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Re-mything Nature: Walt Whitman as an Ancestral Origin of Ecofeminist Literature

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Despite the fact that ecofeminist theory and the writings of Walt Whitman are separated by over a century of radical literary and social change, I suggest that the style, content, and philosophy behind Whitman's poetry represent a catalyst of change in the manner in which nature and women are viewed in America. His defiant approach to literature initiated a compositional and philosophical revisioning that took the door of tradition off of its hinges, allowing women and their alternative styles of literary expression to walk through. In the detailed study from which this presentation is sourced, I reveal how Whitman's poetry aligns with the basic tenets of ecofeminism by means of a careful examination of his writings. Thus, I take part in re-evaluating the canon in American literature, challenging its worth in light of a society less acquiescent of male-dominated hierarchies in art and culture. In the case of Walt Whitman, I argue that he continues to belong.

We will need to assume a general understanding of and exposure to Whitman's work for the sake of brevity. Also, rather than spending time on the various nuances and schools of ecofeminism, a centralized, general definition will be offered and assumed. Karen Warren defines ecofeminism as: "a feminism which attempts to unite the demands of the women's movement with those of the ecological movement in order to bring about a world and worldview that are not based on socioeconomic and conceptual structures of domination" (Warren, Cheney 244). There are not many retrospective ecofeminist analyses of the great voices of the past to establish a lineage of literary matrons who in some way experienced the world as a contemporary ecofeminist would, and who spoke into the world against dominating systems of oppression. Yet these rare voices of yesteryear that stood for inclusion and equality must be recognized and embraced for their philosophy and literary methodology that initiated the psychological metamorphosis of a society from one of hierarchical domination to one of organic

equality. Patrick D. Murphy articulately charges ecofeminism with just such a task in his essay *Ground, Pivot, Motion: Ecofeminist Theory, Dialogics, and Literary Practice*, noting that “it is time that literary critics more systematically begin to search for the ‘emancipatory strategies’ that have been giving voice to ecological narratives and to recover those works that have realized such strategies, while critiquing the rest of the literary canon in terms of just such strategies as they appear or fail to appear in heretofore canonized ‘major’ works” (229). In this way, ecofeminists can more effectively shape the world not only through the creation of new ecofeminist literature, but also by revealing those artists whose legacy has influenced contemporary understandings of the relationship between the human and non-human worlds. Gender scholar Gloria Orenstein further articulates how the arts are central to the ecofeminist cause of conceptual change: “In the creation of new cultures that neither pit humans against nature nor set them above it, but rather situate us within the cycles of the cosmos and celebrate the interconnectedness of all things, the arts have begun to play a major transformational part. This, in itself, makes ecofeminism a different kind of political movement, for instead of viewing the arts as adjuncts to political activity or as distractions from political activism, ecofeminism considers the arts to be essential catalysts of change.” If this is so, then Whitman has something profound to say to 21st century American culture.

Though Whitman did not write explicitly from the yet to be articulated ecofeminist perspective, his poetry carries in both its style and thematics some of the fundamental principles of contemporary ecofeminism. As a source of comparison and qualification, I use Gretchen Legler’s seven emancipatory strategies from her essay “Ecofeminist Literary Criticism” as the basis of my textual analysis of Whitman’s verse. I can give textual examples and demonstrate patterns of these strategies throughout his *Leaves of Grass*, but won’t for the sake of time.

Rather, I simply assure you that they are there, some of course more prevalent than others, just as it would be in any body of work from any ecofeminist artist. The point is that the following seven emancipatory strategies can easily be identified in Whitman's immense *Leaves of Grass*, retroactively nonetheless:

1. "Re-mything" nature as a speaking, bodied subject.
2. Erasing or blurring of boundaries between inner and outer landscapes, or the erasing or blurring of self-other distinctions.
3. Re-eroticizing human relationships with a "bodied" landscape.
4. Historicizing and politicizing nature and the author as a participant in nature.
5. Expressing an ethic of caring friendship as a principle for relationships with nature.
6. Attempting to unseat vision, or "mind" knowledge, from a privileged position as a way of knowing. That is, positing the notion that "bodies" know.
7. Affirming the value of partial views and perspectives, the importance of "bioregions," and the locatedness of human subjects. (230-31)

