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QUESTIONING THE RELATION BETWEEN FEMINISM AND ENVIROMENTALISM

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QUESTIONING THE RELATION BETWEEN FEMINISM AND ENVIRONMENTALISM

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Abstract

The essay 'Eco/Feminism, Non-Violence and the Future of Feminism' takes on an important issue within ecofeminism and feminist theory generally – the relationship between maternalism, pacifism, ecofeminism, and essentialism – arguing for new ways of reading 'eco/feminist' activism as an engaged mode of theory. Ironically, even though the purpose of the peace camp in Clayoquot Sound was to protest the logging of the rainforest, this essay does not examine the meaning of nature or environmentalism for the protestors. Nature becomes a mere background for the gendered human drama that unfolds. It is crucial that we interrogate the grounds, purposes, and consequences of linking environmentalism and feminism, by analyzing specific articulations within particular places and contexts. Whether or not it is beneficial to merge feminism and environmentalism remains an open question.

Keywords

feminism, environmentalism, gender, nature, ecofeminist activism, feminist theory

The essay 'Eco/Feminism, Non-Violence and the Future of Feminism' boldly challenges predominant, calcified notions of essentialism within feminist theory by analyzing an eco/feminist peace camp. Niamh Moore takes on an important issue within ecofeminism and feminist theory generally – the relationship between maternalism, pacifism, ecofeminism and essentialism – arguing for new ways of reading 'eco/feminist' activism. The essay thus contributes to a significant project within current theory – a reconsideration of anti-essentialist orthodoxies that have foreclosed paths for both feminist theory and feminist activism. The charge of essentialism has been leveled most vociferously against any feminist movement or writing that connects 'woman' with 'nature', which makes a certain kind of sense given that, historically, a litany of misogynies have relied upon that very connection.

The essay's close, careful reading of actual ecofeminist activism refutes the blanket condemnation of environmental feminisms as essentialist. The author

demonstrates, in fact, that this ecofeminist camp was no hotbed of essentialism, but instead, a place for the different mobilizations of the category of 'woman' within specific narratives. The examination of the two accounts of the violent event demonstrates that 'eco/feminist' peace camps 'can be understood as sites of struggle over the meaning of woman, and the practice of eco/feminist politics, where the meanings of woman, and eco/feminism, are not just reified but are also refigured' (p. 294). Such narrative refigurations are the very stuff of feminist contestation over the category of 'woman' (see, of course, Butler 1992). Indeed, one of the most compelling aspects of this piece is the author's generous and expansive reading of her interview with 'Fireweed'. By analyzing Fireweed's account of the attack, and by contextualizing it within Langer's story, the author demonstrates that essentialist notions of 'woman' did not ground the politics of this peace camp, but, that, nonetheless, essentialist 'discourses crept back in, in the face of a woman who tried to refuse to be vulnerable' (p. 293). Even as Fireweed insisted upon a political analysis of the violent event that would reveal how the 'understandings of peacekeeping were gendered' (p. 292) her response was reduced to hysteria, thus reiterating, 'cultural expectations of women's victimhood' (p. 293). Niamh Moore's incisive critique demonstrates the 'ongoing work necessary to challenge dominant cultural norms' (p. 293). Overall, I appreciate the attempt to challenge the essentialist label that has been used to condemn ecofeminism as one homogenous movement or philosophy (even as I have been a critic of particular essentialist, or even gender maximizing, formulations within ecofeminism). I also applaud Moore's efforts to take activism seriously as an engaged mode of theory, a process of reflective thought. Feminist theory needs to be in continual conversation with, provoked by, and transformed by, activism.

