts in non-human nature are classified as mechanical and solely procreational (even when they are not³⁰), while human (meaning heterosexual, white male) remains not only the keeper of pleasures and deeper sensualities, but also — contradictorily — becomes the site of ‘perversions’ against which normalization (of the human/humanitas) is re-made over and over again in complex but rigid ways. An example for these contradictory conceptualizations about man/animal sexualities can be the following: While sometimes man (human) is discursively produced as instinctual and ‘animal’ at its core when it comes to sex, other times he (*sic*) appears as having a more sophisticated — thus higher — sense of sexuality and feeling. The figure of the animal is in fact quite crucial in any attempt at disentangling discourses around sexuality. Here Eva Hayward’s work that looks critically at the intricate relations between figures of the human and the animal in relation to sexuality studies proves highly useful.

The relay of meaning between human-animal sexuality, particularly with regard to nonheteronormative modes — I think here of Elizabeth Wilson (2002) and Myra Hird’s (2004) scholarship — should not be an essentializing move, as in “animals are queer so then queerness is natural,” but an opportunity to see the ways “natural perversity reorganize[s] our culture-centric theories of difference, embodiment and identity.”³¹

This critical approach to “culture-centric theories of difference” is linked to the ‘Man’ of modernity. In that the binary of human/animal, which also echoes the binary of superior/inferior in the colonial logic or logic of modernity, is not only what maintains

“Man” as universal human, but also what categorizes and manages sexuality in terms of sex acts, eroticism, and pleasure. Hayward’s upcoming work in this area will offer invaluable analyses and discussions on this relationship between ‘the animal’ and sexuality. She argues that the category of the animal helps humans to administrate fears and anxieties about sexuality.³² Putting the self in crisis, in Hayward’s approach sexuality constantly tries to manage this crisis of the self; and the animal as empirical category makes the category of the human, becoming a ground for the violence of ontology that the colonizer inflicts upon the colonized — be it land, human, or non-human animals. While its theoretical scope might be too large to fully engage with in this paper, Hayward’s work provides precious critical tools in thinking about sex and human/non-human binary, especially in relation to understanding the legacies of modernity in our current imaginaries of sex.

Looking at Alaimo’s recent posthumanist work on environmentalism and pleasure, it becomes possible to problematize not only the ‘human way’ in sex, but also how the nature/human divide fails to maintain itself as a logic. In *Exposed: Environmental Politics and Pleasures in Posthuman Times*, Alaimo dedicates a chapter to “queer animals,” in which she brings together a significant amount of research and evidence about sexualities and sex acts within the non-human animal world that trouble not only heterosexuality but also larger hierarchical systems of categorization by Western thought such as human/animal and culture/nature. Animals that have same-sex sex, masturbate or engage in sex acts outside the purpose of procreating, as Alaimo proves, have been cast aside in scientific research³³ or narrativized in ways that enhanced the discourse of ‘natural’ heterosexuality,³⁴ or have otherwise ossified the dichotomy of nature/culture.³⁵ She writes:

When nature and culture are segregated within different disciplinary universes, animal sex is reduced to a mechanistic and reproductive function and human sexuality — in its opulent range of manifestations — becomes, implicitly at least, another achievement that elevates humans above the brute mating behaviors of nonhuman creatures. Rather than closeting queer animals and their cultures within “nature,” we can recognize that sex for most species is a *mélange* of the material and the social, and that queer desire of all sorts is part of an emergent universe of a multitude of naturecultures.³⁶

Alaimo’s “queer animals” offer a space to uncover the hierarchical and rigid ways humans make sense of and produce knowledge about sexuality and sex acts. In turn, this can help us see how both the scientific and the socio-cultural discourses around human

sexuality, as positioned within the dichotomy of nature versus culture, perpetuate the logic of Western modernity, which as I have argued is never separate from anthropocentrism.