While his work cannot be said to have perfectly embodied and voiced modern ecofeminism, his radical world view and innovative stylistics can now be identified as a catalyst of a nation's evolving consciousness from a patriarchal traditionalism to an inclusive acceptance of gender equality, freedom from social, personal, and literary restraints based on hierarchical colonial structures, and a reverence for nature. Through his self-defined "barbaric yawp" concerning the essence of nature came forth a body of thought that radically challenged the accepted perspectives of his day and ours. The efforts of ecofeminists likewise expose as destructive some of today's commonly held social assumptions regarding gender and nature, promoting a greater respect and equality for both humanity and nature. I'll quickly compare the philosophical dualisms between the dominant patriarchal philosophy and ecofeminist/Whitman philosophy, reflecting Whitman's stylistic and philosophical parallels with ecofeminism:

Patriarchal/dominant philosophy: **Ecofeminist & Whitman philosophy is:**
 Has Value/hierarchical (up-down) thinking, Cyclical/associative thinking,

Is Deductive/objective,
 Uses Value dualisms,
 Is Exclusive/dividing,
 Is Mind centered,
 Reason/logic based,
 Patriarchal/male dominated,
 And sees Organic as Profane

Inductive/subjective,
 Values Interdependency,
 Is Inclusive/embracing,
 Is Body centered,
 Values Emotion,
 Pursues Equal representation, and
 Sees Organic as Sacred

I've spent a good deal of time on the philosophical parallels, but must also highlight the stylistic progenation of such perspectives and how it too reflects ecofeminist tenets. Whitman saw that in order for a poet to vivify the sacredness of both the human body and nonhuman nature truthfully, he had to capture the essence of his philosophy and the essence of nature in a syntactic and organizational style that evinced the same qualities. This "free" style and counter cultural philosophy was a defiant response to both the historical imperial control placed on literature by white western European men, and an embracing of a new American ethic of freedom. Within the established traditions of 19th century western literature, nature and humanity alike are defined by means of logically controlled spirituality. The transcendentalism of Whitman viewed nature as the best medium through which to celebrate life, and was inspired by this need for a liberated style through which it should be communicated. His concept of a free and equal America was intended to include a clean break from former modes of restricted expression, thought, and lifestyle. Therefore he developed a style that countered the measured control of patriarchal verse and made room for an intuitive, natural form of being.

Therefore Whitman's rhythm, rhyme, syntax, and organization of thought were radically different from the European and American romanticized forms of his day, distinctly counterbalancing the style of his contemporaries with one all his own, convention and canon be damned. It is duly noted by Legler that "critiquing the very notion of 'form' as a way to define a genre and insisting that genre or canon formation is a politicized process" is quite accurate. "In

the case of nature writing,” she goes on, “. . . it has resulted in a canon that reflects masculinist values and assumptions about the natural world” (229). The father of free verse stylistically challenged these patterns head on.

Literature is certainly a significant medium being taken advantage of by ecofeminists to not only reveal the male dominated misconceptions about women and nature that have shaped the Western social subconscious for centuries, but also to establish a new way of understanding humanity’s relationship with nonhuman nature in a way that is inclusive of the woman/nature perspective. The literary *critic* has the daunting task of reexamining the great literature of the past through an ecofeminist lens to reveal the anthropocentric patterns that have been taken as truth for centuries, promoting an awakening of the need for a reconceptualization of both women and nature. The ecofeminist *writer*, as the critic’s partner, must offer literature that brings concepts of gender equality and ecological justice to life. One without the other will fall short of accomplishing the changes desired of the popular Western world view. Walt Whitman began this daunting task long ago, writing from a perspective that embraced the core principles of ecofeminism. His effort is worthy of note not only as a precursor to contemporary ecofeminist theory but also for his unique stylistic approaches to literature that aided him in communicating his revolutionary ideas both then and now. Through this acknowledgment of theoretical and stylistic alignment, contemporary ecofeminist writers can celebrate the blueprints laid in the past while widening the gyre of an ecofeminist consciousness.

Walt Whitman is a wonderful paradox. He stands outside of his physical categorizations, and for that matter outside of all categorization. He is certainly a leading voice from Western culture against the denigration of the underrepresented by the powers that be despite the fact that he was American, white, and a man. And while the feminist literary movement has certainly

taken seriously their call to reassess the “classics” and rediscover other silenced voices, ecofeminists must continue this work while also including nonhuman nature in the examination. Whitman is, to say the least, a hopeful place to start.

