

A Poststructuralist Approach to Ecofeminist Criticism

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I BELIEVE . . . THAT creative, complex ecofeminist interpretations of literary texts should be able to enhance the growth of ecofeminist theory rather than wait for its development. In order for the project of ecofeminist literary criticism to flourish, though, it must become more responsive to its position at the intersection of two broad fields – ecofeminism and literary theory and criticism – and simultaneously draw from and contribute to both of these fields. Currently, ecofeminist literary criticism is very dependent on ecofeminist theory, a condition that limits its capacity to meaningfully contribute to literary theory and criticism; in particular, it is limited by certain trends of thought in ecofeminist theory that are difficult to apply to the interpretation of literature in ways that result in complex and ideologically subversive readings. The trends I refer to are allegorically described by Val Plumwood in *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*: as she explains, it is all too easy for the ecofeminist theorist ‘pilgrim’ to ‘fall into the Ocean of Continuity on the one side or stray into the waterless and alien Desert of Difference on the other, there to perish’ (3). As she suggests, there is a tendency within ecofeminist theory to emphasize the connections or continuity between women and nature at the expense of recognizing important differences between the two groups. While seeing the connections and potential for communion between humans and nonhuman nature is an important step toward overcoming the dualisms that structure our culture’s thinking, relying only on connection can collapse the self/other dualism into an undifferentiated whole. Such holism risks simply incorporating the other into the self, a move that Jim Cheney warns leaves no room for ‘respecting the other *as* other’ (124). Other tendencies within current ecofeminist theory go to the opposite extreme and emphasize differences based on aspects of identity such as gender, race, or species in ways that can isolate people from each other and from nonhuman nature.

The path between continuity and difference that ecofeminist theorists must walk is so narrow and difficult, not because of inadequacies in the theorists or the

*From ‘Blurring Boundaries in Ursula Le Guin’s “Buffalo Gals, Won’t You Come Out Tonight”’: A Poststructuralist Approach to Ecofeminist Criticism’, *ISLE*, 3(1), 1996.

theories, but because of the complexity of their task. Ecofeminism explicitly works to challenge dominant ideologies of dualism and hierarchy within Western culture that construct nature as separate from and inferior to human culture (and women as inferior to men). While many ecofeminists identify such ideologies primarily as masculine, such a characterization is oversimplistic; as Plumwood explains, 'It is not a masculine identity pure and simple, but the multiple, complex cultural identity of the master formed in the context of class, race, species and gender domination, which is at issue' (5). The dualism and hierarchy that ground all these forms of domination are such pervasive forces within our culture that even a movement with the most subversive motives and discourse cannot help but reflect their influence. Within ecofeminism, an unproblematized focus on women's connection with nature can actually reinforce dualism and hierarchy by constructing yet another dualism: an uncomplicated opposition between women's perceived unity with nature and male-associated culture's alienation from it. On the other hand, an unbalanced emphasis on differences in gender, race, species, or other aspects of identity can deny the complexity of human and natural identities and lead to the hierarchical ranking of oppressions on the basis of importance or causality.

Although many ecofeminist theorists are keenly aware of the pervasiveness of dualism and hierarchy in dominant ideologies, they are far more likely to note the ways that other fields manifest the influence of such forces than to search for their traces in ecofeminist discourse itself. Thus, they risk unconsciously reinforcing the very cultural beliefs and attitudes that they wish to transform. In order to help fulfill the political potential of ecofeminism, ecofeminist literary criticism must become more conscious of the ways that ecofeminist theory can be subtly diverted into the traps of continuity or difference, and thus recontained by the pervasive force of dualistic and hierarchical thinking. And in order to make a significant impact on literary criticism and theory, ecofeminist literary criticism must offer a perspective that complicates cultural conceptions of human identity and human relationships with nonhuman nature rather than relying on unproblematized visions of continuity or difference. . . .

[BLURRING BOUNDARIES: AN ECOFEMINIST
READING OF URSULA LE GUIN'S 'BUFFALO GALS,
WON'T YOU COME OUT TONIGHT?']