6_The Material-Discursive Entanglement of Love and Sex in Modernity

When it comes to the legacy of modernity and the logics of coloniality it is not only sex and biological classification that carry along the binary and anthropocentric discourse. The notion of love has also been part of the same epistemology. I argue that in the encounter with ecosexuality these two concepts – love and sex – get entangled in such a way that it urges a redefining or reimagining of love, in this case clearly thought together with passion, pleasure, and sensuality — some key elements that make up ‘sex’ in the ecosexual understanding. As ecosexuals define their loving as both caring for the earth and ‘having sex’ with it, love and sex acts are thought as mutually constitutive. As Rebecca R. Scott argues: “Ecosexuality queers the distinction between love and sex in a way that opens both categories to intersubjective complexity.”³⁷ This co-existence brings forth the necessity to re-think love alongside sex, which means to investigate the colonial logic within practices and descriptions of love in the framework of modernity. This is the same logic that underlies the heteronormative understanding of sexual relation that builds itself upon the human/animal binary, as I have demonstrated in the earlier sections here. In the rest of this paper, I argue that if we understand love as desire towards ownership, love as capture of the beloved (both in the sense of knowing the beloved and having the beloved as a love object), and if we understand sex as heterosexual sex — i.e. mostly penetrative and reproductive — we inevitably reiterate an understanding of both that is rooted in the logic of coloniality/modernity.

While I will not be discussing in depth what I mean by love, it is still useful to sketch how this love in ecosexuality is imagined as well as how the binary and oppositional thinking of modernity has affected imaginaries and practices of loving. Within the limited scope of this paper, I understand love — a phenomenon that is personal, political,³⁸ and cultural³⁹ — as “the active concern for the life and growth of that which we love.”⁴⁰ Moving away from love as something that one falls into or something that happens to a person, I argue that ecosexuality also suggests a form of love that brings forth elements like commitment (thinking, for example, of the performative marriage ceremonies of Sprinkle and Stephens, despite their being problematic in other ways), care,

compassion, and affection, as well as eroticism. By specifically highlighting love in their practice and conceptualization of ecosexuality as an identity/mode of activism/conceptual tool that builds upon a celebration of sexuality and eroticism, ecosexuals offer a love that is erotic, and an erotic that is not easily defined by the subject/object divide of the economy of desire. Basing their sexual/erotic practices on an understanding of love (similar to the ‘active concern for the life and growth’ of the beloved), ecosexuality seems to purposefully entangle love and sex in an attempt to reconfigure both.

The necessity to perform this reconfiguration, or to at least look at this reconfiguration through a critical lens, comes from the fact that love, as much as it can be romanticized, is also a manifestation of feelings, cultural symbols, histories, and economic and geopolitical systems that shape discourses of relationality. Love, as much as it is felt and as much as it *moves* one (towards action or inaction), also interweaves “stories, images, metaphors, material goods, and folk theories [...] people make sense of their romantic experiences by drawing on collective symbols and meanings.”⁴¹ These collective symbols, as I understand them, are not disconnected from the epistemologies of modernity, which underlie the often violent or appropriative logics of coloniality. Therefore, as Scott also demonstrates through a reading of love, nature, modernity, coloniality, and Western humanism, it becomes crucial to acknowledge that love can become a tool for violence “in the colonization of Indigenous people, when ‘the absolute psychical distinction between man and beast’ becomes the foundation for reifying settler hegemony.”⁴² In Puig de la Bellacasa’s reading of Donna Haraway, we can also trace the place of ‘love’ in relation to categories of science and colonial projects of knowledge. In her *Primate Visions*, Puig de la Bellacasa reminds us that Haraway carefully observed “humans’ devouring love for nonhuman others, including the ravages of epistemic love in colonial enterprises set out to research, and hunt, exotic non-human and human preys.”⁴³ Following these scholars’ criticism of ‘loving’ practices when it comes to coloniality, I argue that love as we understand and practice it today — in its political, cultural, (inter)personal, and affective complexity — is fused with colonial legacies of the human, i.e. ‘Man.’ The knowledge practices of the colonizer along with notions such as curiosity and civilization have been interlinked with this idea of love for the exotic, different; love for the other. And while it would be wrong to categorize every knowledge practice (from past or present) under the frame of colonizing love, which becomes a claim at ownership and capture, we must acknowledge

that the connections between these knowledge practices, explorations, and science are intimately interlinked with what we now think of as love.

The violence of the colonial discourse of love is linked to sex as this discourse affects our experiences of heteronormativity and patriarchy, which in turn seep into our imaginaries of what it means to ‘have sex’, something I tried to problematize earlier with my discussion of ‘likeness.’ Critiquing love and romance as they are configured in heteronormative and patriarchal systems, Scott argues:

Heteronormativity depends on hyperseparation, on the assumption of radical disconnection that adds a spark to the romance. The phrase “to make love” shines a rosy light but some of us are subjects of this making while others are objects. At its extreme, the patriarchal heteronormative model of “lovemaking” is a form of masturbation. “The lover is a narcissist with an object.” Loving seems hopelessly determined by patriarchy. Centuries of dependence, discipline, and intimacy have infused hierarchy with wide-ranging affective intensities.⁴⁴