In closing, Patrick Murphy again encourages contemporary ecofeminists to be open to such voices and styles of the past that may miss the mark peripherally, but are fundamentally aligned with their theories and style. He says: “If ecofeminists seek only for a literature that meets equally the criteria of ecological and feminist sophistication, they will be frequently disappointed. *If, alternatively, they seek works that to some extent embody both dimensions they will find a vast array of writing that can provide inspiration and evidence of a developing consciousness of the imperatives for cultural change that have given rise to ecofeminism*” (240 italics added).

Footnotes for personal use/reference:

1: Warren further establishes four conditions that capture the basic claims of all perspectives within ecofeminism, which are: “(i) there are important connections between the oppression of women and the oppression of nature; (ii) understanding the nature of these connections is necessary to any adequate understanding of the oppression of women and the oppression of nature; (iii) feminist theory and practice must include an ecological perspective; and (iv) solutions to ecological problems must include a feminist perspective” (106).

2: Adding to these prerequisite beliefs, Ynestra King notes four additional principles in “The Ecology of Feminism and the Feminism of Ecology” from which all ecofeminists function, which are: (i) The development of Western civilization in opposition to nature reinforces the subjugation of women since they are closer to nature, thereby forcing ecofeminists to take on the struggles of nature as their own; (ii) that all of nature is an interconnected web rather than a hierarchy, making the ecofeminist stance distinctly antihierarchical where all parts of an ecosystem have equal value; (iii) ecosystems must maintain diversity, not only among nonhuman nature but in the decentralized global diversification of cultures and interests; and (iv) the survival of humanity requires “a renewed understanding of our relationship to nature, of our own bodily nature, and of nonhuman nature around us” as humanity pursues unity in the midst of diversity (151-52). These four principles make it clear that there is a need for a greater understanding of human and ecological history, a need for equality, a respect for diversity, and a call to humility in order for an ecofeminist ethos to pervade dominant social norms. These principles call for a candid look into the socio-cultural events of the past that formed humanity today and identify those concepts for what they are. They demand a balance of power among all life forms. They sing of the benefits of diversification in all ecosystems, and above all else they ask humanity to reassess its identity and role in nature from one of domination to one of partnership.

3: **the issue of *creating* EF work that transforms the mainstream ecological perspective**-- the ecofeminist *creator* has perhaps the more difficult task of creating a new ethos of ecological justice through a philosophy and style of writing that is antihierarchical and inclusive of all living things. As Gretchen Legler states, “ecofeminists argue that unmasking the metaphorical, conceptual links between gender, race, class, and representations of nature in literature is an important part of forming a more viable environmental ethic” (228). This unmasking of the perceptions of nature within canonical literature of the past via ecofeminist critique serves many purposes for the advancement of an ecofeminist ethic. First, ecofeminist criticism demonstrates humanity’s past perceptions of a feminized nature and what has been labeled “nature writing” despite nature’s otherness within the text. Nature has traditionally been portrayed objectively, retaining the patriarchal perspectives shared in society and literature through the twentieth century. For the fathers of American nature writing such as Emerson, Thoreau, and Muir, an enlightened assessment of the ways in which gender, race, class, and nonhuman organisms were represented in their writing, and how it is that they came to perceive such relationships, may further explain the patterns of contemporary ecological conceptions. That is to say that “nature writers” who came after these men significantly aligned their representations of nature with those that had come before them. These three writers were generally considerate to the interdependent qualities of the human/nature relationship, yet many of their predecessors and peers were not and continued to refuse the presence of a subjective representation of nonhuman nature. The resulting literature that depicted nature tended to lean towards an objective utilitarian perspective rather than a perspective of interdependence and organic inclusion. Legler goes on to note that “despite efforts to forge a new understanding of nature and a new relationship with it, many canonical authors still place nature ‘out there’ as an ‘other.’ Many canonical authors refine and entrench the notion of nature as a sacred place where only solitary, single, and chaste men go to cleanse their spirits and be one with God” (229). This is all the more reason for ecofeminist criticism to identify canonized voices of the past, such as Walt Whitman, that were in some way or another close to the mark in regard to a correlative relationship between humanity and nonhuman nature. This establishes a history and style from which contemporary voices of ecological equality can draw and build as they reestablish a more inclusive meaning of “nature writing.”