

# Birds of a Feather

How Rethinking Animals Helps Us Rethink Ourselves

*Sandra Swart (Stellenbosch University)*

## Abstract

This exploratory introductory essay has thought about a gender in human-animal or animal sensitive history. It brings into conversation environmental history, natural sciences (ornithology, primatology), feminist science studies and queer ecocriticism. It explores the ways in which our shifting understandings of animals have contoured our understandings of our own species' gender and sexuality and, vice versa, human heteronormativity and sexism have led us to impose categories on Nature that do not exist. What the other animals get up to and therefore what is understood to be 'natural' has a strange power over us. So rethinking what is 'natural' has real world impacts. Historically gendered stereotyping, predicated on a misunderstanding of the animal world, is harmful to boys and men as well as for girls and women – and to our understanding of the more-than-human world.

**Keywords:** animals, penguins, seagulls, gender, queer ecology, women

It was 1977.<sup>1</sup> A total blackout in New York led to mass looting across the city. Son of Sam, the serial killer, was at large. A war erupted between

<sup>1</sup> My thanks to Andrea Palk, Charla Smith, and Larissa Schulte Nordholt. For primary sources, see Judith Martin, "Science and the Gay Gull," *The Washington Post*, December 4, 1977, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/business/1977/12/04/science-and-the-gay-gull/d4397a4c-ea60-4763-885c-c1b879d4e0b2/>; UPI, "Extensive Homosexuality is Found among Seagulls Off Coast of California," *The New York Times*, November 23, 1977, <https://www.nytimes.com/1977/11/23/archives/extensive-homosexuality-is-found-among-seagulls-off-coast-of.html>; author unknown, "The Sexes: Lesbian Gulls," *TIME*, December 12, 1977, <https://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,915847,00.html>; Bettina Boxall, "The Nest Quest: Group Sets Sail for Lesbian Sea Gulls: Nature: Biologist Takes Gay Group to Channel Islands, Where He Had Observed Same-Sex

Cambodia and Vietnam. Roman Polanski was arrested for sex with a minor. The last guillotine execution in France and the last legal beheading in the western world occurred. The president of the Central African Republic crowned himself emperor. *The Sex Pistols* tried to disrupt the Queen's Silver Jubilee celebration. Another whites-only election was held in apartheid South Africa. Slavery remained legal in Mauritania. Anita Bryant started a war on the gay community in Florida, running the 'Save Our Children' campaign to repeal a local law against discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation.

But what really outraged many god-fearing, tax-paying citizens was a pair of seagulls. What had ruffled their feathers? It was another nesting pair – a wife and husband team of biologists, Molly and George Hunt from the University of California at Irvine – who had set out, in 1972, to study seagulls (*Larus occidentalis*) on the islands off Santa Barbara, on the Californian coast. They discovered something strange: a pair of female seagulls were raising fledglings together. Their scientific article on this intriguing anomaly, published in 1977, sparked a storm in both conservation and conservative circles. (Molly discovered the pair, George apparently did not believe her at first, but it is hard not to notice George was first author on their ground-breaking article.)<sup>2</sup> The Hunts had been alerted to this curious case by stumbling upon what they came to call 'supernormal clutches' with up to six eggs, instead of the usual two or three. It was only after killing and dissecting the super-producing seagull pairs and realizing both had ovaries that things became a little clearer. Astonishingly, some of the female–female gull pairs presided over super-sized clutches of (mostly) sterile eggs, and even sometimes raised families together. But there was something more. In a few of the pairs, one of the females displayed behaviours ordinarily attributed to males, such as mounting and copulation, cloaca to cloaca. No such similar domestic arrangements existed among male birds. Despite the always provocative and thorny analogy between humans and animals, it was widely reported in the press that these were 'lesbian seagulls'.

Pairs in the 1970s. Research Has Prompted Controversy," *LA Times*, June 20, 1993, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1993-06-20-me-5238-story.html>. For two short and very readable takes, see Zoë Schlanger, "The Gulls Are Alright: How a Lesbian Seagull Discovery Shook Up 1970s Conservatives," *Quartz*, July 10, 2017, <https://qz.com/1023638/the-gulls-are-alright-how-a-lesbian-seagull-discovery-shook-up-1970s-conservatives>; and Qilin Zhao, "How Lesbian Seagulls Changed the Gay Rights Movement," *Medium*, March 6, 2021, <https://medium.com/ostem-ucsd/how-lesbian-seagulls-changed-the-gay-rights-movement-dd88493da8e0>.

2 George Hunt and Molly Warner Hunt, "Female-Female Pairing in Western Gulls (*Larus Occidentalis*) in Southern California," *Science* 196, no. 4297 (1977): 1466–67.

Suddenly, many ordinary people, who would normally not give a hoot about ornithology, began to care about the sex life of birds. They were outraged. After all, one of the strongest indictments against gay people – especially deployed in conservative, Christian circles in the USA – was that there were no gay animals. They did not exist in the natural order. Therefore, homosexuality could not exist ‘naturally’. Yet, now it seemed to exist on this sapphic seagull isle. Protests erupted; angry letters were written to the newspapers. Traditionalist, populist, and fundamentalist pundits had a field day. An anonymous group advertised in *The New York Daily News* that 100 per cent of their seagulls were strictly heterosexual. Even Congress took an interest, a Republican representative chucklingly shook his head over the \$62,300 of the Hunts’ research grant spent discovering these ‘odd birds’. He even threatened to slash funding for the National Science Foundation.