Addressing the subject/object divide which is oriented towards capture and possession in the imaginary of love under patriarchy and heteronormativity, Scott also gives an account of the nature lovers and some of their ways in which the human/nature hierarchy is maintained. She recognizes the difficulty in disentangling love from the grip of colonial logic:

The reductive commodification of the biophysical, be that sex or other natural resources and processes, is so engrained in modern thinking that it is difficult to imagine nonobjectifying ways to love. To love without ownership, to inhabit without mastery, to have sex without obligation, these ideas are hard to get one’s head around.⁴⁵

The difficulty in imagining a different way of loving does not equal the impossibility of an otherwise, however. To pay attention to our loving practices and to engage critically with the ways we understand sex is necessary for us to imagine a form of relationality different from the binary of subject/object that is the legacy of colonial thought.

7_Concluding Remarks: A New Way of Loving?

The aim of this paper has been to explore the potential ways in which ecosexuality as a theoretical framework can trouble the modern understandings of love and sex, and can elicit an erotic re-imagination of human-nature relationality. In order to think with ecosexuality in this manner, I have unpacked how the logics of modernity and coloniality are deeply entangled with each other and how they inform dominant/western un-

derstandings of who counts as human and what counts as nature, and of the epistemological and ontological positioning of the human in relation to nature. Additionally, working with ecosexuality prompted me to delve further into the categories of animals/nature in order to question what counts as sex. I have shown how heteronormativity, patriarchy, and modernity connote a love that is shaped by the same anthropocentric assumptions that categorize human and animal sex in specific ways. In my thinking with ecosexuality as a conceptual framework, I do not suggest that it offers an unproblematic relationality, nor do I believe that embracing it fully would solve the problems the earth faces at the moment. One of the pitfalls of ecosexuality, for example, is its rhetoric of caring for the earth for the coming generations of humans. Without constantly working to destabilize this anthropocentrism and prioritizing dialogues with indigenous cosmologies,⁴⁶ it is not realistic to work towards another relationality of human/non-human. As Scott demonstrates in her chapter, “loving” nature can easily be understood as admiring the beauties of the earth; whereas humans’ new ways of relating to nature should also reflect on loving “the damaged places, the scarred, the mutated, the unloveable.”⁴⁷ Another problematic aspect of ecosexuality can be that it is presented as an identity category (for example “coming out as ecosexual” plays an important part in Sprinkle and Stephens’ movement), which perpetuates the currently problematic neoliberal identity politics that brings the politically transformative potential of queer theory to an impasse.⁴⁸

These possible issues with ecosexuality necessitate caution in our practical and theoretical engagements with it within the frame of sex and love. I side with Scott, who writes, “I fear we moderns are overconfident in what it means to love Nature, too convinced of the sincerity of our romance, and too ready to speak for ‘humanity.’”⁴⁹ Yet I also see the potential of ecosexuality in reconfiguring a love that is “less about ownership, and more about response,” as well as a sexuality that is “less a project of subjectification and more of an interaction in the open.”⁵⁰ In this sense, a careful and critical concern for the material-discursive entanglement of love, sex, and coloniality is needed in an attempt to think with ecosexuality in the endeavor of imagining relationalities otherwise, whether human/human, human/non-human, or beyond. Attending to the complex ways in which love, sex, nature, and ‘human’ are co-constructed, as well as to the ways that we practice/live with these ideas, can help imagine relationality differently, *despite* the logic of coloniality.

