Cyborg environmentalism and the privileged leftist

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The University of Montana

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CYBORG ENVIRONMENTALISM AND THE PRIVILEGED LEFTIST

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A.B. Harvard University, 1998
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The University of Montana
1999

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12-9-99

Date
The contemporary environmental movement, while generally aligned with leftist politics, relies on tropes that often reinforce a white, middle to upper class, heterosexual, male hegemony. Although many types of people are complicit in this pattern, we can focus critique by concentrating on one particular character: the white, middle to upper class, heterosexual, male, left-leaning environmentalist. This character serves as a limit case for privilege. What can be done to rewrite his tropic practices can be done for all privileged left-environmentalists.

Donna Haraway, Noel Sturgeon, and Peter van Wyck see potential in tropes based on the cyborg, a partially organic, partially technological actor. The cyborg, they argue, presents new political space for feminism, leftism, and environmentalism and acts as a prophylactic to the reinscription of hegemony. Each author shies away from explicitly discussing the white, middle to upper class, heterosexual, male, left-leaning environmentalist, but I find that the cyborg trope is useful here, also. Overall, the cyborg offers a vision of left-environmentalism that moves beyond images of guilt and innocence and into a tricky landscape of accountability, danger, and commitment.
Table of Contents

Introduction .......................................................... 1
Methodology ........................................................... 4
Left-Environmentalism Runs Awry ............................ 6
Prelude to the Cyborg ........................................ 16
The Cyborg ............................................................ 23
Cyborg Environmentalism ................................. 31
Beyond Innocence and Guilt? ......................... 41
Introduction

My project is narrow and partial: To open new, anti-hegemonic, political space within environmentalism. My strategy is to concentrate on the white, middle to upper class, heterosexual, male environmentalist who desires to live counter to his violent social heritage and to relinquish the durable and adaptive privilege that sustains that heritage. What can be done for him can be done for environmentalism in general. The project is tricky: Hegemonic privilege has a certain capacity to endure, even in the most liberal sectors of environmentalism, and opening new political space might only succeed in extending the reaches of privilege. I enlist, therefore, the help of the cyborg (a very tricky character).

Cyborgs are partially biological, partially technological actors. Some obvious examples of cyborgs include the optically-improved LaForge in Star Trek: The Next Generation and the behooked Captain Hook of Peter Pan. The particular cyborg I wish to discuss is figured in the work of theorist and historian of science Donna Haraway. This cyborg appeared when Haraway was asked to consider the future of socialist
feminism under the Thatcher and Reagan administrations, when many feminists were using essentialism (sometimes in the form of revived traditions of goddess worship) as a means of empowering women.\footnote{Essentialism asserts that a certain thing or class of things has a non-accidental, inherent property. In the case of essentialist feminism, women are posited as naturally more intuitive and naturally less exploitative.} Though never completely rejecting essentialism or goddess worship, Haraway finds trouble in them and offers the cyborg as an alternative socialist feminist role model. Cyborgs are of illegitimate origin and uncertain kinship; thus, Haraway argues, they have a politics that does not rely on salvation or stable identity. Cyborgs may be equipped, then, to open up possibilities within the very technoculture that incorporates women, rather than looking beyond that incorporation for a mythical past or a natural(izing) self to return to.

Beyond the aphorism, “I’d rather be a cyborg than a goddess,” however, Haraway uses the cyborg to disrupt the very dualisms that might make us take essentialism and anti-essentialism so seriously in the first place. Haraway wants to treat dualisms like identity/difference, mind/body, culture/nature, technological/organic, truth/illusion, man/woman, and even cyborg/goddess as both unresolvable \textit{and} illusory. The divide between the sides of these dualisms cannot easily be erased, but it can be transgressed, confused, or obscured. Our best bet, Haraway seems to think, is to treat dualisms ironically, to recognize or blur them as necessary. “One is too few, but two are too many,” she says neatly. Haraway’s cyborg has no commitment to one side of a dualism or another; it straddles the boundaries and is both organic and technological, natural and artifactual. It is one, both, and neither side of a dualism—depending when you look at it and what you want when you do.
The cyborg trope proliferates from there in Haraway’s writings to offer a multitude of possibilities for oppositional lives for oppressed groups living in a new, digital world order. Whether the cyborg trope could be useful to white, middle to upper class, heterosexual, male left-environmentalists, however, is left unanswered by Haraway. She goes only as far as to tell us that her cyborg is definitely female and “hasn't really figured out a politics that makes the necessary articulations with the boys who are your allies. It’s undone work” (Int 20).²

Two other theorists, Noel Sturgeon and Peter van Wyck, continue the project by examining possibilities for cyborg environmentalism. Sturgeon uses Haraway’s cyborg to reframe a perennial debate in feminist environmentalist circles over the dangers and advantages of essentialism. While Sturgeon’s work does suggest ways the cyborg trope might help female left-environmentalists, it leaves out the question of male participation. Van Wyck uses the cyborg in a left critique of deep ecology and proposes a cyborgian way to care about nature without denying that nature is produced discursively and without relying on an authorizing narrative. Unfortunately, van Wyck, as we shall see, replicates the very hegemony Haraway resists by implicitly casting the white, middle to upper class man in the role of his cyborg environmentalist.