But out of the public eye, quietly and appreciatively, Lesbian and Gay groups and individuals wrote to the scientists, thanking them for their research. Thanking them for, in a sense, confirming that their lifestyles were perfectly ‘natural’ after all. A Los Angeles theatre group celebrated with a play called ‘Supernormal Clutches’ and gay activist Tom Wilson Weinberg released a song titled ‘Lesbian Seagull’, with the immortal lyrics: ‘You and me, lesbian seagull ... Our love will keep us flying high until we die’. These seagulls offered a mirror for humanity’s face – and some were scandalized by what they saw, while others celebrated. Clearly, this was about more than just birds.

Indeed, the ‘animal mirror’ mattered to both sides of the political spectrum that divided over the sexual continuum. People wanted to peer into the creaturely glass and see at least something of themselves and a world they saw as somehow ‘natural’ and ‘normal’. In the case of the seagulls, about fourteen per cent of the pairing couples were female–female. Some mated with males but then returned to their female life partner (for they were largely monogamous for life) to sit on their eggs and split incubation responsibility much like male–female couples did – although often it must have been disheartening because many of the eggs were not fertile unless there had been male–female mating on the side. In those cases, the eggs hatched, and these fledglings were fine and went on to raise babies of their own.

We know about this generational history because George carried on with the study.<sup>3</sup> By the 1980s, he was wondering if the seagulls’ anomalous

3 Molly divorced him – I do not know whether it was about that first authorship issue, but it would have been for me.

choice was based on the lack of males? In a sad turn of events, he discovered that the males seemed to die off more easily. He hypothesized that this was from the insecticide DDT, as the females were perhaps better able to shed some of the poison into the yolks of eggs they produced. What stayed incurably toxic was the public outrage over such sexual ‘deviance’ in the animal world. Again and again, we see that anxieties over the ‘unnatural’ emerge at moments of social, political, and cultural crisis, which are sometimes reframed as ecological crises.<sup>4</sup> The categories ‘natural’ and ‘unnatural’ exist as fluid, friable configurations: the former basking in the sunlight of popular approval and the latter lurking in the shadows below. The ‘unnatural’ is a powerful – if shifting and culturally specific – concept with critical repercussions for what is seen or unseen, tolerated or taboo, accepted or abhorred.

Enter Anita Bryant, a former beauty queen and current born-again Christian, who based her noxious campaign on the idea that homosexuals could not raise families, so they had to sustain themselves and their societies in ‘unnatural’ ways (Fig. 1). After the Dade County Commission passed a gay-rights ordinance at the start of 1977, Bryant fought to repeal it with Save Our Children, Inc campaign. By mid-year, the ordinance was repealed, precipitating anti-gay actions in other states. By pushing the notion that homosexuality threatened the ‘American family’, Bryant and the Religious Right succeeding in raising both conservative support and funds.<sup>5</sup> She had powerful allies like Jerry Falwell, the televangelist whose right-wing faction (the Moral Majority) promoted itself as reintroducing religion to politics. Under the banner of ‘traditional family values’, Falwell famously declared: ‘Homosexuals don’t reproduce! They recruit! And they are out after my children and your children’. He added: ‘feminists and all these radical gals ... just need a man in the house. That’s all they need’.<sup>6</sup> Yet, suddenly, here were radical gulls pairing off together and raising some happy, healthy families without a man about the nest.

4 C. Mortimer-Sandilands and B. Erickson, eds., *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010); Stacy Alaimo, “Eluding Capture: The Science, Culture, and Pleasure of ‘Queer’ Animals,” in *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire*, eds. Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson, 51–72.

5 See Gillian Frank, “‘The Civil Rights of Parents’: Race and Conservative Politics in Anita Bryant’s Campaign against Gay Rights in 1970s Florida,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 22, no. 1 (2013): 126–60. See also Anita Bryant, *The Anita Bryant Story: The Survival of Our Nations’ Families & the Threat of Militant Homosexuality* (Chicago, IL, Revell, 1977).

6 Clarence Page and a member of the *Tribune’s* editorial board, “The Rise and Fall of Jerry Falwell,” *Chicago Tribune*, May 20, 2007, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-2007-05-20-0705190543-story.html>.



Figure 1. Anti-gay activist Anita Bryant regretting investigating the gull issue. Zoë Schlanger, "The Gulls Are Alright: How a Lesbian Seagull Discovery Shook Up 1970s Conservatives," *Quartz*, July 10, 2017. (Image originally from the *Boston Globe*, courtesy of George Hunt.)

Subsequent research began to show that the same sex seagull pair was not all that atypical. In fact, since this breakthrough, field biologists have discovered that hundreds of species display non-binary sexual behaviour and a range of flexible sexualities. Clearly, same-sex sexual behaviour and what might be called sex-flexibility and the breaking of binaries abound in the animal world.<sup>7</sup> As early as 1999, Canadian biologist and linguist Bruce Bagemihl published a weighty dossier on this sheer diversity, cataloguing 450 species.<sup>8</sup> It was called *Biological Exuberance* and I bought this despite

7 Some scholars prefer the term 'same-sex sexual behaviour' instead of 'homosexual' to avoid conflation between human sexuality and the other animals' sexual activities.

