

Approaching the issues of climate change and climate justice from a range of diverse perspectives including those of culture, gender, indigeneity, race, and sexuality, as well as challenging colonial histories and capitalist presents, *Climate Futures* boldly addresses the apparent inevitability of climate chaos.

Seeking better explanations of the underlying causes and consequences of climate change, and mapping strategies toward a better future or, at a minimum, the most likely best-case world that we can get to, this book envisions planetary social movements robust enough to spark the necessary changes needed to achieve deeply sustainable and just economic, social, and political policies and practices.

Bringing together insights from interdisciplinary scholars, policymakers, creatives and activists, *Climate Futures* argues for the need to get past us-and-them divides and acknowledge how lives of creatures far and near, human and non-human, are interconnected.

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Kum-Kum Bhavnani, John Foran, Priya A. Kurian, and Debashish Munshi

CLIMATE FUTURES

Reimagining Global Climate Justice



11 | OUT OF THE CLOSETS AND INTO THE CLIMATE! QUEER FEMINIST CLIMATE JUSTICE

Greta Gaard

Dancing to salsa and merengue at Pulse nightclub on Latinx night in June 2016, the queer and trans* community of Orlando, Florida was unprepared for the gunman who arrived at 2:00 a.m. with an assault rifle and a pistol, killing 49 people and wounding 53 more. The violence continued from 2:00 to 5:00 a.m., with the 29-year-old shooter claiming his actions honored the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). While mainstream media heralded this as the deadliest mass shooting in US history, even grieving activists were quick to cite the Battle at Wounded Knee in 1890, where US cavalry massacred 300 Lakota Sioux—mostly unarmed women and children—and to recall the racially motivated shooting just a year earlier at the oldest Black church in Charleston, South Carolina, where nine members of Bible Study group (half of whom were seniors) were murdered by a 21-year-old white man who claimed he wanted to start a “race war.”

In the days that followed, the intersections of race, sexuality, and environment were eloquently articulated in e-mails from environmental and climate activists. Michael Brune (2016) of the Sierra Club expressed sorrow and solidarity, affirming that “standing boldly against homophobia, transphobia, racism, Islamophobia and sexism is the only way we can tear down the systems of oppression and exclusion that have divided our country for far too long.” The internationally known climate justice organization, 350.org (Capato et al. 2016) sent out a collectively authored message of grief and hope, affirming “our fights are connected,” and “as LGBTQ+ climate activists, we need to bring our whole selves to this work.” Disclosing that “many of us who are shoulder to shoulder with you in the streets are LGBTQ+,” 11 queer and trans* activists of color from 350.org provided the climate justice movement with its first nationally publicized coming-out statement.

Climate Futures: Rethinking Global Climate Justice. Eds. Kira-Kim Bhavnani, John Foran, Priya Kurian, & Debashish Munshi. 2nd Book, 2019. pp. 92-101

Against nature?

Work connecting the feminist, environmental justice, and climate justice movements had been ongoing for decades prior to the tragedy at Pulse nightclub. Ecofeminist writings in the 1990s had initially addressed the colonialist links between homophobia and ecophobia, Western culture’s fear of nature and all those socially constructed as “closer to nature,” whether by gender, race, or species. As ecofeminists argued, colonialism provides a clear example of the intersections and devaluations of all those associated with nature, whether by indigeneity, race, sexuality, gender, or species.

So, why have arguments against homosexuality have always involved appeals to nature? Queer theorists who explore the natural/unnatural dichotomy find that “natural” is invariably associated with “procreation,” an equation all too familiar to feminists. Refusing childbearing through alternate sexualities or birth control (including abortion), women are described as “unnatural,” and queer sexuality is seen as “against nature.” Such arguments imply that nature is valued, yet Western culture has constructed nature as a force to be dominated if culture is to prevail. These contradictory claims reveal that the “nature” queers are urged to comply with is simply the dominant paradigm of heterosexuality.