Endnotes

- ¹ Elizabeth Stephens and Annie Sprinkle, “Ecosex Manifesto,” accessed November 21, 2019, <<http://sexecology.org/research-writing/ecosex-manifesto/>>.
- ² Annie Sprinkle and Beth Stephens, “25 Ways to Make Love to the Earth,” accessed November 21, 2019, <<https://theecosexuals.ucsc.edu/earthlove/>>.
- ³ Jennifer J. Reed, “From Ecofeminism to Ecosexuality: Queering the Environmental Movement,” in *Ecosexuality: When Nature Inspires the Arts of Love*, eds. SerenaGaia Anderlini-D’Onofrio and Lindsay Hagamen (Puerto Rico: 3WayKiss via CreateSpace, 2015), 92–102.
- ⁴ Inge Konik and Adrian Konik, “Unearthing Ecosexuality,” in *Angelaki* 24.6 (2019), 76–94.
- ⁵ Konik and Konik, “Unearthing Ecosexuality,” 87.
- ⁶ While ‘sexual’ and ‘erotic’ connote different things and they would both require close and critical engagement, due to the limitations of this paper’s format I do not go into detail about their convergences and divergences. It is helpful nonetheless to note that the sexuality in ecosexuality is one that seems to be powered by erotics.
- ⁷ Stephanie Theobald, “Nature Is Your Lover, Not Your Mother: Meet Ecosexual Pioneer Annie Sprinkle,” in *The Guardian*, May 15, 2017, accessed March 18, 2020, <<https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2017/may/15/nature-ecosexual-annie-sprinkle-porn-star-queer>>.
- ⁸ Sprinkle and Stephens, “25 Ways to Make Love to the Earth,” <<https://theecosexuals.ucsc.edu/earthlove/>>.
- ⁹ Nelson Maldonado-Torres, “On The Coloniality of Being,” in *Cultural Studies* 21.2–3 (2007), 240–270, here: 243.
- ¹⁰ Rolando Vázquez, “Towards a Decolonial Critique of Modernity: Buen Vivir, Relationality and the Task of Listening,” in *Capital, Poverty, Development, Denktraditionen im Dialog: Studien zur Befreiung und Interkulturalität* 33 (2012), 241–252.
- ¹¹ Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham/London: Duke University Press, 2014), 24.
- ¹² Sylvia Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, AfterMan, Its Overrepresentation — An Argument,” in *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3.3 (2003), 257–337, here: 260–261.
- ¹³ Madina Tlostanova, “Transcending the Human/Non-Human Divide,” in *Angelaki* 22.2 (2017), 25–37, here: 27.
- ¹⁴ Tlostanova, “Transcending the Human/Non-Human Divide,” 26.
- ¹⁵ Tlostanova, “Transcending the Human/Non-Human Divide,” 25.
- ¹⁶ Stacy Alaimo, “Trans-Corporeal Feminisms and the Ethical Space of Nature,” in *Material Feminisms*, eds. Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008), 237–264, here: 239.
- ¹⁷ Alaimo, “Trans-Corporeal Feminisms,” 238.
- ¹⁸ Alaimo, “Trans-Corporeal Feminisms,” 257.
- ¹⁹ Kathrin Thiele, “Ethos of Diffraction: New Paradigms for a (Post)humanist Ethics,” in *Parallax* 20.3 (2014), 202–216.
- ²⁰ Kim TallBear and Angela Willey, “Introduction: Critical Relationality: Queer, Indigenous, and Multispecies Belonging Beyond Settler Sex & Nature,” in *Imaginations* 10.1 (2019), 5–15, here: 5.

