

## Sexual/Environmental Justice and Ecocriticism of the New Century

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Current U.S. debates over issues such as climate change, gay marriage, insurance coverage of abortion within the proposed health care plans, signal that activists have finally captured the attention of a public that had wished to remain happily oblivious of issues that profoundly challenge society's problematic assumptions about the human recourse to "nature" and "environment," but I rarely hear public examination of the conjunctions between sexual justice and environmental justice issues. I predict that in this 21<sup>st</sup> century, environmental justice lit-crit will lead the way in further illuminating these intersecting oppressions and movements for change. While environmental justice movements and cultural criticism have focused predominantly on intersections of race, class and environmental inequities, 21<sup>st</sup> century authors, activists and theorists now also consider how other aspects of human corporeality and identity such as sexuality/reproductivity are interwoven with environmental injustice. Recent and forthcoming work by myself and other ecocritics/ecotheorists explores how sexual identity and sexual oppression have often been formulated in terms of nature, the natural, and material environments. Yet, at the same time, I am still troubled that certain mainstream versions of environmentalism and ecocriticism remain unaware or indifferent to such questions—or even more disturbing—may still be promoting sexual injustice in the name of environmental need. However, I foresee that in the new century, the field of ecocriticism will become more conscious of the need to think through our assumptions about sex and nature.

Let me look backward for a moment to my introduction to the volume of essays entitled *New Perspectives on Environmental Justice: Gender, Sexuality and Activism* that I edited in 2004, in which I spelled out these historically rooted intersections:

Historically, the sexuality and reproductivity of women of color have been targeted for exploitation and control in the name of environmental needs and protections. We can see this interlocking history from the time of the European conquest and colonization of the indigenous peoples of the Americas, which was justified in part by their diverse sexual practices, through the enslavement of Africans and the legal construction of enslaved women as breeders whose children would be not kin, but simply more chattel

property to increase the prosperity of the land owners, to the present debates about overpopulation and environment that focus on the fertility of Third World women of color rather than on overconsumption of resources by the First World (Silliman and King 1999; Stein 1997). Negative associations of women of color with overpopulations still underlie contemporary problems such as the coercive use of birth control, forced sterilization, and concerns over possible eugenics misuses of genetic research or biogenetic manipulation of environmentally stricken populations (Silliman and King 1999). Also, we continue to learn that certain environmental hazards affect female sexual /reproductive systems in particular, and growing attention is now being focused upon health concerns such as environmental toxicity and pregnancy, toxicity of human breast milk, environmental links to breast cancer, and sexually transmitted epidemics such as HIV/AIDS. (LaDuke 1999, Stengraber 1997; 2001)

Furthermore, because divergent sexual identities and practices have historically been condemned and punished as “unnatural” expressions of desire, environmental justice theory and perspectives offer us a useful set of principles to adopt for struggles for sexual justice. By analyzing how discourses of nature have been used to enforce heteronormativity, to police sexuality, and to punish and exclude those persons who have been deemed sexually transgressive, we can begin to understand the deep, underlying commonalities between struggles against sexual oppression and other struggles for environmental justice. By reframing sexuality issues as environmental justice concerns, we can argue that people of differing sexualities have the right to live safely as sexed bodies within our social and physical environments. (6-7)

Eco-scholars, such as Giovanna Di Chiro, Greta Gaard, Katie Hogan, Arlene Plevin, Cate Sandilands, Noel Sturgeon, and Priscilla Solis Ybarra, among others, contributed their profound thoughts on these conjunctions to this anthology. Since compiling that volume, I have witnessed growing attention to intersections of sexual justice and environmental justice within ecocriticism—exciting work, insightful and original. I am hopeful that as the work on sexual/environmental justice flourishes in this new century, the field as a whole will learn to address these aspects of texts, in the same ways that we have become much more adept at thinking about race, class, geographic location, etc in relation to nature, in the wake of environmental justice movements.