8 Sex refers largely to biological characteristics, while gender refers to an internal psychological experience of self and also the way one might express oneself in society. We cannot know about an interior self-understanding of other species, but we refer to diversity in visually observable sex roles. Gender involves a shifting set of behaviours and norms that shape how, for example, men and women act, depending on the division of genders in that particular society, and prescribe

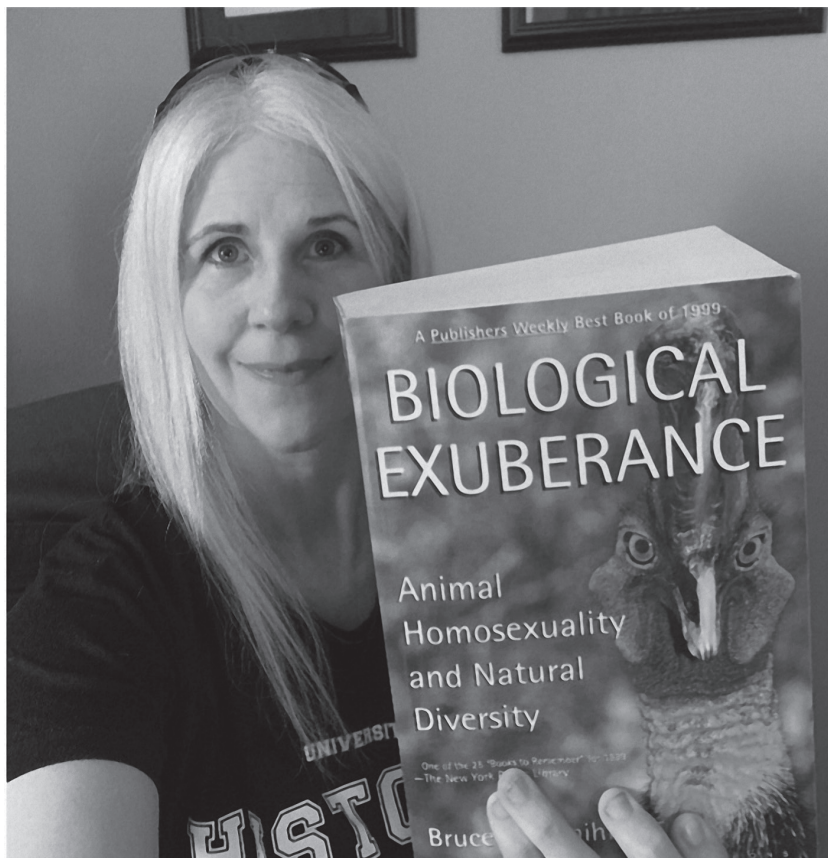


Figure 2. The author with her copy of *Biological Exuberance*. Own picture.

being an impecunious post-graduate student (Fig. 2). It lit up the soft mole-grey Oxford winter with iridescent hummingbirds, tawny giraffes, opulent cassowaries, verrucous warthogs – and I plunged into its heterodox shades. It was a kind of archive of the queer, before queer was embraced in the mainstream as an emboldening and positive term. Today, same-sex sexual behaviour has been observed in over 1,500 animal species: seagulls, of course, penguins, primates, bats, lions, orcas, dolphins, squirrels, snakes, lizards, and worms. (Homophobia, however, has so far been observed in only one species.) All it took to see a sexual spectrum was *looking at biology with a queer eye*. The complexity and flexibility were always there, scientists just could not see them. And when they did see, they sometimes tried to hide

what it means to be male or female. The two terms cannot be entirely detached: sexed bodies influence the cultural rules surrounding gender, and vice versa, in constant feedback loops.

it from the eyes of others – or even themselves. But why did it take so long for Bagemihl's book? Attempting to answer this takes us to the history of the birds closest to humans in appearance and most remote in place, at the southern tip of the world.

### Not Black and White: 1,500 Shades of Grey?

One of the two staff surgeons on Captain Robert Falcon Scott's doomed *Terra Nova* Antarctic 1910–1913 expedition was a man called George Murray Levick (1876 – 1956). In fact, Levick was not only the doctor but a zoologist, a man passionately interested in the natural world of the frozen south. His heart was warmed by one of the icy landscape's most endearing creatures: the little Adélie penguins (*Pygoscelis adeliae*). You will remember that Scott and four others died tragically, after reaching the South Pole only to discover that Norwegian Roald Amundsen had beaten them to it. Levick and others survived. He overwintered in an ice cave alongside a rookery in Cape Adare, thus becoming an eyewitness to the penguin breeding cycle; indeed, he came to know them better than any other human. But familiarity bred much more than contempt, as you will see. At first, the penguins seemed simply adorable. Males and females are difficult to tell apart: they are all portly, flappy-armed figures in too-tight 'tuxedos', with the comically goggly eyes and the globous bodies of a child's stuffed toy. Indeed, today Adélie penguins star in the *Happy Feet* movie franchise, singing Sinatra's 'My Way' ...

They certainly did ... Because, as Levick discovered with growing horror, their sex lives were unconventional at best. In fact, he uncovered what he believed was a terrible secret about these birds: not only were males having sex with each other, but they were also agents of sexual coercion, violently violating females and chicks, even forcing themselves upon dead females. He went so far as to code these revelations in his notebooks, using the Greek alphabet, so only men like himself would be able to read them. Levick, by all accounts, was the very model of an Edwardian Englishman, and he fretted over what he had stumbled upon. He brooded over what he had seen, bringing back extensive notes, a trove of photographs, and some penguin skins. Anxious that their sordid secret remain just that, he published an innocuous public account of their natural history, *Antarctic Penguins: A Study of Their Social Habits* (1914), intended for a general audience. The following year he produced the *Natural History of the Adélie Penguin* (1915), a more academic account. He noted the scourge of 'hooligan' cocks who kill some chicks. He

refused to say 'how', noting instead, in a human analogy, that their crimes 'are such as to find no place in this book, but it is interesting indeed to note that, when nature intends them to find employment, these birds, like men, degenerate in idleness'.<sup>9</sup> Arguably, the penguin is the most humanlike of all birds in body-shape, face, and locomotion, so it is understandable that they are perhaps most often anthropomorphized. Thus, the Adélie outrages appeared all the more outré. The result was suppression of the story: certainly, Levick was concerned about its impact but probably he was also under pressure from the Keeper of Zoology at the British Museum of Natural History. Accordingly, Levick's accounts were anodyne versions of events.