In fact, the ample evidence of same-sex sexual behaviors in other species confirms that such behaviors transcend the procreative. Popular science books such as Bruce Bagemihl’s *Biological Exuberance* (1999) and Joan Roughgarden’s *Evolution’s Rainbow* (2013) document a vast range of same-sex acts, same-sex childrearing pairs, intersex animals, and multiple “genders.” Female homosexual behavior has been found in chickens, turkeys, chameleons, and cows, while male homosexual behavior has been observed in fruit flies, bulls, dolphins, porpoises, and apes. Like sexuality, mating behavior varies across mammal species: some pairs mate for life (jackals), some have multiple partners (zebras, whales, chimpanzees), and some are homosocial, seeking out members of their species solely for procreation. The protests against the New York City Zoo’s male chinstrap penguin couple who hatched a penguin egg and raised the offspring as their own (see Smith 2004) show both the depth of homophobic fears about gay parenting, and the wisdom of inspired zookeepers around the world, who have subsequently allowed same-sex penguin couples to adopt eggs.

To destabilize heteronormativity even further, queer approaches to plant studies reveal that plant species display a range of behaviors in reproduction, kinship, and association that rival that of animals: triads, multiple

partners, self-pollination, and multiple genders all exceed compulsory heterosexuality's mandates in their queer botanical vitality. Because so many species have their own sexualities and cultures that don't fit with dominant human cultural models, it appears impossible to require humans to comply with "nature," for which species' "nature" would be the model? Would it be the black widow spider, who eats the male after mating, or the praying mantis, who eats the male while mating? Would it be the lesbian lizards, who reproduce by virgin birth? Evidently, attempts to naturalize one form of sexuality above all others are, at root, attempts to foreclose investigation of sexual diversity and sexual practices. Such attempts manifest Western culture's homophobia, erotophobia, and ecophobia.

Climate change homophobia

Climate change homophobia is evident in the media blackout of LGBTQ+ people in the wake of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, an unprecedented storm and infrastructure collapse which occurred just days before the annual queer festival in New Orleans, "Southern Decadence," a celebration that drew 125,000 revelers, when conservative groups first began videotaping the event and filing a petition to have it terminated. In 2005, the religious right quickly declared Hurricane Katrina an example of God's wrath against homosexuals, waving signs with "Thank God for Katrina" and publishing detailed connections between the sin of homosexuality and the destruction of New Orleans (Richards 2010).

Queer and transgendered persons already live on the margins of most societies, often denied rights of marriage and family life, denied health care coverage for partners and their children, denied fair housing and employment rights, immigration rights, and more. Climate change exacerbates pressures on marginalized people first, with economic and cultural elites best able to mitigate and postpone impacts. As a global phenomenon, homophobia infiltrates climate change discourse, distorting our analysis of climate change causes and climate justice solutions, and placing a wedge between international activists. For example, at the First World People's Conference on Climate Change and Mother Earth held in Cochabamba, April 19–22, 2010, Bolivian President Evo Morales claimed that the presence of homosexual men around the world was a consequence of eating genetically modified chicken: "The chicken that we eat is chock-full of feminine hormones. So, when men eat these chickens, they deviate from themselves as men" (Valenza 2010). This statement exemplifies a nexus of sexism, speciesism, and homophobia that overlooks the workings of industrial agribusiness, and simultaneously

vilifies gay and transgendered persons as unnatural "genetic deviants." And it illustrates the need for queer feminist climate justice—because all our climates are raced, gendered, and sexualized, simultaneously material, cultural, and ecological.

Given the correlation and mutual reinforcement of sexism and homophobia (Pharr 1988), it should be no surprise that the standpoints on climate change for women and LGBTQ+ populations are comparable. While skeptics have debated whether a higher participation of women leads to better climate policy, and whether there is any verifiable gender difference in climate change knowledge and concern, the data suggest that women would make different decisions about climate change problems and solutions (see Table 11.1).¹

While gender balance at all levels of climate change decision-making is necessary, it does not automatically guarantee gender-responsive climate policy. A wider transformation is needed, involving progressive men and genderqueer others.

Very few studies have recognized a *queer* ecological perspective, much less brought that perspective to climate change research and data collection. Yet according to a US poll conducted by Harris Interactive, "LGBT Americans think, act, vote more green than others" (2009).²

Table 11.1 Gender Differences in Climate Change Knowledge, Attitudes, and Actions

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Women are estimated to compose between 60 percent and 80 percent of grassroots environmental organization membership, and are more active in environmental reform projects.• Women tend to perceive environmental risks as more threatening and express greater concern about climate change than do men.• Women in the US show greater scientific knowledge of climate change, approach the issue of climate change differently, and express different concerns and potential solutions to problems.• Women consider climate change impacts to be more severe.• Women are more skeptical about the effectiveness of current climate change policies in solving the problem, whereas men tend to put their trust in scientific and technical solutions.• Women are more willing to change to a more climate-friendly lifestyle.• Climate protection policy areas—energy policy, transportation planning, urban planning—tend to be male-dominated.• Women are underrepresented in areas of climate change policy.• Women underestimate their climate change knowledge more than do men.