Haraway, Sturgeon, and van Wyck each leave me wondering what it would mean to be a leftist, white, male, cyborg environmentalist. It is in the space left open (and thus full of possibility) by the overlapping partialities of their theories that my ultimate

² Because I quote more than one work by Haraway, I will use the following abbreviation system for in-text citations (full citations appear at the end of the paper): CM, “A Cyborg Manifesto”; SK, “Situated Knowledges”; PM, “The Promise of Monsters”; MW, Modest_Witness@Second_Millenium.com; Int,
interest lies. There, somewhere in the sticky field of anti-racist, anti-sexist, anti-classist, anti-imperialist, anti-heterocentrist, socialist environmentalism, I want to stage a meeting between the cyborg and the white, middle to upper class, heterosexual male. What comes of it should say something about possibilities for our future.

Methodology

The problem of privilege occupies this paper both as subject matter and methodological constraint. Simply put, there is a fear that my own privilege might reinscribe itself in this work, even though my project tries to call into question such tendencies. I find this interesting as well as crucial to discuss, so I will take a moment to acknowledge some of the problems inherent in my project and some of the ways I find these problems productive.

In part, this paper will depend on a description of ways mainstream environmentalism is oppressive to groups to which I do not belong. bell hooks warns us that such scholarship, too often, is taken as more authoritative and legitimate than scholarly work done on the same subject by members of the oppressed groups in question.

Even if perceived "authorities" writing about the group to which they do not belong and/or over which they wield power, are progressive, caring, and right-on in every way, as long as their authority is constituted by either the absence of the voices of the individuals whose experiences they seek to address, or the dismissal of those voices as unimportant, the subject-object dichotomy is maintained and domination is reinforced. (1989:43)

While my research explicitly avoids dismissing or excluding the voices of the oppressed, it does depend almost exclusively on the work (my own included) of white, middle class academics. To this extent, its pretenses at authority reinforce domination. The fear of

"Cyborgs at Large: Interview with Donna Haraway"; and SI, Introduction to Simians, Cyborgs, and

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reinforcing domination in an otherwise “right-on” paper acts, however, not to paralyze me, but only to inspire caution. Rather than taking the easy out and writing about white guys simply to offer advice to white guys, I write about white guys in order to refigure the divides that separate their voices from other ones.

A related concern, again both topical and methodological, centers around gender specifically. In my effort to be a progressive white male and to address the future of leftism in the mainstream environmental movement, I open up new paths for my own gender-linked power. As Donna Haraway puts it, "The image of the sensitive man calls up, for me, the male person who, while enjoying the position of unbelievable [male] privilege, also has the privilege of gentleness" (Int 19). Throughout her work, however, Haraway insists that we must embrace traps like this, for we have no choice but to cast our lot somewhere. We are never innocent but always hopeful. More than once, Haraway describes her own work as a search through "discards from the Western deck of cards, [a search] for the trickster figures that might turn a stacked deck into a potent set of wild cards for figuring possible worlds." Dutifully pointing out the cultural imperialism of appropriating the trickster figure from Native American and other literatures, Haraway situates herself in a network of traps—"in the belly of the monster"—trying to point us from an “impossible but all too present reality to a possible but all too absent elsewhere" (SI 4). As the monster himself, I want here to search through the discards and openings of Cultural Studies and environmental theory in an attempt to point in similar directions.

My project, as I said earlier, is narrow and partial. I ask only a few questions, yet find myself so tangled up in a number of other questions that my conclusions can only be
incomplete. At best, I hope that this paper, composed, after all, in cooperation with computers and corporate-patented voice-recognition software, acts as a cyborg in its own right—already compromised, miscegenated, “fucked,” and promiscuous—a portable textual machine incorporating other people’s metaphors and technologies, my labor, and multiple reading environments to generate connections of unplanned obsolescence and unpredictable productivity.³

**Left-Environmentalism Runs Awry**

The white, middle to upper class, heterosexual male is an often unmarked character, whether he is left-environmentalist or not. He is unmarked in the simple sense that many people find it utterly unremarkable to be white or middle to upper class or male or heterosexual. In telling a story, for example, we are unlikely to remark upon a person’s race, class, gender, or sexuality if that person is white, middle to upper class, male, and heterosexual. This character’s status as the default setting for humankind is integral—cause and effect—to his hegemonic power and to his ability to erase difference and reinscribe himself into the system, like a virus, without even writing his name. Like an orthographic character, he disseminates, mutates, and reinscribes meaning and power. The Greek word for character, *ethos*, tells us more about him: He is a set of habituations or cultural vectors that acts both as a normative paradigm and a system of kinship—of inclusion and exclusion. Like a dramatic character he can be (but seldom is) described with a list of attributes, adjectives, and stories. This paper deliberately writes this

³ Gray, Mentor, and Figueroa-Sarriera offer the term omni-cyborg: something that makes “of everything they interface with a cyborg, like the omni-cyborgian theory of articles such as this one” (1995: 14n6).
character's name with its descriptives. It exposes him to scrutiny by refusing to allow him to define himself merely in terms of what he is not, but instead in terms of what he preserves: the privileged positioning of whiteness, wealth, heterosexuality, and maleness.