But he had a darker story to share with those whom he could trust with the secret. So, at the same time, he printed a hundred copies of a no-holds-barred account called *Sexual Habits of the Adélie Penguin*. Nearly a century later, this perturbing little pamphlet was rediscovered.<sup>10</sup> The four-page tract, bearing the legend 'Not for Publication', exposed the penguins at what Levick believed to be their worst: their erotic exploits, sexual and physical abuse of chicks, homosexuality, and necrophilia. He was initially nonplussed but increasingly appalled by it all:

This afternoon I saw a most extraordinary site [sic]. A Penguin was actually engaged in sodomy upon the body of a dead ... bird of its own species.<sup>11</sup>

Here on one occasion I saw what I took to be a cock copulating with a hen. When he had finished, however, and got off, the apparent hen turned out to be a cock, and the act was again performed with their positions

9 For the expurgated version, see G.M. Levick, *Antarctic Penguins: A Study of Their Social Habits* (London: William Heinemann; New York: McBride Nast and Company, 1914), 97–98.

10 It was republished in the journal *Polar Record* in 2012. See [Not for Publication.] British Museum (natural history). The sexual habits of the Adélie penguin. By staff-surgeon G. Murray Levick, R.N. The following account is based on observations made by Dr Levick at Cape Adare during the course of the British Antarctic (Terra Nova) Expedition, 1910, printed in February 1915, *Polar Record*, 2012.

See Christie's auction of "George Murray Levick (1876–1956), British Antarctic Expedition, 1910–1913," <https://www.christies.com/en/lot/lot-4966529>; The Week staff, "Shock at Sexually 'Depraved' Penguins Led to 100-Year Censorship," *The Week*, June 10, 2012, <https://theweek.com/health-science/47334/shock-sexually-depraved-penguins-led-100-year-censorship>; Lloyd Spencer Davis, *A Polar Affair: Antarctica's Forgotten Hero and the Secret Love Lives of Penguins* (New York: Pegasus Books, 2019); Ian Robson, "Sexual Depravity of Penguins that Antarctic Scientist Dared Not Reveal," *The Guardian*, 9 June 9, 2012, <https://www.chroniclive.co.uk/news/north-east-news/sexual-depravity-penguins-geordie-antarctic-7991737>.

11 Translated from the Greek, from his notebook.

reversed, the original “hen” climbing on to the back of the original cock, whereupon the nature of their proceeding was disclosed.<sup>12</sup>

Levick was perplexed and perturbed. His words dripped with quiet revulsion: ‘There seems to be no crime too low for these Penguins’. But what is really important for us to note is, not only did Levick censor his own, observed account of widespread natural behaviour, but he also dismissed the penguin behaviour in his own mind as ‘unnatural’. He labelled them ‘depraved’, ‘hooligans’, casting them as criminals and delinquent rule-breakers of the natural order, rather than trying to understand and explain their behaviour. This vignette illustrates both the twin dangers of censorship and the misinterpretation of data when the ‘animal Other’ is filtered through the prism of human sexual mores imposed upon another species. The mirror shatters when we do not like what we see.

Today, scientists are certainly more at liberty to research and make public these supposedly unusual behaviours than in Levick’s time. Yet, we must remember the history of suppression and repression to explain why researchers have to cope with a deficiency in data and a dismissal of data that should have been acquired accretively over time. Same-sex sexual behaviour is now widely recognized to occur in many species.<sup>13</sup> Societal attitudes have changed, in most places, global academic culture is more diverse, researchers who identify as LGBTQ+ have become more visible. The public is more accepting of alternatives to the fantasy of the monogamous heterosexual pairings. To return to penguins, the icy little birds who are far from frigid, we see non-heteronormative, non-monogamous sexuality as a routine part of their behaviour. King penguins captured from the Antarctic in 1913 for the Edinburgh Zoo created a stir once keepers figured out how to tell the sexes apart. Indeed, in 1932, the institute’s director T.H. Gillespie noted quizzically (perhaps even a little enviously) that they ‘enjoy privileges not as yet permitted to civilized mankind’. In 2018, Sphen and Magic, two male Gentoo penguins closely related to Adélie penguins, made headlines when they built a nest together (‘bigger than the other pairs’) at the Sea Life Sydney Aquarium, and Sphen presented Magic with a ‘special stone’, part of the courting ritual. Aquarium staff offered them a fake egg, which they nurtured so conscientiously that they were provided with a fertile egg from another penguin couple.

12 From the pamphlet.

13 A. Poiani, *Animal Homosexuality: A Biosocial Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

Baby Sphenic (initially named for their celebrity couple name, but now known as Lara) was born in the spring of that year.<sup>14</sup> The media dubbed them the gay penguin ‘power couple’ and the aquarium says ‘love wins’ at their exhibition. The mirror reflected a fabulous vision: a human couple proposed to each other outside the penguin enclosure, equality groups celebrated the rainbow family and their new chick, affectionately camp quips were made about penguin *chic*.

