

## **Queer Zoo Animals: Between Species, Sex, and Politics**

### **Abstract:**

Since 2006, the Berlin Zoo hosts “Gay Night at the Zoo,” an open-air swing party for more than 1000 guests. Initially taking place during the Pride Week, the party celebrates diversity, cosmopolitanism, and tolerance and is one of the largest LGBT-themed events organized in collaboration with a city zoo. When looking at the history of the zoological garden, this unusual location is not that surprising. Since its birth in the early 19th century, the public zoo helped to showcase development, openness, and innovation and thus, allowed for performing certain types of modern subjectivities: in particular middle-class, urban, and national ones. However, the juncture between sexuality and animality also raises some questions: doesn't the zoological context run the risk of animalizing homosexuals? Who can afford seeking affinity with nonhumans in shaping their sexual subjectivity? What is at stake in performing sexual identities at the zoo, given the colonial legacy of this institution and its key role in producing the discourse on Nature that for a long time defined non-heteronormative behaviors as “aberrant”? Only recently homosexual behavior among nonhuman animals has been discussed openly by biologists and ethologists. “Queer animals” are often observed in captivity, making the zoo into a crucial site for thinking species, sex and politics together.

With major transformations in sexual politics in the last three decades the phenomenon of homosexuality in the animal kingdom gained traction within widely recognized biological research. In this lecture, I will focus on the phenomenon of “queer zoo animals” and analyze it as a catalyst for reclaiming nature for queer politics. I will first present the process by which the zoo becomes a site equipped with a set of “technologies” that, through discourses on nature and animals, shape identities and politics. I go as far back as the late 18<sup>th</sup> century when private menageries transformed into the modern enterprise of a public zoological garden, which involved scientific, economic and political goals. Drawing upon various cases of “queer zoo animals” I show how specific species are differently mobilized to produce naturalization, biological essentialism, and anthropocentrism. What or who are these creatures that stir debates on naturalness of sexuality and gender? I suggest to analyze the phenomenon of queer zoo animals in close relationship with historical changes that made it possible to openly discuss animal queerness, which itself is usually presented in relation to human sexuality. It is not a coincidence that penguin “homosexual romance” is flourishing when human gays fight for marriage equality and adoption rights, and that zoos are working with the latest reproductive technologies to stimulate giant pandas to breed against their own extinction.

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gardens. At the MPIWG she is a member of “The Body of Animals” working group in Department III Artifacts, Knowledge, Action. She has published on zoos and gender, scientific research on hormones, relations between affect, transgender, and animal studies.