The white, middle to upper class, heterosexual male does not necessarily lack dreams for a better world. With some exceptions, he is not holding meetings on the top floor of a Manhattan hi-rise, plotting how to reinscribe his power most effectively onto the body public. The problem is trickier than this. Take, for example, the rebellious and idealistic suburban adolescent male: He can find comfortable causes in atheism, spiritualism, individualism, communalism, vagabondism, or environmentalism. I say comfortable because, while these causes are not without import or value, there is a reason why they are ubiquitous in suburbia and, for instance, concern for labor issues is not. (Labor issues challenge too closely the class privilege that rebellious suburban youth enjoy.) Most counterculturalism within the Silent Majority and its wealthier cousinry can be read as a sort of complicity to the tyrannical reign it presumes to question. None of the "comfortable" causes listed above, for example, adequately challenges heterocentrism, patriarchy, classism, imperialism, racism, or sexism. It seems a little suspicious, a little too convenient, then, when people well protected by the regime they were born into characterize something like environmentalism (often wilderness preservation, in particular) as the political problem of first importance.

Although he may sometimes act like it, the white, middle to upper class, heterosexual male is not an ontologically special category. The distinction between him and everyone else is not a natural one, awaiting discovery by scientists or philosophers. I pay this man so much attention only as a limit case for privilege—as a way to test left-
environmentalism at its tenderest demographic point. The white woman, the light-skinned mestizo, and the well-to-do gay man, for instance, all have their own special privileges and can make for dangerous left-environmentalists in their own right. Neither is the Third World lesbian of color ontologically special. She could stand in as an opposite limit case, an idealized privilege-less actor, but to treat her as a poster child or as a standard of reference simplifies extremely complex global circulations of power. Nobody enjoys total privilege, nor does anyone lack privilege altogether. To take the white, middle to upper class, heterosexual male as seriously as I do here is merely my political and practical attempt to call attention to an amorphous problem in left-environmentalism and leftism in general.

Left-environmentalism, as practiced by the white, middle to upper class, heterosexual male can be dangerous. Its rhetoric and practices easily reinscribe domination through tropes like voluntary simplicity and union with nature. The reinscription of domination depends on none of these tropes in particular. Tropes are not dangerous in and of themselves, but domination needs them like music needs instruments. In the following pages, I offer a brief bestiary of left-environmentalist tropes that reveals a network of racism, sexism, classism, imperialism, and heterocentrism in white, middle to upper class, heterosexual, male left-environmentalism. My argument does not situate itself along the biocentrist-anthropocentrist axis, the monist-dualist axis, or even along the deep ecology-social ecology axis. My problem map simply shows one character, the left-leaning, white, middle to upper class, heterosexual, male environmentalist, traveling through environmentalism and spinning new tropic threads for his own web of privilege. I do not discuss environmentalist tropes that have been explicitly incorporated into right-
wing agendas. Others writers have already noted that risk management, resource scarcity, environmental accounting, and the population explosion are all tropes used to reinscribe white patriarchy. I focus, instead, on environmentalist tropes that still occur primarily on the left but that end up working to sabotage a left agenda.

Take, for example, voluntary simplicity (not to be confused with the paranoid and racist survivalist movement of the extreme right). The “simple life” is meant to replace the capitalist supply-demand treadmill with a cooperative society of plenty, but it is generally advocated and practiced by financially secure people and is facilitated by an initial position of excess. Going “back to the land” involves selecting certain privileges and amenities to relinquish and others to retain, choosing what to live without but retaining the power to get it back if desired. Simple living obscures privilege enough to allow very privileged people to dress in blue collar chic, while they, at the same time, can look down on the poor for buying packaged foods or driving big cars. Conveniently, voluntary simplicity also justifies apoliticality, because after paring down the number of social issues we are concerned with, we can concentrate entirely on what we consider “basic” to life and not get hung up on issues like gunboat diplomacy or sexual harassment in the workplace. These other problems, the simple liver may think, are only symptomatic of a misdirected, “complex” life.

As another example, consider left-environmentalists’ glorified idea of backpacking. Similar to hunting and fishing in the right-environmentalist discourse of “sportsmen,” this trope constitutes an important part of most left-leaning environmentalists’ self-image—so

