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### Ecofeminism: The Intertwining of Oppressions

In *The Art of Protest*, author T.V. Reed discusses environmental justice ecocriticism, naming ecofeminists “pioneers” in the field because they link the sociocultural with the natural (227). Specifically, ecofeminists examine the relationships between gender and environment, noting that the narratives that cultural systems teach about women and the environment are similar and that environmental degradation parallels the subjugation of women. Ecofeminists are able to make these connections because women in general and the environment are affected by the same oppressive forces, namely capitalism and patriarchy. At a glance, the connection between these two unhealthy social systems may seem fuzzy but through an ecofeminist lens, their similarities can be seen as well as their tendency to reinforce one another. Capitalism and patriarchy work in concert to exploit, commodify, and objectify both women and the environment.

Patriarchal societal structures are found in every country, and although they may be expressed differently from place to place, the control of women is a constant. Patriarchal systems corrupt ideas of masculinity by tying manhood to the domination of women. Men are portrayed as aggressive actors and women as receptive objects that are acted upon. These ideas are often voiced and legitimized by institutions of power such as churches and their religious leaders. The Christian Bible outright discusses the role of a woman as secondary to her husband and encourages women to obey their husbands, placing a man as the head of the household. Patriarchy is also enforced in our very language. It is not uncommon to hear the phrase “he or

she wears the pants” meaning that the partner wearing traditionally male garb is the one with the power. The description of a man as “pussy whipped” similarly comments that men are emasculated when they follow the lead or desires of a woman. It is language like this that is deceptively benign but, upon inspection, is a way to play on male insecurities, suggesting that they aren’t men unless they control their women. This line of thought is harmful by itself but becomes a true physical threat when paired with the violent enforcement of this perceived natural order. Domestic violence, rape, and other forms of violence against women are a result of such male entitlement to women’s bodies paired with patriarchal ideas that a man should use aggression and violence to assert his dominance. Women are not the only targets of this twisted version of masculinity, however.

The power complex cultivated in men by patriarchal masculinity has another harmful outlet onto the Earth itself. Consider the following hypothetical: a man calls his vegetarian, Prius-driving friend a pussy. This might appear to be a very commonplace, uncomplicated scenario but there are quite a few interesting judgements about masculinity, meat-eating, cars, and women tied into that statement. First, the word “pussy” itself is used to call into question a man’s masculinity, suggesting that his actions feminize him in some way and that being equated to a woman is an insult (all while objectifying women by referring to female genitalia as a stand-in for femininity). Then there are the emasculating acts themselves which are driving a low emissions car and eating a diet without meat. These acts are deemed unmanly because hunting, meat eating, and destructive machinery all feed into this male power fixation by using violent means to conquer nature. Patriarchal attitudes toward the environment are further reinforced in the Christian religion with the idea that man should rule over the Earth and all living things in it. In the King James Bible, God explicitly states, “Let us make man in our image, after our

likeness: and let him have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth.” This conceptualization of the relationship between man and nature is one of exploitation. It views other living things as commodities, encouraging their wanton use and disposal, rather than an ecosystem of which man is a part. T.V. Reed uses Adrienne Rich’s poem, “Trying to Talk with a Man” to offer the ecofeminist perspective that destructive technologies, in this case bombs being detonated in a desert, are representative of “the patriarchal power and arrogance that threatens the world” (235). Like the Christian conception of the man-nature relationship, the act of bombing an ecosystem is arrogant because it fails to recognize the damage to human beings as part of that ecosystem. Increased cancer rates as well as soil, air, and water pollution don’t discriminate; every living thing is affected. The patriarchal views of both women and nature explored so far become compounded and incentivized once a profit motive is introduced.

The capitalist system of economics layered on top of an already patriarchal social structure works to oppress women by commodifying female bodies and sex while simultaneously exploiting female labor. The objectification and commodification of female bodies is pervasive and so normalized that it doesn’t seem strange that almost naked female bodies are used in advertisements to sell everything from hamburgers to cars. Ads use these images of women or sometimes just certain body parts to entice a male audience, and pushes the message that sex appeal is what the true value of women is. Ads are somehow the least disturbing form of commodification of women with pornography, prostitution, and, at the extreme end, sex slavery directly letting men pay money to use women for sexual gratification. This cultural indoctrination has real effects on how society views the relationship between men and women and how individuals see themselves. Men are reassured of their entitlement to women’s bodies

while women are taught passive acceptance and even to compete for male attention by being as sexually appealing as possible. Under patriarchal capitalism, women must also face the oppression of devalued work. Not only are women denied the same wages as a man for doing the same job, but according to a comprehensive study by Stanford researchers, once an industry becomes female-dominated, it becomes less valued and wages go down. This refusal to recognize female labor has a long history stemming from women's traditionally unpaid work in the family to raise children and be a homemaker. These vital contributions to society are not profitable and therefore are not rewarded in a capitalist system. To this day, the societal expectation is for a mother to have more responsibility than a father for managing the household and raising children even on top of a career, meaning that she has a double expectation to have a job where she earns less than a man would and still perform all of the unpaid labor that women have been doing for centuries. Whatever choice a woman makes for her career and family, the deck is stacked against her with a gender-biased market always ready to devalue her work.

Environmental health parallels women's work in society because it is critical and necessary, yet undervalued because it doesn't produce profit. Powerful men cannot make money from letting old growth forests do their job of taking carbon out of the atmosphere and replacing it with oxygen, so there is no place for them under a capitalist patriarchy. The Dakota Access Pipeline situation in South Dakota perfectly exemplifies the precedence given to capital gain for environmentally destructive organizations over the rights of people to have an unpolluted environment. Valuing short term profit always wins in capitalism and causes us to divide the land and resources up piece by piece, rendering us blind to the bigger picture of long term sustainability and environmental justice.

Systems of oppression are not isolated, they strengthen each other. Nor are struggles against these systems a lonely endeavor. Once we understand how similar systems of oppression work to hurt both groups of people and the environment, we can understand better how to fight against those systems. Women and their experiences happen to be at the intersection of patriarchy and capitalism but this discussion may even be stronger when considering colonialism, racism, and various other social and political structures that effect people and their environments. Reed recognizes the intersection of these forces when analyzing a poem by June Jordan, explaining, “the rape of an African country, and environment, and an African American woman’s body are all entwined; that each violation of rights shapes the others, reinforcing mutually” (235). He also says that “only a mutual resistance on all these levels will bring liberation to any part” (235). Only through recognizing how oppressive systems reinforce each other can we move towards change. As we start to near the point of no return regarding irreparable pollution, a depleted ozone, and melting ice caps, we need to understand that our social and financial mentalities are trapping us on a march to own destruction.

Works Cited

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