Therefore, I was delighted when author Ruth Ozeki was invited by Dan Phillipon to deliver the banquet address at the 2009 ASLE conference in Victoria, CA, because Ozeki's novels foreground intersections between food justice and sexual justice. Expanding upon the politics of food and gender that she explored in her first novel, *My Year of Meats*, Ruth Ozeki's second novel, *All Over Creation*, represents overlapping struggles for biodiversity and social diversity, as transnational corporate enforcement of agricultural monocultures and biogenetic control of plant regeneration at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century reinforces racial monoculture as well as patriarchal controls of women's sexuality and reproduction.<sup>1</sup> In *All Over Creation*, Ozeki traces the contemporary struggle between transnational corporations that genetically modify potatoes and the local farmers and guerilla food activists who resist the biogenetic imperative, working to maintain family farms and horticultural diversity. Ozeki then draws analogies between this food fight and struggles over reproductive justice,<sup>2</sup> emphasizing the dangerous intersections of the biotechnological modification of plants and the oppression of human sexuality and reproduction. And, even as Ozeki draws these parallels, the characters in her novel illustrate how environmental activists, such as Lloyd Fuller, who defends heirloom seeds and plant sexual diversity, may impede women's sexual freedom. At the ASLE banquet, I was gratified to overhear so many ASLE members tell Ozeki that they are using her novels in their courses—and I only hope that these professors will emphasize the intertwined struggles for multiple sorts of justice in these texts---as

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<sup>1</sup> *My Year of Meats* focuses upon a filmmaker hired by the U.S. beef industry to produce a series of tv shows that portray American families cooking beef in order to market meat to a Japanese audience. The novel focuses on parallels between DES daughters and meat animals dosed with hormones and other drugs, exposing similarities between the patriarchal treatment of women and the meat industry. Three critics who explore the gender and food issues in this novel are Cheryl Fish, in "Environmental Justice in Literature and Film: From Toxic to the Sustainable," in *Teaching North American Environmental Literature*, Kyoko Matsunaga, in a paper entitled "Toxic Discourse and Eco-Activism in Ozeki's *My Year of Meats* and Castillo's *So Far From God*" presented at ASLE 2007, and Simon Estok, who also presented a paper entitled "Diethylstilbestrol, Ecocriticism, Nation: Ruth Ozeki Goes where No One Has Gone Before," at ASLE 2007. I presented a paper on *All over Creation* at ASLE 2007, which I have expanded into a chapter of Bonnie Roos and Alex Hunt's *Postcolonial Green*, forthcoming 2010.

<sup>2</sup> The term "reproductive justice is defined by the Sister Song Women of Color Reproductive Health Collective as linking "sexuality, health and human rights to social justice movements by placing abortion and reproductive health issues in the larger context of the well-being and health of women, families and communities, because reproductive justice seamlessly integrates those individual and group human rights particularly important to marginalized communities....The ability of any woman to determine her own reproductive destiny is directly linked to the conditions in her community and these conditions are not just a matter of individual choice and access. For example, a woman cannot make an individual decisions about her body if she is part of a community whose human rights as a group are violated, such as through environmental dangers or insufficient quality health care. Reproductive justice addresses issues of population control, bodily self-determination, immigrants' rights, economic and environmental justice, sovereignty, and militarism and criminal injustices that limit individual human rights because of group or community oppressions" (Ross, 3).

ecocritics such as Simon Estok, Cheryl Fish, Kyoko Matsunaga, myself and others have traced in our analyses of Ozeki's provocative work.

Another upcoming milestone in our theorizations about sex and nature will be the publication of *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Biopolitics, and Desire*, an interdisciplinary volume of cutting edge analyses bridging queer studies and ecological studies, edited by Cate Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson, forthcoming from Indiana University Press, 2010. (Also, see Cate Mortimer-Sandilands' *Ecozon@* essay) For many years, Cate Mortimer-Sandilands' own multidisciplinary scholarship has been offering ecocritics useful models of queer ecologies, applicable to a range of texts. As I have attended recent sessions at ASLE, NEMLA, and ASA focused on issues of queer ecology, I have frequently heard scholars refer to Cate's theories as the framework from which they launch their textual explorations. The forthcoming anthology compiles work by a number of queer/eco-theorists in a range of fields who take this project in varied, thoughtful and provocative directions, offering ecocritics much to reconsider about sex and nature. For example, Stacy Alaimo explores the way that new studies of queer animals complicate our views of the nature of sex; Andil Gosine exposes the way that some environmental discourse denigrates women of color and gay men's sexuality as antithetical to the natural environment; LaDelle McWhorter interrogates the exclusionary social effects of the scientific formulation of "species;" Gordon Brent Ingram examines the geography of an urban gay and lesbian community. I foresee that this anthology will aid eco- scholars to continue to think about queer ecology in ways that will transform our approach to intersections of sexuality and nature, sexual justice and environmental justice. I eagerly await such explorations.

## Works cited

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