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much so, that left-environmentalists seem to spend more time feeling guilty about not
going backpacking than actually going backpacking. Being a backpacker is also the self-
identification most inspired by and inspirational to mainstream environmentalism. Like
voluntary simplicity, backpacking is most often a pastime of the white middle and upper
classes. A window shopping trip (and it is all about shopping) to outfit my partner for an
imaginary three-day, late fall backpacking trip runs up a tall bill. I quote as examples
prices of name brand gear at a conspicuous, downtown shop because these name brands
and their advertising photography seem to define the outdoor experience of a true
“backpacker.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Price</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thorlo® hiking socks</td>
<td>$15.75x3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Layers® Thermion™ long underwear</td>
<td>$46.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FoxRiver® Polypropylene liner socks</td>
<td>$5.95x3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Layers® Polartec™ fleece pants</td>
<td>$38.95</td>
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<tr>
<td>Marmot® fleece sweater</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marmot® Polartec™ fleece pullover</td>
<td>$89.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sierra Designs™ rain suit</td>
<td>$58.50 (on sale)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asolo® 520™ hiking boots</td>
<td>$108.00 (on sale)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TurtleFur® hat</td>
<td>$34.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arc'Teryx® Bora 65™ internal frame pack</td>
<td>$320.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sierra Designs® Wyatt Earp™ Polarguard 30™ zero degree sleeping bag</td>
<td>$200.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outdoor Research® Gore-Tex™ mittens</td>
<td>$62.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timberline® water filter</td>
<td>$25.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Licamp® Lexan™ Eating Utensils</td>
<td>$0.95x3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Petzl® Micro™ head lamp</td>
<td>$24.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quantum® Buzz Away™ insect repellent</td>
<td>$6.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MSR® Whisperlite International™ stove</td>
<td>$69.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MSR® fuel bottle</td>
<td>$8.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MSR® quart of white gas</td>
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<tr>
<td>MSR® Titan™ titanium cookset</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nalgene® water bottles</td>
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<tr>
<td>Camelbak® Aeroform Reservoir™</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Therm-A-Rest® sleeping pad</td>
<td>$50.00 (on sale)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Horny Toad Active Wear® Anacapa™ scarf</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>ChemaArmor® Personal Defense Weapon™ Bear/survivalist spray</td>
<td>$21.95</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

And so, without a tent, or even food, the bill for a three-day walk in the woods comes to
$1515.05. While not many people go and buy all these items at once, the list above
reflects what a self-respecting backpacking environmentalist “needs” and what my peers in a mid-sized Environmental Studies department actually seem to have. The backpacker is easily inspired to protect wildlands for recreating in, but because backpacking is so expensive, people from other tax brackets rarely visit these same places. The wilderness retreat, one might say, is no more than a getaway from politics, accountability, and the horribly unaesthetic poor. The wilderness preserve, similarly, acts as a reservoir for privilege, a gated community disguised as nature.

Another tropic maneuver of left-environmentalism is to speak of our debt to “Mother Earth.” While, in some ways, this planet does act as a “womb” or generative matrix, our impulse to gender everything (witness gendered nouns in most European languages) surely has become suspect by now. Joni Seager identifies a few of the main political problems with Mother Earth imagery. First,

It suggests a benign distribution of power and responsibility, one that establishes an erroneous and dangerous assumption about the relations between us and the environment. It obfuscates the power relations that are really involved when we try to sort out who’s controlling what, and who’s responsible for what, in the environmental crisis. It is not an effective political organizing tool. If the earth is really our mother, then we are children, and cannot be held fully accountable for our actions. (219)

Casting planet as mother helps us to ignore human power differentials because they become small potatoes in the shadow of the Earth’s matriarchal and benevolent rule. It gives us room to take some of our mess seriously while assuming that other parts of it will eventually get cleaned up like the urine stains we leave on the toilet. The sexism of the Mother Earth image is also disconcerting. “In a patriarchal culture in which female status is cast as subservient status, there are inherent pitfalls in sex-typing an inherently gender-free entity” (ibid.). These dangers are that the Earth will be treated like we treat women—as resource, as lesser—and that, at the same time, we will limit women’s
identities to "earthly" qualities like care, intuition, and reproduction (leaving power, logic, and culture for men). Furthering gender dualisms when most, if not all, of our dualisms are used as hierarchies to justify oppression cannot make for a very consistently leftist environmentalism.

Another set of left-leaning white environmentalist tropes deals with ethnic and cultural diversity. Most New Age, hippie, and world music consumer cultures have a dual worship of nature and of those humans they consider close to nature. In a perversely imperialistic maneuver, Native Americans and Tibetans become the ultimate charismatic megafauna for German and U.S. greens, with Native Americans often being identified with animal totems. Senegalese guitarists, South Asian sitarists, and Native American flautists garner much adoration but only end up fulfilling the dictum that for a person of color to be famous in the U.S., s/he must be an entertainer. All this worship comes to a crashing halt when Makah go whaling, Amazon peoples wear Nikes, or Inuits watch television. We like our world multicultural, but only superficially, as a way of disguising our own whiteness. As bell hooks notes in "Eating the Other," "Within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture" (21). White multiculturalism seeks to act out fantasies about contact with the Other but tends to do so in a way that preserves the status quo. When white multiculturalist environmentalists performatively fraternize with or idolize individuals or cultures that they imagine fit on the "nature" side of the nature/culture

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5 White viewers looking for Native American characters to idolize may also be disappointed in indigenous films like Dance Me Outside or Smoke Signals. These works trouble the image of the noble savage by showing ways reservation life can be less than ideal and by implying guilt on the part of white society for some of the problems of contemporary Native America.
divide, they perpetuate a harmful dichotomy and disingenuously privilege the “natives” on their side while secretly congratulating themselves on their own.

Related to this fetishization of non-white ethnicity is the environmentalist call for us to lose control, to merge with the natural world. In the case of two movement rituals, marijuana use and meditative walks in the woods, attempts by the privileged environmentalist to lose control often end up reinscribing privilege. A white, male environmentalist, for example, might smoke marijuana and lose control in a way that remains *totally in control*. He decides when to dissolve and when to sober up, and the basically private nature of drug use means that he need not be confronted, while chemically compromised, by anything too far outside of his realm of comfort. Likewise, during a meditative walk in the woods, our character might work toward breaking down his sense of individual agency in favor of a broader union with the ecosphere, but in the woods, he takes the opportunity to leave other responsibilities behind and to simulate the ultimate state of power: oneness with totality. Perversely, Seager notes, when practiced by privileged female environmentalists, the same rituals can actually disempower, rather than empower.