Most significant in the Harris Poll—given that heterosexuals are more likely to have children—was the LGBT response expressed for what kind of planet we are leaving for future generations, a question which concerned LGBT respondents at 51 percent as compared with 42 percent of heterosexual respondents. Yet in United Nations discourse to date, when LGBTQ+ people seek an entry point into the ongoing climate change conversations, the primary entry point is one of illness, addressing only HIV and AIDS. From these studies, it appears that structural gender inequality, and more specifically the underrepresentation of women and genderqueers in decision-making bodies on climate change, is actually *inhibiting* national and global action in addressing climate change. For example, research has shown that women and queers have more environmental consciousness than straight white men—yet women and queers are largely excluded from decision-making bodies addressing climate change. Their exclusion means that the decisions affecting all of us are lacking both information and analysis that do not exist separately from the embodiment of diverse communities (see Table 11.1).

The culturally constructed fear, denial, and devaluation of our embodied erotic is not lost on eco-activist youth, who are among the first to mention sexual well-being in climate change discussions. At COP 18 in Doha, Qatar, November 26–December 8, 2012, a Youth Gender Working Group emerged, emphasizing issues like the right to financing and technology, and how disasters impact women, LGBTQ+ communities, sexual health, and reproductive rights. Updating the Gender and Climate Change Network's slogan, youth agreed, "there will be no climate justice without *queer* gender justice" (De Cicco 2013).

Queering climate justice

The intersections of gender, sexuality, race, and economic justice have not always been a recognized part of either feminism or the environmental justice movement, but the internal diversity of these movements has been present from the start. LGBTQ+ people have taken leading roles in many movements, from the women's suffrage and abolitionist movements of the 19th century, to the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and 1930s, to the Civil Rights movement, and the social movements of the 1960s. But in these movements, queer activists have not been recognized for their work as LGBTQ+ people, and have had to form separate organizations addressing their multiple needs and interests.

In 2002, an international coalition of activists drafted the *Bali Principles of Climate Justice* (2002), articulating the links between climate change and

environmental justice, and expanding the 17 *Principles of Environmental Justice* (1991) to a list of 27 principles, specifically including the rights of women, youth, and the problem of ecological debt. Another formal expansion of climate justice that includes LGBTQ+ rights has yet to be developed, but queer climate justice organizing has already begun.

At the 2014 Fossil Fuel Divestment Convergence at San Francisco State University, a workshop on "Queering the Climate Movement" was offered to participants who wanted to explore the question, "how come our movement so rarely talks about the intersection of queer, trans* and climate justice?" Participants concluded that not only are there groups within the climate movement that have not recognized the intersections between LGBTQ+ and climate movements, but that queer and trans* folks also need to be more visible, both in the climate movement and in allied movements defending justice for marginalized communities. Among those allied movements should be #BlackLivesMatter and #IdleNoMore, for as Naomi Klein (2014b) observes, "the reality of an economic order built on white supremacy is the whispered subtext of our entire response to the climate crisis, and it badly needs to be dragged into the light." Such alliances will educate queers, feminists, and climate activists about the depth and complexity of racism, which is still invisible to those in dominant groups—and many in marginalized groups as well.

At the People's Climate March in September 2014, a workshop on "Queers for Climate" was offered to articulate the ways that queers are affected by climate change, the reasons queers need to act on climate change, and how queer activism has tools that can be useful to the fight for climate justice. Discussion addressed the fact that in crises, already marginalized groups experience added stress: women face increased levels of sexual assault, while queers and people of color face higher levels of discrimination, prejudice, and hate crimes. "What good is marriage equality on the Titanic of climate change?" participants asked. And queers can't build racially inclusive communities on the ground of toxic and stolen lands. There are many skills queers bring to the climate crisis, developed over a history of mobilizing for human rights and for federal responses to the AIDS health care crisis, along with the multitasking skills of addressing government institutions, cultural homophobia, and public opinion while continuing to do the everyday work of maintaining community—providing companionship to elderly, sick, or disabled queers along with problem-solving support, food, transportation, and laundry.