Sphen and Magic joined other household names: King penguins Stan and Oli (who became icons in a gay marriage equality campaign in Germany), Toronto zoo’s African penguins Pedro and Buddy, who were separated by keepers in what campaigners called homophobic efforts to break them up.<sup>15</sup> Perhaps the most famous pair were Roy and Silo, two male Chinstrap penguins at New York City’s Central Park Zoo, who made headlines in 2000 when they raised a chick called Tango from a fostered egg (immortalized in the children’s book *And Tango Makes Three*).<sup>16</sup> You would think this had been normalized since the Hunts put a cat among the pigeons. Unhappily, no. It became one of the most banned books in the US, after it was denounced for being pro-homosexuality and ‘anti-family’.<sup>17</sup> It retains its position on the American Library Association’s list of the most ‘complained about’ books. This year, in districts in Florida (where Anita Bryant complained about seagulls almost half a century ago) the book is being removed or restricted.<sup>18</sup>

14 Naaman Zhou, “Lovebirds: Male Penguin Couple in Sydney ‘Absolute Naturals’ at Incubating Live Egg,” *The Guardian*, October 12, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/oct/12/lovebirds-male-penguin-couple-in-sydney-absolute-naturals-at-incubating-live-egg>; Caitlin O’Kane, “Gay Penguin Couple Have Been Given an Egg to Look After,” *CBS News*, October 12, 2018, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/gay-penguin-couple-in-sydney-australia-have-been-given-an-egg-to-look-after/>; Faye Brown, “Gay Penguin ‘Power Couple’ Become Dads for the Second Time,” *Metro*, November 24, 2020, <https://metro.co.uk/2020/11/24/sydneys-gay-penguins-magic-and-sphen-become-dads-for-second-time-13645776/>.

15 Kayleigh Lewis, “Two Gay King Penguins Are Being Moved to Hamburg So They Can Stay Together,” *Independent*, April 17, 2016, <https://www.independent.co.uk/climate-change/news/gay-king-penguins-berlin-hamburg-zoo-moved-homosexual-a6988506.html>; Alex Neddham, “Is It Homophobic to Split Up Gay Penguins?,” *The Guardian*, November 9, 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2011/nov/09/homophobic-split-up-gay-penguins>.

16 Justin Richardson and Peter Parnell, *And Tango Makes Three* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2005). Roy and Silo later parted ways when Silo left to be with a female.

17 Nick Duffy, “Gay Penguin Book Still Topping ‘Most Banned’ List,” *Pink News*, April 13, 2015, <https://www.thepinknews.com/2015/04/13/gay-penguin-book-still-topping-most-banned-list/>.

18 Recently, the London Natural History Museum fittingly used the (then) bird app to talk about same-sex swan pairs for Pride. This tweet awoke the same kind of hostility as the seagulls did over four decades before, although, as always, it was framed in its own historical period’s

## Querying and Queering Animal Histories

An important lesson to take from all this is that our idiographic and diachronic ways of interpreting nature – individually, socially and scientifically – are knotted in histories of sexism, homophobia, classism, casteism, racism, colonialism, and so on.<sup>19</sup> History can help us see why this is and thus move us beyond merely inverting the conservative condemnation that anything other than hetero couples are bad because they are ‘unnatural’. So, we do not merely crassly invert this syllogism and assert that being LGBTQ+ is acceptable because it is ‘natural’. Instead, on a much more fundamental level, a deeper understanding of this history explodes the very border between what is ‘natural’ and ‘unnatural’.<sup>20</sup> As Micha Rahder notes:

Queer ecology seeks to abolish the idea of a “pure” nature altogether. Ironically, this allows us to get closer to those living things we learned to recognize as “wild,” “exotic,” or even “alien.” This also means that queer ecology shares important resonances with other traditions that push back against colonial scientific legacies, including anti-racist, indigenous and feminist approaches. Changing how we think about nature changes how we relate to the world around us, and can broaden and strengthen struggles for environmental justice.<sup>21</sup>

Activists have long alluded to loneliness in human queerness. Finding queer figures in the past creates a long-standing community, a sense of the enduring nature of the identity, and a feeling of shared comradeship.<sup>22</sup> The

shibboleths and anathemata. So, this time it was couched in dyspeptic outbursts about ‘wokeism’, and ‘rainbow orthodoxy’, calling out the museum for its supposed virtue signalling and asking, which ‘blue haired intern’ has commandeered their Twitter feed.

19 Ten years ago, Gabriel Rosenberg was presciently asking “Where Are Animals in the History of Sexuality?,” *Notches*, September 2, 2014, <https://notchesblog.com/2014/09/02/where-are-animals-in-the-history-of-sexuality/>.

20 Alex Johnson, “How to Queer Ecology: One Goose at a Time,” *Orion Magazine* 30, no. 2 (2011), <https://orionmagazine.org/article/how-to-queer-ecology-once-goose-at-a-time/>. See Joan Roughgarden, *Evolution’s Rainbow: Diversity, Gender, and Sexuality in Nature and People* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004); Joan Roughgarden, *Evolution’s Rainbow: Diversity, Gender, and Sexuality in Nature and People* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2013); N. Seymour, *Strange Natures: Futurity, Empathy, and the Queer Ecological Imagination* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2013).