> For centuries women have been told that they have no singular identity. Women have always been subsumed by culture and men, and denied independent existence. Selflessness, unbounded oneness, total connectedness, and denial of independent identity have been central to women’s oppression. (235)

In this light, suggesting that women should dissolve themselves into the ecosphere through drug use or meditation works reactionarily to reverse gains women have made in establishing separate agency. And, of course, both white men and white women become suspect when they fetishize other cultures as paradigms for surrendering independent
agency. White superiority is asserted when Native Americans, for example, are considered role models in this way when, in reality, they have a strong tradition of sophisticated political agency, and any control lost by them was probably stolen.

Seager also touches on the final left-environmentalist trope I will discuss: professionalization within the environmental movement. The professionalization of left-environmentalism began in the 1980s with the rapid membership growth of many major environmental non-profits and continued into the 1990s with a bloom of academic departments devoted to environmental issues. Without essentializing men or women, Seager points out that professionalization often means increased male control and decreased valuation of the "feminine." The growth of respectability in the environmental movement came with a turn away from its diverse grassroots elements and toward a reincarnation of its original history as a men's club pastime. Women in leading environmentalist jobs must mirror the image of the successful corporate woman of the 1980s: clean-cut but sexy... a "ballbreaker."

The newly professionalized environmental movement is one in which "pragmatics" and "credibility" are given privilege over "emotionalism," which is equated with "amateurism." Increasing primacy is given to slick communication skills, pragmatic politics and a professional appearance—as measured by the most conventional yardsticks. The "reasonable man" is replacing the "emotional woman" as a green archetype, a presumptive dualism that diminishes both men and women. (187)

Male/female dualisms are unconsciously reinscribed as left-environmentalism infiltrates the old-boys network and vice versa. The incessant call among environmentalist ranks to "Do the science!" plays into this valuation of the "masculine," as science is still considered a male domain. Professionalism, in general, also works to hide political

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7 For New York Times Magazine's take on this, see Parini (1995).
interest under the masks of objectivity, logic, and compromise. While this may help environmentalist agendas become policy, it can also help the race, class, and gender interests of environmentalists pass as pragmatism and not politics.

It may seem that, without knowing it, I am leaning toward an agenda similar to the left-environmentalism of Murray Bookchin. Indeed, Bookchin’s social ecology intends to move beyond the reinscription of hegemony in environmental movements such as deep ecology. The hypothesis that our environmental crisis is a mere symptom of our diseased, exploitative social structure, however, is simplistic at best. And this kind of search for a “root cause” of our problems usually divides, more than unites, environmentalists. Social ecology tends, in its suggestions for revolution, to underestimate or wish away the inertia of white, middle to upper class, heterosexual, male privilege. To argue, as a leftist, that we should all just become socialist-anarchists is irresponsible in that it offers no coherent strategy for dealing with the potential persistence of patriarchal privilege. If, as Bookchin seems to think, it were as easy as just realizing that there is enough stuff to go around and that we ought to love one another, then the Beatles would have fixed everything 30 years ago. Leftism is inescapably utopian but must stay cognizant of its historical conditions; not free to be no-place-at-all, it moves around in a very sticky mess.

Attention to the actual workings of left-environmentalist tropes reveals an exceedingly tricky (and sticky) conservation of privilege. The trick behind it all seems to be environmentalism’s ideological monopoly on the “natural.” Any ideology would like to think of itself as natural, as fairly straightforward and uncontingent, in order to distract
from the messy, questionable, and negotiable aspects of its political claims. With environmentalist ideology, however, nature and the natural lie at the very center of attention. In a circular twist of logic, environmentalism becomes the natural ideology because it strives to protect the natural. As an expert on or voice for the natural, environmentalism wins the power to deal in distinctions between natural and unnatural—members of an imperfect dichotomy—and thus claims an awesome power to authorize or discredit narratives. The contingent and political nature of the act of distinguishing between natural and unnatural is hidden, and environmentalism becomes the single most important political cause. At its tamest, this means that democracy and social politics are overshadowed by sincere efforts to save rivers and trees; at its worst, it means that hegemonic practices can be dressed up in the robes of environmental activism or ecological imperative. The cyborg, an entity with a promiscuously ambiguous relationship to nature, may be of use here.