Despite these skills, at the 2014 People's Climate March, queer and trans* people of color (QTPOC) were still backgrounded. As an organizer

with the Audre Lorde Project, Ceci Pineda explains that the lineup for the People's Climate March placed LGBTQ+ folks in the seventh and final group, far behind communities identified as on the "frontlines of the crisis and forefront of change," or those who "can build the future," "have solutions," and "know who is responsible." This placement erases the knowledge and experiences of queer and trans* people of color and reopens wounds from the larger homophobic and racist culture as well as the LGBTQ+ culture. The Audre Lorde Project had just completed a solidarity letter naming the harsh impacts that climate change has on the queer and trans* people of color community, as marginalized communities bear increased burdens at all stages of environmental disasters, and are particularly vulnerable to climate change's adverse health effects, and its negative impact on food supply and drinking water. Low-income queer and trans* folks, particularly those with disabilities or mental illness, are even more vulnerable. Queer and trans* politics recognize that confronting climate change requires challenging the systems of oppression that exploit the earth and most human communities.

Influenced by the larger cultural forces that queers both critique and resist, queer organizations may still reflect the segregation of the larger US culture. In recognition of this problem, many organizations working on racial equity also engage in lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) advocacy, but these examples are not highly visible and are often under-resourced, a point made in the 2013 Applied Research Center *Race Forward Report* discussed below. As a result, misperceptions about the potential linkages between racial and LGBT justice flourish, including assumptions that few people of color identify as LGBT or that people of color are more homophobic than whites. In their 2013 *Better Together* report, Arquero, Sen, and Keleher of the Applied Research Center (now renamed Race Forward: The Center for Racial Justice Innovation) recommend:

- Expanding media visibility and communications capacity of LGBT people of color and those working at the intersection of race and sexuality,
- Developing LGBT leaders of color,
- Increasing support for strategic political analysis that links racial justice and LGBT equity, and
- Investing in tools that expand beyond specific policy fights like marriage equality and Don't Ask, Don't Tell to engage long-term capacity development and coalition building (Arquero, Sen, and Keleher 2013: 6).

The road to education about racial, gender, and sexual justice includes working within existing organizations to build broader pathways toward intersectional analysis and activism. Groups such as the gay and lesbian Sierra Club chapters in California, Colorado, and Washington, the US-based Queer Farmer Film Project, San Francisco's Rainbow Chard Alliance, Toronto's EcoQueers, and Minnesota's Outwoods all bridge the queer/environmentalist communities that are working to address white-hetero-privilege in the environmental movement. Given the persistent racial segregation of the United States, LGBTQ+ organizations within diverse urban centers or with a national reach are more able to organize queer and trans* communities of color. The Washington state-based Out4Sustainability, for example, has chapters in San Francisco Bay, Phoenix, Vermont, and New York, and organizes annual Earth Gay service projects, an annual Fab Planet Conference, and Greener Pride. Publisher of the daily news site ColorLines, Race Forward organizes the Facing Race National Conference and provides mobilization, skill-building, leadership development, organization- and alliance-building, issue-framing, and research reports. While the climate justice movement clearly addresses racial and gender justice, its ability to integrate an intersectional approach that foregrounds climate impacts on queer and trans* communities of color is still in progress.

Queer alternatives to climate crises

Creating sustainable and just alternatives to climate change is a crucial part of the climate justice movement, and queers are contributing in many ways. Queer food justice grows out of today's budding eco-queer movement, and is shaped by queer farmers and gardeners who feel uncomfortable in the mainstream white, heteromale, and middle-class locavore movement. The grassroots food justice movement is far from this stereotype, and reaches back to Black women rural gardeners in the post-Reconstruction South and in Harlem's rooftop gardens. In San Francisco, Queer Food For Love (QFFL) provides food, community, and a safe space against prejudice, while the Rainbow Chard Alliance bridges the organic farming movement and the queer movement, creating community for like-minded "eco-homos" in the Bay Area. In the US, the queer food justice movement is articulated through groups ranging from Vermont, Massachusetts, California, and Connecticut to Tennessee, Alabama, Arkansas, Kansas, and Washington. Concerned about the intersections between environment, sexuality, and gender, these queer groups use food to build community, fight oppression, and take care of planetary and human bodies.