21 Micha Rahder, “Queering the Wild,” *Autostraddle*, June 13, 2019, <https://www.autostraddle.com/queering-the-wild/>.

22 Sacha Pfeiffer, Megan Lim, and Justine Kenin, “What ‘Queer Ducks’ Can Teach Teenagers about Sexuality in the Animal Kingdom,” NPR, May 29, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/05/29/1101224759/>

same might be true of finding queer in nature.<sup>23</sup> The animal comparison is one to handle sensitively, as Bénédicte Boisseron reminds us about animal issues and race.<sup>24</sup> All this underlines why this volume of the *Yearbook* is so timeous and urgent, and in the context of the enduring attack on feminism, queer identity, sexual diversity, and trans rights. My starting point in thinking about this suite of essays was focused on animals not very different to us, our primate cousins, with whom we have a difficult if close relationship – as family often does. Jane Goodall’s 1971 seminal study of free-living chimpanzees was called *In the Shadow of Man*, and, for a long time, (ironically) that is exactly what studies on animals were. Animals were eclipsed by anthropocentrism – but they were also overshadowed by the other meaning of ‘man’ as pseudogeneric: the male as normal, the female as aberrant or invisible. Goodall’s childhood role models – Dr Dolittle, Tarzan, and Mowgli – and mentor Louis Leakey inspired her to pursue fieldwork in Tanzania. But her own identity was a double-edged sword, winning her funding and misogynist scorn of her work. She observed wryly: ‘If my legs helped me get publicity for the chimps, that was useful.’ Yet, her research (and those of other women entering primatology at the time) challenged the male-dominated scientific consensus, revolutionizing our understanding of the sentience of other animals and emphasizing the kinship between our species. Equally, she (and others) exploded the myth of the ‘model’ animal who conformed to a stereotype dictated by their sex. It opened up a world where animals in the field were known by name, and were understood as individuals with personalities, emotions, and histories. Such contradictions and complexities motivated this volume. Historically, our understanding of the other animals was filtered through a lens of our own (various) societies’ views on gender. After all, we are ‘mammals’ because, just over two and a half centuries ago, Linnaeus chose to name humans and their relatives after the breast as *Mammalia*. In the same 1758 edition, he baptized us *Homo sapiens*, the ‘man of wisdom’. So, our species was included in the animal world, while simultaneously the stark separation of the rational male from the nurturing woman was deeply inscribed. This essay – this collection of essays! – is interested in the histories of such ideas,

what-queer-ducks-can-teach-teenagers-about-sexuality-in-the-animal-kingdom; Greta Gaard, “Green, Pink, and Lavender: Banishing Ecophobia through Queer Ecologies. Review of *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire*,” *Ethics and the Environment* 16, no. 2 (2011): 115–26.

<sup>23</sup> For useful organizations, see the webpages of the Critical Ecology Lab, Queer Nature, and The Institute of Queer Ecology.

<sup>24</sup> Bénédicte Boisseron, *Afro-Dog: Blackness and the Animal Question* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).

and its mission was to deconstruct such dichotomous thinking, break binaries, and end essentialism.

Something fresh and vital in *Animal History* is a new focus on gender. Here, 'gender' is not just code for only 'women'. Instead, it refers to the relationality of historically and socially co-constructed ways of being – behaviours, expressions, and identities – based on how society imagines sexual biology to operate. Part of exploring this question is the connection between the historically constructed and ever-changing human–animal boundary and the cultural construction of women as closer to animals – for good or bad. The questions inspiring me in this volume were fundamental: How does gender work in the historical construction of species and conceptualizing the animal world? How were animal classificatory systems (from diverse parts of the world) and disciplines devoted to understanding animals shaped by gendered norms? Can animals have gender and how would we know? How were female animals erased from or fetishized in scientific sight? Why are most laboratory animals male? How have the other animals been dragged into the construction of human gendered identities? Should we look into Deep History to find the origin of patriarchy in our animal ancestries? And, finally, why does the matriarchal hyaena, with her enlarged clitoral 'pseudo-penis', freak everyone out?<sup>25</sup>

Multi-species history matters in answering all these questions. I hoped topics might include: 'Pecking Order? Gender in legal systems, cosmologies, and classificatory systems of animals'; 'The Female of the Species? Decolonizing animal histories'; 'Animal Archives? What can we learn from women's history to tell animal histories?'; 'Gendered disciplinary histories of animal sciences'; 'Intersectionality in animal histories: At the intersections of speciesism, racism, sexism, and classism'; 'Intimate bodies: Gendered power relations in pet-keeping and horse riding'; and 'Cougars and Man-eaters: Sexuality and animal histories'. Can we have a feminist or queer multi-species history? In this volume, you will find essays that explore the changing gendered dynamics at work in animal sensitive history. You will find analyses of how relations of power are contoured by gender and how they work in human–animal relations historically, deepening the dialogue between feminism and animal studies. Essentially, you will encounter research that vividly illuminates human–animal connections in the past and thereby dissipates the *shadow of man* – both in species and gender.

25 Urination, penile insertion, and giving birth occur through the clitoris, which is capable of erections; moreover, the females are usually bulkier, more capable of violence than the males.

I was especially interested in how our own gender stereotypes have affected our understanding of the more-than-human world historically? It may be that some species do have a sense of gender or sense of it in others of their kind – we await more research. But what is much clearer is that our own species' sense of gender affected our understanding of other species. Our own rigidity has blinded us to the multi-species diversity of sexualities, as we saw with Levick keeping his penguin paper secret and the resistance to the Hunts' gull research. There have been moral panics over animal sex-flexibility as we saw with the 1970s seagull controversy and recently with the homosexual penguin parents.<sup>26</sup> (Who can forget the panic over the gay frog? The American alt-right spread a panic over frogs being 'turned gay' by hormones in the communal water system.)<sup>27</sup> Moreover, nature has been mobilized as an alibi to prop up the case of 'man the hunter', 'the alpha male', and the dominance of patriarchy. While culturally inflected, there has been a widespread myth of the 'naturally' dominant man and the compliant and pliant woman – reflected in law, social practice, ritual, and religion since at least the Neolithic period – with, of course, a few glaring exceptions. This is true of how we have thought of our animal kin, too. Generally, the stereotypes of the dominant male and passive female have shaped (and been further shaped by) not only academic zoology, but also other academic disciplines in the humanities and social sciences. Humans and the other animals are so entangled in this stereotype because animals have long been seen through anthropocentric eyes that project human qualities upon them and, equally, animals have enduringly been summoned to be a natural proof of the (human) social order. This entanglement has further entrenched the purportedly essential differences between male and female humans: the idea that men are naturally evolved to compete for dominance and women are naturally intended to be submissive and receptive to such alpha males.