**Prelude to the Cyborg**

Cyborgs abound. From designer tomatoes to people with pacemakers, mergers of technology and organism no longer appear exclusively in comic books. We have (been) assimilated. Donna Haraway finds both danger and promise in this transgression of one of our most sacred boundaries: the nature/artifice divide. Although the cyborg predates

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8 See Ellis (1996).
9 Thanks to Bill Chaloupka for thoughts on this.
10 The stock example here is the connection between environmentalism and genocide in Nazi Germany. Appeals to maintain the “natural” state of Northern Europe led to both conservation of trees and extermination of “impure” races. See Ferry, (19xx).
Haraway, she is one of its most important surrogate parents. Because we will ultimately be discussing the potential of Haraway’s figuration of the cyborg to help with the problems of privileged left-environmentalism, I here essay an idiosyncratic retelling of her theory. An author entirely excessive with tropes and comfortable with ambiguity, Haraway perhaps prefers idiosyncratic interpretations. I will unabashedly recontextualize her use of the cyborg trope in ways that my political commitments and philosophical training suggest—looking first at her politics and philosophy, next discussing her thoughts on cyborgs, and closing with the question of cyborg gender.

Haraway’s work is hard to categorize. Moving freely between disciplines like women’s studies, anthropology, cultural studies, biology and biochemistry, history of science, literary criticism, and science fiction, it frustrates some people to no end. Haraway’s work is flamboyant, but there is something productive about it. Throughout her interventions into multiple disciplines, Haraway consistently incorporates a strong socialist, feminist, anti-nuclear, anti-racist, and anti-heterocentrist agenda as well as complex theoretical arguments—making her somewhat of a cult figure for the “postmodern” left. Since Haraway’s philosophical commitments are integral to how she envisions the cyborg and how the cyborg might be useful to my character, I will spend a few pages unpacking them.

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11 Some would argue that cyborgs have always been around, but the word was probably first used by scientist Manfred Clynes in 1960 to describe a man-machine coupling he believed would allow space travel.

12 Recently, I found myself on a plane sitting next to a Boston University anthropologist who, noticing I was reading Haraway’s latest book, went to great lengths to argue that Haraway’s anthropological work is unfounded in science and should be discounted entirely. “She just put something out in a journal in my field,” he said, “and reading it, you’re just like ‘where the hell is this coming from?’”

13 See, for example, Wired Magazine’s portrayal of her (Kunzru 1997).
Haraway's writing boils down to a discussion of semiotics. In the mechanics of meaning, Haraway believes, lies the key to understanding most of what we can understand (and change) about our world. Meaning is not a simple thing, though. The world is not a book waiting to be read (by scientists), an object waiting to be named (by Adam), or a blank slate waiting to be filled (by postmodernists). Meaning making is not an act that occurs separately from the world. Meaning and the world are, instead, intricately tied up in a process Haraway calls articulation.

She uses this term (articulation) in a play on its etymological connections to concepts of expression, segmentedness, and connectedness. Expression, segmentation, and connection occur on material as well as semiotic planes. For instance, genes and orators both express themselves; vertebrae and sentences are both segmented; and ideas and molecules can both be connected. Articulation, Haraway argues, even occurs across the divide between material and semiotic. Language plays a role in the articulation of the material world, and the material world plays a part in the construction of language.

Haraway invokes a mushy material-semiotic cosmos, pulsing with articulation:

Language is the effect of articulation, and so are bodies.... Nature may be speechless, without language, in the human sense; but nature is highly articulate. Discourse is only one process of articulation. An articulated world has an undecidable number of nodes and sites where connections can be made. The surfaces of this kind of world are not frictionless curved planes. Unlike things can be joined—and like things broken apart—and vice versa. (PM 324)

In this kind of world we continually interact with other actors (human and otherwise) to reconnect the ways our world is strung together. Actors are material-semiotic entities, simultaneously bodily and discursive, always collective in articulation. Together they make up the complex material-semiotic system we call "reality." Material-semiotic actors, or nodes, could be words, people, laws, bears, winds, electrons, pulsars, or
anything that acts like a unit in a material-semiotic world. Such nodes appear, sometimes
only ephemerally, as the result of articulation and they continue on to make new
articulations. “Their boundaries materialize in social interaction among humans and non­
humans” (298). The boundaries between material-semiotic actors are real but only in a
weak sense.

“Objects” like bodies do not pre-exist as such. Similarly, “nature” cannot pre-exist as such, but
neither is its existence ideological. Nature is a commonplace and a powerful discursive
construction, effected in the interactions among material-semiotic actors, human and not....
[It] is not a ghost, merely a protean trickster. (ibid.)

The tricky realness of nature and material-semiotic actors suggests the need for a tricky
way of understanding reality and truth and for an epistemology that avoids stripping the
world down to a passive resource for language.

As a material-semiotic mush, the world never stays still long enough to be figured
out, but it nevertheless makes claims on us. “This world must always be articulated, from
people’s points of view, through ‘situated knowledges,’” through truth claims that make
no attempt to transcend embodiedness (313). Situated knowledges are neither relativistic,
nor hegemonic. They embrace

simultaneously an account of radical historical contingency for all knowledge claims and
knowing subjects, a critical practice for recognizing our own ‘semiotic technologies’ for
making meanings, and a no-nonsense commitment to faithful accounts of a ‘real’ world, one
that can be partially shared and friendly to earth-wide projects of finite freedom, adequate
material abundance, modest meaning in suffering, and limited happiness. (SK 187)

Haraway proclaims that, from where she is standing, “Objectivity turns out to be about
particular and specific embodiment, and definitely not about the false vision promising
transcendence of all limits and responsibility” (190). Objectivity is a form of articulation,
always partial and never complete.
Situated knowledges are also always already political; they are "partial in the sense of being for [and in] some worlds and not others. There is no way around this polluting criterion for strong objectivity" (MW 37). We are embodied, thus interested, thus political. In meaning-making, we end up throwing our articulative weight in certain directions but not in others. Apoliticality is only a deceptive guise. That our articulations and truth claims are political means that the effort to police the divide between spin and truth may fail.