- 21 TallBear and Willey, "Introduction: Critical Relationality," 5.
- 22 TallBear and Willey, "Introduction: Critical Relationality," 6.
- 23 Eva Hayward, "FingeryEyes: Impressions of Cup Corals," in *Cultural Anthropology* 25.4 (2010), 577—599, here: 588.
- 24 Stephens and Sprinkle, "Ecosex Manifesto."
- 25 Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology* (Durham/London: Duke University Press, 2006).
- 26 Eva Hayward, "Lessons from a Starfish," in *The Transgender Studies Reader* 2.0, eds. Susan Stryker and Aren Z. Aizura (London/New York: Routledge, 2013), 178–188.
- 27 Definition retrieved from *Oxford Reference*, accessed May 18, 2020, <<https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100153175>>
- 28 As a critical topic in feminist debates, agency requires re-thinking especially when it comes to theorizing relations with non-human worlds. Remembering Alaimo's questions can be useful in not assuming a certain definition of agency (usually as part of the enlightenment configuration of the willful subject) in discussing the human/nature binary and anthropocentrism: "How to conceive of nature's agency (in ways that are neither anthropomorphic, nor reductive, nor silly-seeming) has been a central problem for the dismantling of discourses that define nature as a terra nullius, an empty ground, evacuated of all that culture would claim for its own self-definition. It is difficult, however, to imagine what agency would look like in an other-than-human sense. How is it possible to understand agency without a subject, actions without actors? How can we rethink matter as activity rather than passive substance?" Alaimo, "Trans-Corporeal Feminisms," 245.
- 29 "'Perverse' sexualities, from homosexuality and necrophilia to celibacy and lust-murder, are morally maligned as equivalent based on the ways all challenge 'proper' object choice. But non-violent perverse sexualities pose challenges to issues of corporeal volition and desire beyond traditional oppositional and hierarchical libidinal configurations." Patricia MacCormack, "Necrosexuality," in *Queering the Non/Human*, eds. Myra J. Hird and Noreen Giffney (New York: Routledge, 2008), 339–62, here: 341.
- 30 For a detailed critique of the classification of animal sexual behavior, see Alaimo, "Eluding Capture". An example of epistemological dominance over non-human nature can be found in following: "Dr. Susan Block's philosophy of the 'ethical hedonism' of the bonobo is indicative of a general understanding that the 'reason' bonobos have so much sex, including same-sex sex, is to reduce social conflicts. Such explanations make all that mounting seem like just another chore. Whereas Block celebrates the eroticism of the bonobos, many scientific accounts of same-sex genital activities emphasize their social functions in such a way as to define them as anything other than sex. As Vasey explains, much same-sex sexual behavior has been interpreted as 'sociosexual,' meaning 'sexual in terms of their external form, but . . . enacted to mediate some sort of adaptive social goal or breeding strategy.'" Stacy Alaimo, "Eluding Capture: The Science, Culture, and Pleasure of 'Queer' Animals," in *Exposed: Environmental Politics and Pleasures in Posthuman Times* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 41–62, here: 54.
- 31 Hayward, "FingeryEyes," 590. The quotes used by Hayward are from Elizabeth Wilson, "Biologically Inspired Feminism: Response to Helen Keane and Marsha Rosengarten, On the Biology of Sexed Subjects," in *Australian Feminist Studies* 17.39 (2002), 283–235, here: 284.
- 32 Eva Hayward, *SymbioSeas*, forthcoming, Penn State University Press.
- 33 Alaimo's chapter covers an array of research in order to reveal the heteronormativity and anthropocentrism of scientific discourse, an example of which can be seen in the following: "Bruce Bagemihl and Myra J. Hird document how the majority of scientists have ignored, closeted, or

- explained away their observations of same-sex behavior in animals, for fear of risking their reputations, scholarly credibility, academic positions, or straight identities.” Alaimo, “Eluding Capture,” 44.
- ³⁴ It is important to note, however, that knowledge can be bent in ways that maintain violent and oppressive discourses of the dominant epistemological and social systems. In the case of animal homosexuality, Alaimo reminds us that the evidence showing non-heterosexual behavior in animals do not mean the ideological war of “human/beast” will cease and homosexuality will be seen as part of diverse sexuality within the larger ecosystem we live in: “[P]eople bent on damning homosexuals will, no doubt, see all this queer animal sex as shocking depravity, consigning queers to the howling wilderness of bestial perversions” (2016: 45). Her careful and attentive approach to science and her awareness of the resilience of discourses of human superiority offer intriguing questions about sexuality in the face of discursive legacies of Western modernity.
- ³⁵ “Whereas many cultural critics cast animal sex into the separate sphere of nature, many scientific accounts of queer animal sex have rendered them as entirely ‘cultural,’ and thus not sexual.” Alaimo, “Eluding Capture,” 54.
- ³⁶ Alaimo, “Eluding Capture,” 51.
- ³⁷ Rebecca R. Scott, “Love,” in *Veer Ecology: A Companion for Environmental Thinking*, eds. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Lowell Duckert, (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 377–391, here: 384.
- ³⁸ Elizabeth Povinelli, *The Empire of Love: Toward a Theory of Intimacy, Genealogy, and Carnality* (Durham/London: Duke University Press, 2006).
- ³⁹ Eva Illouz, *Consuming the Romantic Utopia: Love and the Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (Berkeley/Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1997).
- ⁴⁰ Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving* (London: Thorsons, 1995 [1957]), 21.
- ⁴¹ Illouz, *Consuming the Romantic Utopia*, 6.
- ⁴² Scott, “Love,” 378.
- ⁴³ María Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More Than Human Worlds* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 82.
- ⁴⁴ Scott, “Love,” 379.
- ⁴⁵ Scott, “Love,” 385.
- ⁴⁶ See Tlostanova, “Transcending the Human/Non-Human Divide,” 30; and Alaimo’s *Exposed*.
- ⁴⁷ Scott, “Love,” 377.
- ⁴⁸ See Lisa Duggan’s *Twilight of Equality* (1994) for a discussion on the relation between queer theory, neoliberalism and identity politics.
- ⁴⁹ Scott, “Love,” 387.
- ⁵⁰ Scott, “Love,” 384.