There evolved a discipline to analyse this binary: socio-biology, based on the idea that observable behaviour is shaped by the evolutionary process, favouring behaviours that enhance the greatest transmission of animal's genes to future generations, often peppered with evidence drawn from other animal species. The research from this field – especially in its

26 G. Di Chiro, "Polluted Politics? Confronting Toxic Discourse, Sex Panic, and Econormativity," in *Queer ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire*, eds. Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson, 199–230; J.M. Gray, "Heteronormativity without Nature: Toward a Queer Ecology," *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking* 4, no. 2 (2017): 137–42.

27 Hannah Boast, "Theorizing the Gay Frog," *Environmental Humanities* 14, no. 3 (2022): 661–79.

most populist form – buttressed gender binaries.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, same-sex or non-reproductive sex was disregarded – as it seemed not to contribute to evolutionary development. Yet, recent research suggests a paradigm shift, with a rich seam of evidence suggesting enhanced social emollience, pair bonding, hunting alliances, pleasure, and higher survival rate of progeny. A similar paradigm shift, stemming from the 1960s and 70s, was a new focus on females – simply *seeing* them and taking their agency seriously.

Of course, in recognizing female dominance among some of our fellow animals, we will be (at first) tempted to celebrate. Hurrah, we think, with the female of the species in charge things will be better! (We are, after all, so often told to keep male generals away from war and ‘let the mothers sort it out’.) But this is simplistic and sexist in its own way. It imposes a sexist stereotype: the notion that matriarchy ineludibly suggests a soft, sweet sorority of shared sovereignty.

But, alas, it does not! Female ascendancy in the animal kingdom does not, as a matter of course, inevitably result in non-violence. Indeed, to assume that female means ‘natural pacifiers’ is to turn ‘female’ into a caricature, denying females the gamut of drives open to males – including the ‘bad ones’ (pride, greed, wrath, envy, lust, gluttony, and sloth). Women are human, not saints – so too other female animals. They can be as competitive, sexually or physically aggressive and, importantly, also impel evolutionary change at species level. As we saw with the opening vignette of this essay, scientists who break gendered stereotypes suffer censure. Patricia Gowaty, at the University of California, Los Angeles, discovered that songbirds raise their fledglings as a monogamous couple, but many females had promiscuous pasts and clutches of eggs could have many fathers.<sup>29</sup> She ruefully remembered: ‘I got a lot of flak from this study ... it offended so many people ... They couldn’t imagine that females were anything but benign’.<sup>30</sup> It is foolish to stereotype the ‘female of the species’ as one thing or other – not only does

28 Not unexpectedly, its relationship with feminism is ‘complicated’. Darwinian feminists have found it useful to help understand the long history of women’s subjugation, but – antithetically – other feminists argue that sociobiology actually rationalizes and normalizes patriarchy by portraying it as ‘natural’. Z. Tang-Martinez, “The Curious Courtship of Sociobiology and Feminism: A Case of Irreconcilable Differences,” in *Feminism and Evolutionary Biology*, ed. P.A. Gowaty (Boston, MA: Springer, 1997), 116–50.

29 Patricia Adair Gowaty, “Male Parental Care and Apparent Monogamy Among Eastern Bluebirds (*Sialia sialis*),” *The American Naturalist* 121, no. 2 (1983): 149–57. For a still useful read, see Patricia Adair Gowaty, “Sexual Natures: How Feminism Changed Evolutionary Biology,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28, no. 3 (2003): 901–21.

30 Quoted in Lucy Cooke, *Bitch: On the Female of the Species* (London: Penguin Random House, 2022).

it vary wildly *between* species, but also (and this is only beginning to be understood) *within* species.

## Nostalgia Ain't What It Used to Be!

Equally, multi-species sexist stereotyping cuts both ways. So, the so-called alpha male is often a historically created caricature, harkening back to earlier, often longingly misremembered periods of man the hunter and woman in the cave or kitchen. The notion of male leaders as always the embodiment of machismo came to us from early studies in primatology in the context of the masculinist cultures of the wartime West, of violent carceral captive colonies of baboons in too-small spaces.<sup>31</sup> This one-dimensional model of violent patriarchy under an alpha male is not reflected in many more recent primate studies in which simian superiors show prosocial strategies and female primates clearly play much bigger roles in society. Many people, however, still accept that false premise that our current socio-political order is essentially 'primate patriarchy' buttressed inexorably by our own evolutionary past. They rest their defence or despair on the fact that it extends into our Deep History – a kind of biological script that we were still either destined or doomed to follow (depending on how you feel about patriarchy). Nevertheless, as described earlier, feminist or simply more open-minded scientists have dared to upend fallacies about male–female stereotypes, especially female 'niceness', including mate selection, maternal instinct, and female monogamy. We do not see variety when we are blinkered: but we now know about a range of animals who overturn simple binary or dichotomous thinking about male and female – be it biological or behavioural.<sup>32</sup>

## Conclusion

This exploratory introductory essay has thought about gender in human–animal or animal-sensitive history. It tried to bring into conversation fields