Stories and facts do not naturally keep a respectable distance; indeed, they promiscuously cohabit the same very material places. Determining what constitutes each dimension takes boundary-making and maintenance work. (68)

This work is done by different people with different ends in mind. The articulation of fact requires a non-innocent process of sorting through stories and reworking boundaries. Haraway's epistemology highlights non-innocence and leaves to those committed to faithful, political accounts of embodied reality "the confusing task of making partial, real connection" with the world (CM 161). We can take facts seriously at the same time as seeing them as stories. We can argue that some acts of boundary maintenance need more troubling and reworking than others. "Some differences are playful; some are poles of world historical systems of domination. 'Epistemology' is about knowing the difference" (ibid.).

Haraway's call to distinguish between playful and dangerous difference suggests an interesting take on modernity's penchant for dividing the world into twos. Haraway does not take dualisms, like material/semiotic, at face value, but neither does she dismiss them completely.

Certain dualisms have been persistent in Western traditions; they have all been systemic to the logics and practices of domination of women, people of color, nature, workers, animals—in
short, domination of all constituted as others, whose task is to mirror the self. Chief among these troubling dualisms are self/other, mind/body, culture/nature, male/female, civilized/primitive, reality/appearance, whole/part, agent/resource, maker/made, active/passive, right/wrong, truth/illusion, total/partial, God/man. (CM 177)

The dualisms Haraway lists are the currency of modernity, of its domination of the other, and of its alienation of the self. Haraway argues that to be the self of the left side of these dualisms is illusory and that it means surviving entirely through the other, who acts as an invisible resource. The unmarked self (well-off, white, straight, etc.) is defined only by not being what the invisible other is (poor, black, queer, etc.). In a sense, then, the self has no ontology of its own. The other, denied a selfhood of its own, is called upon to labor on the selfhood of the unmarked, and is thus left “frayed, insubstantial,” lost in space between the two poles of a dualism that the self has created.

Dualisms, Haraway reminds us, are not going to disappear from our worldview any time soon. They form the very structure of much of our experience (inside/outside, true/false, etc.). Even Haraway’s own arguments depend on dualism—themselves drawing distinctions between nature and culture, science and deconstruction. The key, for Haraway, is to keep an ambivalent relationship to dualisms and to transgress as much as use them. For her, “One is too few, but two are too many” (ibid.). If we accept this, we find that troubling our dualisms will not necessarily result in the fragmentation of the unary or in the unification of the dual. We are left with dualisms that sometimes make sense and sometimes do not, that are productive but sometimes painful and always contestable.

Such an understanding of dualism inspires Haraway to critique both science and deconstruction (two practices she has strong commitments to) for their policing of the
distinction between truth and illusion. Haraway considers it impossible for science to discover truth or for deconstruction to show that truth is simply an illusion. Any claim about the verity of a single, scientific view or about the equal truth-value of all views assumes a transcendent viewpoint, a view from nowhere. Haraway insists that we are not transcendent, that we are trapped in a context, and thus that we cannot make a solid distinction between truth and illusion, fact and perspective.

Scientific discourses, without ever ceasing to be radically and historically specific, do still make claims on you.... No scientific account escapes being story-laden, but it is equally true that stories are not all equal here. Radical relativism just won’t do as a way of finding your way across and through these terrains. (Int 2)

Science can show us that certain accounts of the world have more empirical relevance than others, but it can never escape perspective or discourse. What scientists choose to ask, how they frame their investigation, and how they interpret their results are all colored by economic, political, and social context. Deconstruction helps us see that perspective matters and that truth is not simply “discovered,” but it does nothing to change the fact that some things are simply more real to us than others. Deconstruction does not vaporize truth claims. It merely shows them to be implicated in networks of power and meaning and, thus, to be both real and contestable. Radical relativism just doesn’t make sense to us empirically (or morally) if we accept our embodiedness.14

These ideas are not new. Hilary Putnam, for instance, argues that we must “see relativism and the desire for a metaphysical foundation as manifestations of the same

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14 One might note that it is an exaggeration to portray mainstream science as denying that it speaks from a perspective or deconstruction as being blindly relativistic. Ironically, Haraway feeds into the exaggerations of her UCSC colleagues, Gary Lease and Michael Soule, who have argued that deconstruction rejects the idea of a real world and has anti-environmental tendencies (1995: xv). Caricatures of science and deconstruction, however, are common to contemporary academia and its attached publishing industries, which seem to thrive on exaggerating schisms and aporias.
disease”—this disease being the inability to accept that we are embodied, that we have \textit{no less and no more} than embodied knowledge, knowledge from a context (177).

“Something in us both craves more than we can possibly have and flees from even the certainty that we do have,” writes Putnam (178). Like Haraway, Putnam seeks a middle ground between scientism and deconstruction \textit{qua} relativism. Haraway advocates a common sense appreciation of what both science and deconstruction can do for us. Each tells part of the story of how we, as embodied beings, actually relate to dualisms like truth/illusion. She challenges us to “give up mastery but keep searching for fidelity, knowing all the while we will be hoodwinked” (SK 199). This modest yet demanding project sets the stage for the cyborg.