Le Guin's story begins when a little girl, injured in a plane crash somewhere in a desert landscape in the American West, is discovered by a coyote, who tells the girl, 'You fell out of the sky' (7). The coyote's unexplained command of human language creates the sense that this story will blur the boundary between humans and other animal species, a sense that grows as the little girl, Myra, follows the coyote back to her home. In the process, Myra's perception of the coyote is suddenly, inexplicably transformed from that of an animal 'gnawing at the half-dried carcass of a crow, black feathers sticking to the black lips and narrow jaw' to that of a 'tawny-skinned woman with yellow and grey hair and bare, hard-soled feet' (21).

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Once Myra arrives at Coyote's village, she meets more characters who, despite predominantly human appearances, also possess qualities that identify them with particular species of nonhuman animals: Doe, for instance, could be identified as a deer simply by her walk – 'a severely elegant walk, small steps, like a woman in high heels, quick, precise, very light' (33) – and the Chipmunk family lives in a dark, burrowlike house. In addition, these people possess characteristics that are distinctly supernatural: Blue Jay replaces Myra's eye, damaged in the plane wreck, with a new eye made out of pine pitch, and after a few healing licks from Coyote's tongue, it works quite well.

In creating such characters, Le Guin is drawing on Native American legends of the First People, whom anthropological linguist William Bright describes as 'members of a race of mythic prototypes who lived before humans existed' (xi). . . . Ultimately, Le Guin's complex First People represent a world view that resists definite boundaries and dualisms, neither choosing one side over the other or collapsing difference. Nevertheless, this world is separated from the world of Myra's origin, a world inhabited by what the First People call the New People. This separation represents, not an inevitable opposition between the two peoples, but the dualism that human culture has constructed not only between itself and nonhuman nature but also between its dualistic way of perceiving reality and a perceptual mode that refuses such boundaries. While the First People thus cannot be labeled 'nonhuman' in the sense that they have no human aspects, they do represent the nonhuman to Myra in the sense that they offer an alternative to the dominant, dualistic human culture that she comes from. On this level, the story is about the process of Myra adapting to, learning about, and coming to love the nonhuman, and to love Coyote in particular as their representative.

. . . In representing the First People as she does, Le Guin . . . renders the natural world in the form of speaking, active subjects, thus questioning the idea of impermeable boundaries between human and animal (especially the boundary that excludes the nonhuman from discourse). Importantly, Coyote is portrayed as especially active in seeking connections with Myra. In the legends of Native American cultures, particularly those native to the American Southwest, the figure of Coyote has links with human culture beyond the human aspect all First People share. Bright characterizes the legendary Coyote as 'a Levi-Straussian "mediator" who links the world of humanity, with all of its curiosity, self-awareness, and resultant "cultural" baggage, to the "natural" world of animals' (22). The legendary Coyote's affinity for humanity is paralleled to some degree by the relationship of the biological coyote to dominant human culture: it has shown an impressive ability to adapt to the changes human cultures have imposed upon its environment, often expanding its range to include areas where wolves have been eliminated or adapting to life in close proximity to human beings. Even more incredibly, the species thrives in North America today despite persistent and brutal campaigns intended to eliminate it.

True to this biological and legendary relationship with human culture, Le Guin's Coyote represents such an openness to interconnection, even when connecting means crossing hostile boundaries erected by human culture. As Myra figures out, 'That was Coyote's craziness, what they called her craziness. She wasn't

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afraid. She went between the two kinds of people, she crossed over' (39). Eventually, Myra realizes that although some of the other People accept her, it is only with 'the generosity of big families' (39). Coyote alone consciously chose to take care of her, a choice growing out of Coyote's 'crazy' ability and desire to cross over and make connections with human culture. In response to Coyote's attitude and actions, Myra chooses to connect across the boundaries as well. She decides to stay with Coyote rather than Chipmunk or Rabbit, even though Coyote's house is filthy and her bed is smelly and full of fleas. Ultimately, as Myra lies listening to Coyote singing 'one of the endless tuneless songs that wove the roots of trees and bushes and ferns and grass in the web that held the stream in the streambed and the rock in the rock's place and the earth together', she tells Coyote, 'I love you' (56). . . .

Significantly, 'Buffalo Gals' begins with Myra's displacement across a boundary, into a realm where she is asked to take a drastically different view of identity and community than that held in dominant human culture. Le Guin represents this boundary quite vividly by the change in Coyote's appearance from unambiguously animal – Myra first notes that the coyote is 'a big one, in good condition, its coat silvery and thick. The dark tear-line from its long yellow eye was as clearly marked as a tabby cat's' (17) – to ambiguously human, animal, and supernatural. Near the end of the story, when Myra decides to try to reapproach the world of the New People, her experience suggests that the boundary between the two worlds extends beyond physical appearance to the way the people on either side of it perceive and name reality. As Myra draws near,

it did seem there was a line, a straight, jerky line drawn across the sagebrush plain, and on the far side of it – nothing? was it mist?

