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Ecology-as-Intrasectionality

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A surge of recent art has engaged ecology in newly complex ways, including by confronting environmental injustice and social violence in aesthetically provocative forms. Consider the visual culture abetting pipeline blockades and Indigenous sovereignty struggles, including at Standing Rock; the creative social engagements motoring the recent campaigns to remove arms and drug dealers and petrocapiatist climate deniers from the governing bodies of cultural institutions; and the social media feeds and direct actions driving recent Extinction Rebellion mobilizations.¹ Building off the insights of political ecology, my work addresses such practices by approaching ecology as a mode of intersectionality, insisting on the inseparability between environmental matters of concern and sociopolitical and economic frameworks of injustice. Intersectionality, emerging from a long history of African American activism and antiracist, antisexist politics, more recently codified in the Black feminist legal theory of Kimberlé Crenshaw,² and underscored within multiple struggles for decolonization, refuses to divide overlapping systems of oppression (such as those tied to race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability) and thereby challenges the essentialization of one or another term in isolation.

Ecology, in my view, functions similarly as a site of indissoluble relationality that highlights, and indeed is constituted by, interaction (or even “intra-action,” in the sense posited by Karen Barad, whose theorization within the field of feminist science studies rejects the separateness and purity of originary categories, arguing instead for a political ontology of being-in-relation³). Just as carbon pollution materializes differential sociopolitical impacts—and there is indeed no way to account for toxicity outside of its disparate consequences—so too does economic inequality produce unequal vulnerabilities to environmental injustices. With the siloing of issues (for instance, with the tendency of eco-art to isolate and celebrate the nonhuman realm in an effort to escape anthropocentrism; or the exclusive focus on intra-human oppression in social justice art), we risk epistemic violence, which can translate into the extremes of privilege and exclusion in white environmentalism, green capitalism, and climate change denialism. Instead, in my view, the most compelling cultural work is that which explores and develops modes of ecology-as-intersectionality, wherein political ecology links with Indigenous and/or queer rights activism and/or movements against police brutality, media censorship, and capitalist extraction.

In this vein, it is crucial to comprehend “naturecultures” (a term grammatically recognizing the refusal of binaries) as sites of complex and indivisible relationalities between and within the slippery category of the non/human, where humanity itself operates according to

regimes of selective inclusion and exclusion, and where practices of antiracism, social justice, and antisexism co-constitute and intra-act upon and with each other in response to multiple intersecting oppressions. These also merge with more-than-human realms, environmental materialities, and life-forms that are also impacted by oppression and violence in ways that are integral and cannot be separated or pulled apart without risks of essentialism, idealism, or fetishism (as again occurs in some forms of eco-aesthetics that focus solely on the nonhuman environmental realm, or conversely in social justice aesthetics that avoid the ecological as if it were a privileged domain of concern, thereby inadvertently reinforcing single-issue analysis). In our emergency times of disastrous environmental transformation, it is urgent to bridge aesthetics and politics, expanding consideration of these entanglements in ways that challenge white supremacy, the militarization of everyday life, creeping fascism, and apocalyptic populism, as well as mass extinction, fast and slow environmental violence, and extractive capital. These are the central ingredients of socioecological climates that differentially impact being and define the uneven exposure to toxicity, violence, and death. That means tracing the current transformations of art, too, especially where it escapes the clutches of market-driven institutionalized forms and the mere representation of ecologies, extending into and generating new forms of life, emergent postcarbon futures, and socioecological justice.⁴

Notes

¹ For examples, see my recent books *Decolonizing Nature: Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology* (Berlin: Sternberg, 2016) and *Against the Anthropocene: Visual Culture and Environment Today* (Berlin: Sternberg, 2017).

² Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics,” *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 140 (January 1, 1989): 139–67.

³ See, for instance, Karen Barad, “Troubling Time/s and Ecologies of Nothingness: Re-turning, Remembering, and Facing the Incalculable,” *New Formations* 92 (2018): 56–86.

⁴ I also have investigated this approach recently with Emily Eliza Scott in New York at the College Art Association meeting, where we co-organized the panel: “Ecology as Intersectionality: Aesthetic Approaches to Social-Justice Environmentalism” on February 13, 2019 with the following speakers: Sara Mameni, Heather Vermeulen, Thea Quiray Tagle, and Heather Davis. Together with Emily, I also co-organized “Ecology-as-Intrasectionality: Radicalizing Arts of Climate Justice” at New York University on February 14, 2019, with panelists Elaine Gan; Terike Haapoja; Sarah Kanouse; Amin Husain, Nitasha Dhillon, and Yates McKee MTL+; Steve Lyons of Not An Alternative; and Aviva Rahmani. I thank all of them for their generosity in thinking about this subject together.