31 See Sandra Swart, *The Lion's Historian: Africa's Animal Past* (Johannesburg: Jacana, 2023).

32 Think of the pansexual *Pan paniscus* (bonobos). Differentiated from chimps in 1929, bonobos were wrongly construed simply as 'pygmy chimpanzees.' But their social lives were radically different: revolving around female alliances, with large amounts of non-procreative sex. In fact, they kiss, practice oral sex and frottage, and it is currently believed that females do orgasm (once considered rare but now observed in a variety of animal species).

that should be talking to each other, drawing in voices from environmental history, ornithology, primatology, feminist science studies, feminist environmental studies, and queer ecocriticism. What can we take from all this? What do we learn by rethinking our fellow animals? I have considered three core issues to do with gender and animal history. The first is the ways in which our shifting understandings of animals have helped shape our understandings of our own species' gender and sexuality and, correspondingly, how understandings of gender and sex have contoured our understandings of animals, indeed, nature itself. Evidence of so-called inversions of the sexed or sexual order in nature have been both hidden and ignored – or simply not seen. It is a historian's job to show that we have been duped – or gulled – into a heteronormative, male-dominated 'natural history'. History shows we have seen the 'animal Other' in sexist stereotypes. Human heteronormativity and sexism cause us to impose categories on nature that do not exist. In essence, we get ourselves wrong and thus get animals wrong. But the reverse is true, too: historically, we have got animals wrong, so we get ourselves even more wrong! Historically, we have interpreted nature based on our biases and use our biased understanding of nature to justify those societal biases we have... So we insisted on innate gender binaries, sex stereotypes exist in Nature and then used these categories to buttress the insistence that human society be patriarchal or rigidly binary. And thus, we get ourselves more wrong. It is History's *ouroboros*.

This volume not only challenges the stale archetype of male dominance and female submission and submissiveness, but it also contests that there was and is ever any one way of being male or female, and therefore of being masculine or feminine. Nature, including humans, is far more diverse. But, we now know that humans recognized multispecies queer ecology that disrupted normative expectations well over a century ago – albeit it was a subterranean knowledge. Life was fluid, hierarchies were not rigid, binaries were not static nor omnipresent – some knew it, but it was largely secret until change came from within human society. Then, at last, it was noticed in Nature. Once that happened, public awareness of multi-species fluidity further challenged our notions about sexual and gender norms. Was the dragon-serpent *ouroboros* finally free from eating their own tail?

Second, we should pay attention to what we consider 'Otherness.' Put simply, variation abounds: if we find it helpful to think about ourselves through a multispecies lens then we need to find fresh exemplars. We certainly have a much broader set of models with which to think with many 'natural' instances of non-binariness, fluidity, and queerness. What the

other animals get up to and therefore what is understood to be ‘natural’ has a strange power over us. Rethinking what is ‘natural’ helps us recalibrate negative and narrow beliefs of who is allowed to see themselves reflected in nature. This has real world impacts. Never forget that Bagemihl’s book was evidence in a brief filed for the 2003 Supreme Court case that ultimately struck down sodomy laws.

The third key message I urge you to take away is this: historically gendered stereotyping, predicated on a misunderstanding of the animal world, is just as harmful to boys and men as it is to girls and women – and maybe as harmful to our understanding of the more-than-human world. It fosters the naturalizing (acceptance and, indeed, promotion of) aggressive, violent male behaviour. This kind of thinking about animals is an alibi and spur for toxic (human) masculinity. But it also makes us get the animal world wrong – again. This, in turn, promotes more misunderstanding and narrowing of the range of possible ways to be and live in this more-than-human world. The mirror socio-biology was supposed to hold up to us was to show a strict male–female binary and heterosexuality as natural. In fact, the mirror animals hold up to us reveals that we are flexible and exist in a diversity of sexualities, contoured by context and changing over time. Biology is not destiny – for any of us.

## Coda

As you will see, in the suite of essays and interventions that follow, we were especially welcoming of contributions that experimented with new forms, perspectives, and scales of analysis from all over the world and invited authors from academia, museums and cultural and heritage institutions, and activist organizations. We feel strongly about the need to extend the boundaries of our field – in authoring and in subject material – by seeking research from a range of writers from diverse backgrounds, institutional affiliations, and places – from the Global South and Global North; early career and senior scholars; and contributors of diverse identities. We started this volume with seabirds (and scholars) who broke the norms imposed by human convention. We now see a freed and freeing flock of authors emerging in the essays that follow, swooping and soaring in susurrations, guided by a shared curiosity. This collection is an intellectual *murmuration*: each essay is individual but all of us are moving together in taking the animal history to new heights.

## About the Author

**Sandra Swart** is professor and chair of the Department of History at Stellenbosch University, South Africa. She received her DPhil in Modern History from Oxford University in 2001, while simultaneously obtaining an MSc in Environmental Change and Management, also at Oxford. She studies the socio-environmental history of southern Africa, focusing on animals. She is an editor of the Brill book series *African and Asian Anthropocene: Studies in the Environmental Humanities* and co-vice president of the European Society for Environmental History. She has authored/co-authored over 80 articles and chapters, with G. Bankoff, *Breeds of Empire: The 'Invention' of the Horse in the Philippines and Southern Africa, 1500–1950* (2007); with L. van Sittert (eds), *Canis Africanis: A Dog History of Southern Africa* (2008); and with E. O’Gorman, M. Carey, and W. San Martín (eds), *The Routledge Handbook of Environmental History* (2024). She is sole author of *Riding High: Horses, Humans and History in South Africa* (Witwatersrand University Press, 2010) and *The Lion’s Historian: Africa’s Animal Past* (Johannesburg: Jacana Press, 2023).