

Reclaim the Climate – Queer Ecologies

Moderator: Julien, cisgender man, white, homosexual, rural and middle class.

Guests:

Ruth, black, cisgender woman, bisexual, from Brussels working-class neighbourhoods and precarious social class. Her parents are from North Kivu, Congo.

Cy, white cisgender, homosexual male, from a rather bourgeois environment in a small village, later moved to Paris.

Julien: Can you tell me how your interest in queer and environmental activism was aroused and what evolution you went through?

Ruth: I first started to take action around student themes, but then I got more and more involved in climate themes that got more and more attention in the media and in general. That's how I ended up with various actions that were orchestrated around the COPs.

I was interested by the climate movement, because it deals with global themes, but at the same time I was always confronted with the white majority in that movement. As black people we already experience racism in daily life, but we always expect - rightly or wrongly - that there will be more awareness within activist groups. Unfortunately that was not always the case.

I didn't start asking myself questions about queer issues until later. In those activist groups we didn't often know who was queer and who wasn't. So I began to wonder to what extent we really knew each other.

Cy: I only became politicized late. Towards the end of my studies I began to distance myself from the academic world. I first got into the climate movement because it was the period before the COP in Paris. At the time I worked for a publisher who published Naomi Klein's book, so I attended conferences on ecology during that period. That was a big shock, but positive. After that I became more interested in social themes.

Within that movement I also stumbled upon forms of oppression. From that experience, but also from my need to integrate my sexuality into my activism, I evolved from the climate movement in the direction of the LGBTQI movement. Since then I keep moving between the two and in intersectional movements.

Julien: How do you see - broader than your experiences - the experience of queer persons within the environmental movement and climate justice?

Ruth: We are often invisible within the movement. It's not talked about much, because it's not part of the ecological struggle. Heterosexuals talk about their partners openly within the movement, but we hear much less about queer people. For example, Julien, I only discovered late that you are queer. For trans persons, this invisibility means misgendering - that people use words pertaining to the wrong gender [pronouns or words like man, woman, ...] to refer to them. It is not common to ask which pronouns people use.

This invisibility also reinforces the lack of inclusiveness. People who feel concerned about the climate crisis do not take the step to the environmental movement because they do not know other LGBTQI people there.

Another important consequence of this invisibility and the prevailing cisheteronormativity is that people also feel comfortable with certain things - hyper homophobic or transphobic statements - because we are still within a cishetero environment and we 'are all progressive' and against all forms of oppression. People don't realize how this excludes people and this translates into the use of language in mutual conversations or also in public discourse.

Cy: I left the big environmental organizations because of this kind of behaviour. At one point I was so frustrated that I couldn't be myself within these spaces that I needed to retreat into LGBTQI spaces, even though it wasn't always appreciated to be 'ecolo' there.

Julien: **Cy, can you tell us more about the causes of these difficult relationships?**

Cy: In the West, ecologism is strongly inspired by a critique of a society that is 'unnatural', that goes against a natural way of life. This construction is very heteronormative and is accompanied by an appreciation of reproduction, gender-binarity, ... Many of the concepts developed in the LGBTQI movement are at odds with this.

This sometimes leads to problematic positions within both the 'left' and the 'right' environmental movement and the difference is not always very clear. The starting point is a closed vision of nature. Everything that starts from a transformation of nature is seen and criticized as unnatural. In this way you can come to extremely violent transphobic opinions and statements from the fantasy of a kind of 'original' nature, which is a very cisheteronormative and white image.

Julien: **It's interesting that it starts from a critique of modernity which sometimes turns into a critique of LGBTQI movement. Trans persons for example are seen as aberrations, cyborgs... While it is also that modernity that has shaped and imposed the idea of the nuclear family in colonized countries, just like the cisheteronormative model. In colonized countries, modernity crushed life forms that were more gender diverse, just as it crushed lifestyles that existed in harmony with non-human life.**

Cy: One of the essential tasks is indeed to be able to give examples that go beyond the dichotomy of 'natural'/'unnatural', wheter this dichotomy appears within a capitalist vision, or within an ecologist vision. We have to go beyond this dualism that historically served to suppress, exploit, colonize areas that would be 'unnatural', or on the other hand just 'too natural', beastly, ...

Julien: **For example, in the resistance against same-sex marriage in France, the image of the monkey was used on the one hand to portray Christiane Taubira - a black woman who introduced the bill as a minister, nvdr - and on the other hand same-sex marriage: "if people can now marry people of the same gender, why not monkeys?"**

Ruth: There's definitely something in there about 'we're better than animals'. "We humans" versus "them, animals". We also see a similar kind of binary between 'individual ecological actions' seen as female and virility of e.g. eating meat on the other side. It is striking how we still find such binary thinking in the environmental movements. Here, too, it is always the men who make the decisions. It all remains quite paternalistic, like: "Yeah, we know it now, we'll work on it".

Julien: **Are there also eco-queer movements, such as ecofeminist movements?**

Cy: Both terms 'ecologism' and 'queer' are relatively recent, so in history we don't find many examples that use these terms themselves, but we do find examples that go in that direction. For

example, within pre-Christian Europe we have examples of people we would now call 'queer', who worshipped nature in the form of a goddess.

In addition: as the sexual sciences and the first forms of homosexual and lesbian identity develop, there are also people who look for a place for queer persons within nature. This often starts from a multiple and more complex vision of nature than the binary version we talked about earlier.

There are also many examples outside the West, although these are less accessible because we often come across reports of white people and not of the people involved themselves, but these reports often express a celebration of sexuality, non-binarity, to a consideration of nature, the visible and invisible, respect for ecosystems.