One of the most intriguing aspects of this study, however, is that even though the purpose of the peace camp in Clayoquot Sound was to protest the logging of the rainforest, this essay, which focuses on one particular violent incident, does not address the meanings of nature or environmentalism for the protestors. Nature becomes a mere background for the gendered human drama that unfolds, which is ironic, given that in *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, Val Plumwood (1993) argues that 'backgrounding' is one of the ways in which both 'woman' and 'nature' have been devalued. Indeed, it is striking to me that the essay, for the most part, does not discuss the meaning, significance, or ramifications of the coupling of feminism and environmentalism. Moore does include the statement from the 'Welcome Handout' for the camp, which says that 'sexism, racism, and homophobia are forms of oppression which are linked to the oppression of nature' (p. 287). After that, however, nature disappears; it is assumed that the feminist contestations that follow are 'eco/feminist' but it is not clear what, exactly, the relation is between environmentalism and feminism. Strikingly, the men who attack the camp are from an 'anti-environmentalist group', and, as McLaren notes (cited within the article), their attacks are 'against women' (p. 291). Thus the attacks

themselves embody the ecofeminist contention that sexism is 'linked to the oppression of Nature' (p. 288). This articulation between masculinity and the domination of women and nature deserves more consideration as well. How did misogyny function within the anti-environmentalist groups?

Environmental-feminist scholarship, quite broadly conceived, has effectively critiqued the mutually constituting discourses that gender nature to denigrate it and naturalize 'woman' to debase her. Annette Kolodny's (1975) *The Lay of the Land*, Carolyn Merchant's (1980) *The Death of Nature*, and, in places, Donna Haraway's (1989) *Primate Visions*, lay bare the interconnecting discourses that link woman and nature in ways that are detrimental to them both. As a mode of critique, environmental feminism has performed valuable cultural work. As a coherent political position, however, ecofeminism raises many questions regarding the costs and benefits of connecting feminism and environmentalism. Does feminist environmentalism have a different sort of basis or a different set of goals than other environmentalisms? Does the very term 'ecofeminism' imply a gender-maximizing approach to environmental issues that relies upon a solid sense of 'woman'? Does it imply, presume, or construct a significant 'connection' between actual women and the natural world? Does allying feminism and environmentalism reinforce the sense that men are disembodied, or exist within more solid body-boundaries that protect them from environmental risk? Does 'ecofeminism' attract or repel women who experience nature and environmentalism as places and political philosophies that are – attractively – a refuge from the constrictions of gender and heterosexism? To what extent are particular struggles – against toxins in the home, the workplace and the neighborhood – gendered and to what extent are these struggles more indicative of the hierarchies of race and class? Does it make sense to examine global warming or the destruction of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge as gendered issues?

Interestingly, Moore uses the typography of 'eco/feminism' rather than the more common 'eco-feminism' or 'ecofeminism', suggesting, I think, that the two political projects are not united, but run along parallel tracks, as the slash both separates and allies the two terms. As I have argued in *Undomesticated Ground: Recasting Nature as Feminist Space* (Alaimo 2000) and elsewhere, there is no necessary or essential relation between feminism and environmentalism, as both of those terms play out quite differently in specific historic moments. Drawing upon a post-Marxist model of articulation put forth by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, as well as Stuart Hall (there are significant differences in those models of course), one can say that there are a staggering range of possibilities for the 'articulation', between different feminisms and environmentalisms. The disarticulations and rearticulations that arise in any given site or moment may align the two terms in multiple ways – which cannot be predicted in advance. Both Vera Norwood (1993) in *Made from This Earth* and Carolyn Merchant (1995) in *Earthcare: Women and the Environment* discuss many examples of the relations between environmentalism,

feminism, and domesticity, whereas my own work has emphasized 'undomesticated' feminist conceptions of nature. In short, the possibilities for connecting feminism and environmentalism are myriad. In the early twentieth century USA for example, the Progressive Women Conservationists forwarded utilitarian notions of nature and xenophobic arguments to bolster their own white, middle to upper class 'environmental feminisms', while Emma Goldman staged herself as 'Mother Earth' – the embodiment of natural-anarchistic abundance – in order to condemn capitalist stingy-ness and prudery (see Alaimo 2000). La Tigresa, who currently strips for the trees, offering her own body as a metonym of the body of the earth in order to distract the loggers from their work, may well be Goldman's descendant. La Tigresa, in fact, exemplifies how vexed the relations between environmentalism and feminism may be as her bare-breasted performance blatantly offers up the spectacle of the female body as an activist strategy. Pro-sex ecofeminism? (Hetero)sexist monkey-wrenching? Campy environmentalist parody? (Alaimo no date).