From an intersectional standpoint, food justice cannot be defined solely in terms of justice across human diversities, excluding those who count as “food.” Founded by an Arab-American and a white working-class lesbian couple in 2000, VINE Sanctuary is run by five queer and trans*-identified activists, providing a haven for animals who have escaped or been rescued from the meat, dairy, and egg industries, or other abusive circumstances, such as cockfights or pigeon-shoots. Sanctuary residents include chickens, cows, ducks, doves, geese, pigeons, sheep, emus, and even a few parakeets. In addition to sheltering and advocating for animals, VINE conducts research and provides education aimed at creating systemic changes in agriculture, trade, and consumption as well as human attitudes about animals and the environment, as these intersect with racial and gender justice.

Just as the exploitation of animals initially set the stage for race-based exploitation of people, VINE recognizes that today’s racial and economic injustices perpetuate both environmental racism and the continued exploitation of animals. Dangerous and environmentally destructive factory farms and processing plants are often located in communities of color. Local citizens must live with the pollution while working at dangerous and degrading jobs. The products of these industries are often marketed to communities of color, regardless of the impact on physical health or cultural welfare. US dietary guidelines recommending high consumption of meat and dairy products are a form of *food racism*, as up to 95 percent of adult Asians, 74 percent of Native Americans, 70 percent of African Americans, and 53 percent of Mexican Americans are lactose intolerant (Gaard 2017: 61). Recommendations concerning meat consumption ignore the high rates of heart disease, hypertension, and diabetes among African Americans. Low-income communities of color continue to be the sites of high concentrations of fast food restaurants (i.e., “food deserts”) without grocery stores offering fresh fruits and vegetables, bulk grains, and other inexpensive ingredients for a healthy diet.

Finally, queer cultural skills such as queer aesthetics, queer performativity, pageantry, drag, and polymorphous perversity are all tools useful to the climate justice movement. Ecosexuality is but one example of the activist potential for queer feminist climate justice. In their eco-documentary, *Goodbye Gauley Mountain* (2013) Beth Stephens and Annie Sprinkle expose the ways that coal mining and mountaintop removal affect queers, working-class poor people, and ecosystems. The Black miners who died of silicosis in the 1930s, working to build Hawks Nest Tunnel for the coal company; the mountaintop-removal communities

of poor white people who have a 50 percent increase of cancer, and are 42 percent more likely to have children born with birth defects—both illustrate the “slow violence” of rural environmental racism and classism, wiping out the culture and ecocommunities of West Virginia, where a homegrown queer performance artist like Beth Stephens and her wife and former porn star, Annie Sprinkle, to West Virginia’s embattled mining communities, Beth and Annie’s ecosexual weddings bridge the urban/rural, queer/straight, white/people of color schisms by affirming a shared and longstanding love of the mountains, and celebrating that love in drag and polyamorous commitment. Ecosexuality “shifts the metaphor from earth as mother to earth as lover,” says Annie Sprinkle, “to entice people to have more love of the planet” (Stephens and Sprinkle 2016).

For a queer and present climate justice

The tragedy at Pulse nightclub effectively outed the climate justice movement. As Suzanne Pharr explained in 1988, homophobia is rooted in cultural misogyny, and the liberation of women, people of color, and queers are inextricably interconnected. Moreover, an economic system reliant on enslaving people, animals, and the earth cannot survive. Nature is far from heteronormative, and real climate justice will have to include all of us.

Notes

1. The careful methodology of these studies affirms their validity. International findings on gendered differences in climate change causes, analyses, and solutions in Ergas and York (2012) rest on 60 peer-reviewed studies, which then shape the questions and statistical analysis these authors undertake. McCright (2010) tests the arguments about gender differences in scientific knowledge and environmental concern using eight years of Gallup data on climate change knowledge and concern in the US public. Alber and Roehr (2006) report on the project “Climate for Change—Gender Equality and Climate Policy” that performed data surveys of the gender balance in climate

policy at local and national levels for ten major cities in four European countries (Germany, Italy, Finland, Sweden). The studies are cited and discussed in Gaard (2015). I recognize that “gender” here is defined in binary terms and searched for but could find no research on trans* perspectives about environmental issues, though I suspect these perspectives would be comparable to other non-dominant gendered views.

2. Because the findings may surprise some readers, I include links to Harris Interactive Methods for LGBT surveys: www.harrisinteractive.com/MethodsTools/DataCollection/SpecialtyPanelsPanelDevelopment/LGBTPanel.aspx.