'It's a ranch,' the child said. 'That's a fence. There's a lot of Herefords.' The words tasted like iron, like salt in her mouth. The things she named wavered in her sight and faded, leaving nothing – a hole in the world, a burned place like a cigarette burn.

(46)

Because she has crossed this boundary, at Coyote's invitation, Myra is confronted with confusions and inconsistencies, with multiple interpretations of reality and of her own identity. Throughout the course of the story, she learns to negotiate these multiple interpretations in a way that allows her consciously to step beyond her culturally constructed human perception and, at least temporarily, perceive as the nonhuman. For example, at one point Myra wonders why Coyote sleeps in the night and wakes in the day like humans rather than the other way around, but 'when she framed the question in her mind she saw at once that night is when you sleep and day when you're awake' (34–5). While the readers of Le Guin's story may never be physically displaced across a boundary in the way Myra is, her experience can lead us to imagine situations that would encourage us to take the perspectives of identities and positions different than those we are accustomed to. . . .

In the end, Myra's experience demonstrates a way that human beings can forge a relationship with nonhuman nature for political ends without positing essential

or static connections that erase difference and reinscribe dualism or hierarchy. In 'A Cyborg Manifesto', one of her essays in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, [Donna] Haraway turns to appositional consciousness, a model of political identity formulated by Chela Sandoval: a kind of postmodernist identity constructed out of 'otherness, difference, and specificity' (155). Importantly, 'this identity marks out a selfconsciously constructed space that cannot affirm the capacity to act on the basis of natural identification, but only on the basis of conscious coalition, of affinity, of political kinship' (157). Ultimately, Le Guin's story provides us with a sense in which we can each act as conscious agents of political change. Through an openness to viewpoints and communities outside dominant human cultural experience, Myra becomes, and accepts the necessity of remaining, what Haraway would call a 'split and contradictory self'. Such a self holds potential for subverting dominant ideologies because her divisions and contradictions allow her to connect without oversimplifying her identity in ways that reinscribe those ideologies in new forms. Haraway describes such a self later in the volume, in 'Situated Knowledges', as 'the one who can interrogate positionings and be accountable, the one who can construct and join rational conversations and fantastic imaginings that change history' (193).

[IMPLICATIONS FOR ECOFEMINIST LITERARY CRITICISM]

In this way, the work of poststructuralist feminists can complement and complicate the ideas most commonly associated with ecofeminism by providing an approach to identity that encourages neither the erasure of difference by representing women and nature as a homogeneous, continuous whole nor its overemphasis, which can lead to alienation and the dominations of humans and nature. Such a sense of identity destabilizes views of both human subjectivity and nature, refusing static, definite boundaries between nature and culture, myth and reality, or any other traditionally constructed dualisms. Given this transformed vision of identity, differences between humans and the rest of nature, as well as the differences among humans, including gender, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation, need not be the roots of conflict; instead, they can be the potential source of new and more sustainable relationships both within human culture and between culture and nonhuman nature. Thus, by going beyond the boundaries of self-defined ecofeminist theory, ecofeminist literary criticism can strengthen its potential to offer us models of human identity and human relationships with nonhuman nature that can disrupt and challenge dominant ideologies, both through literary interpretations and through the politicized perceptions and actions that texts and interpretations can inspire.

Currently, ecofeminist literary criticism exists primarily in potential form, and the potential it holds for contributing to ecofeminism's agenda of political change as well as for expanding and complicating literary criticism's scope and methodology is significant. However, critics must work not only to apply the principles of ecofeminist theorists, but also to put them into dialogue with other theories and

critical approaches as well as with the literary texts themselves. By opening ourselves up to a variety of approaches and viewpoints, ecofeminist literary critics can engage in a process of constant self-interrogation and transformation. In this way, by exploiting our position at the intersection of ecofeminism and literary theory and criticism, we can encourage theorists, critics, and readers alike to cross boundaries, building on our connections with each other while using our differences to expand the range of what we can imagine for our future.

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