In short, I would argue that the relations between feminism and environmentalism cannot be assumed, but must be carefully explored. The recent, wonderfully wide-ranging, special issue of this journal focusing on 'Women and the Politics of Water' demonstrates how even something as specific as the politics of water use plays out in surprisingly different ways. In 'Eco/Feminism, Non-Violence and the Future of Feminism' I would like to have seen more analysis of the relations between environmentalism and feminism at the camp. I would like to learn not only about the particular discursive connections that were made by the activists (again, what sort of feminism and what sort of environmentalism were they connecting?), but also, about what various practices, embodiments, and spatial arrangements revealed about the lived relations between environmentalism and feminism. Karena Shaw (2003: 41) notes that many protestors 'said that the experience of the camp had a much more lasting effect on them than the actual arrest experience'. I wonder whether that 'lasting effect' had 'ecofeminist' dimensions – or not. Moreover, I would like to know more about whether or not the environmental feminist philosophies engaged with the ideas or positions of the First Nations peoples of Clayoquot.

That nature, environment, and environmentalism all seem to vanish in this essay is especially odd given that the primary reason why ecofeminism has been branded as 'essentialist' is because nature itself has been understood as the ground of essentialism. Since the essay forwards an argument intended to complicate the charge of essentialism, it would be beneficial to address how essentialism depends upon particular philosophical notions of nature and how different, more dynamic and robust notions of nature are emerging within feminist theory. The work of Donna Haraway, Karen Barad, Vicki Kirby, Myra J. Hird, and Nancy Tuana, as well as my own work, reconceptualizes nature in such a way that it can no longer serve as the ground of essentialism, because it is no longer the repository of unchanging truths or determining substances but is itself an active, transforming, signifying, material force. Surprisingly, perhaps, nineteenth-century Darwinian feminists

Antoinette Brown Blackwell and Eliza Burt Gamble, as well as some Marxist-feminists of the 1930s cast nature as a hospitable habitat for feminism, in that its evolutions and transfigurations contested the rigid notions of womanhood forwarded by culture (as opposed to nature) (see Alaimo 2000). Contemporary 'material feminists' who insist upon the meaning, significance, agency, and transfigurations of the very substance of human corporeality and the more-than-human world provide a radical challenge to the foundations of essentialism (see Alaimo and Hekman 2008).

The essay concludes: 'Clayoquot can be understood as a site for the production of more hopeful stories, and for the imagining of eco/feminist futures' (p. 295). It remains an open question to me, however, whether or not it will be beneficial or productive to link feminism and environmentalism. Moreover, it is crucial that we interrogate the grounds and the purposes for linking environmentalism and feminism, by analyzing specific articulations within particular places and contexts. As identity politics continues to foster the proliferation of identities, 'feminism' may be too broad or too narrow a term, for various environmental activists to embrace. Karena Shaw (2003: 40) notes, for example, that the protests over the logging in Clayoquot Sound included 'theme days', for 'forestry workers, elders, farmers, deaf persons, women and children, clergy, and business people'. Feminism itself may be undergoing a significant transformation, partly in response to globalization. Virginia Vargas (2003: 909) argues that 'various feminisms enter the process of globalization along a different path than those of the past . . . not from a single identity . . . and not from a unique understanding of feminist being'. She argues that instead, the 'symbolic and discursive frameworks are much wider and more changeable, given that it is diversity and heterogeneity that matters' (2003: 909). Ideally, as part of a crucial sort of utopian political imagining, all environmental movements would be forged in such a way as to repel racism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism, colonialism, as well as anthropocentrism. Whether 'eco/feminism' is a vast enough term to encompass these divergent aims and constituencies will only be answered as the expectedly unexpected futures unfold.

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