The Cyborg

The cyborg appeared midway through Haraway’s career, in the mid-1980s, and achieved notoriety in 1985 with the \textit{Socialist Review}’s publication of “Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s.” (The essay has since appeared elsewhere in revised versions and has inspired a rash of work by other scholars.\footnote{The “Manifesto” also appears in Haraway (1991) and Brown University Staff (1989). I quote the 1991 version in this paper. Some works dealing heavily with the “Manifesto” include Balsamo (1996), commentaries in Brown University Staff (1989), and many of the essays appearing in Gray, ed. (1995).}) In the 1980s, the conditions of world systems of domination underwent significant changes: Military-industrial complexes became “polymorphous, information systems” symbolized, for Haraway, by the U.S. military’s mid-1980s organizational principle, “C^3I” (command-control-communication-intelligence) (CM 161, 150).
At issue in the “Manifesto” are two strategic questions, really: What direction should feminism take? And what direction should leftism in general take? When Haraway was writing the “Manifesto,” New Age culture was growing in popularity, and goddess worship, pagan revival, and anti-technological fetishization of indigenous peoples had become cultural practice for many feminists. While this was in part a successful effort to get beyond the paternalism of white, second wave feminism, it made some feminists, including Haraway, nervous. Meanwhile, leftism was still pushing a more or less industrial-era agenda, fighting hard to keep auto factories operating in the Midwest. In 1985, computers were common but crude, and the information highway consisted of slow, obscure BBS technology. That, at such a time, Haraway looked to the cyborg for strategy is a statement of her frustration with technophobic feminisms and plodding leftists.

The cyborg, more properly called the cybernetic organism, takes its name from the science of cybernetics, which explores the idea that computers and organisms are not that different from each other in that they can both be understood as systems of information exchange. In this sense, any organism is a computer: It operates through control systems that regulate the flow of genetic, electrical, and chemical information units. Add to this the realizations that writing and other communications are technologies for control of information exchange and that social structures such as religion, law, fashion, and sexuality are all systems of information flow, and you start to see that almost everything can be considered a cybernetic organism. Haraway argues that, in an age of artificial intelligence, prosthetic surgery, evolutionary theory, and nanotechnology, the differences
between machine and human, animal and human, and material and immaterial, for instance, come into question.

As a result, Haraway tells us, "one should expect control strategies to concentrate on boundary conditions and interfaces, on rates of flow across" (163). The power to control the interfaces between categories lies primarily with the privileged and is guarded jealously. White men capitalize on blurred boundaries by manipulating them for their own ends. During World War II, for example, women were told that the male:female::active:passive analogy did not hold and that they could and should be active à la Rosie the Riveter. As soon as the need for women's labor waned (and in fact presented an economic threat to returning soldiers), women were told once more that they were passive entities. Similarly, before Native Americans were guaranteed the right to vote in the United States, having even a very low degree of Native American blood could be cause for disenfranchisement. The government at that time was intent on assimilating tribal lands, and any aboriginal votes would have represented a threat to that agenda. Therefore, the boundaries of the category "Native American" were widened. Nowadays, however, the same boundary is being policed in the opposite way. Prominent institutions like Stanford University (or many federal programs, for that matter) require official documentation proving that Native American applicants are enrolled in state or federally recognized tribes or have high enough degrees of Native blood to be considered under University affirmative action policies. Affirmative action can be viewed as representing a threat to a white man's admission to a university, and federal programs for enrolled Indians cost money. This helps explain, in part, why the boundaries of the category "Native American" have been narrowed of late.
The cyborg, Haraway believes, is well equipped to understand the war over coding and thus becomes a powerful metaphor for feminism and leftism. Itself occupying the borderlands between man and machine, natural and artificial, the cyborg notices right away when categories are shifted or erased. In technoculture, the world reads like “problems in communications engineering (for the managers) or theories of the text (for those who would resist),” and, Haraway points out, “Both are cyborg semiologies” (163). The cyborg acts both as the “fiction mapping our social and bodily reality and as an imaginative resource” suggesting possibilities for resistance and reformulation of that reality (150). Cyborgs are the products of patriarchal, military-capitalist technology, but Haraway reassures us that “illegitimate offspring are often exceedingly unfaithful to their origins” (151). Cyborgs can just as easily be revolutionary subjects as guardians of the status quo. “The political struggle is to see from both perspectives at once because each reveals both dominations and possibilities unimaginable from the other vantage point” (154).

Incorporating cyborg consciousness into feminism and leftism does several things. First, it makes boundaries seem movable rather than natural. If we understand that we are cyborgs, we can better read the (operating) system and invent paths for hacking that system and causing stress. Haraway terms this the “struggle against perfect communication” (176), the effort to disrupt ways those in power regulate the way everyone else receives and transmits information. The cyborg, a potentially sophisticated and strategic situated knower, feels at home in this kind of politics. It attempts nothing more than to take “pleasure in the confusion of boundaries, and... responsibility in their construction” (150).
Second, the cyborg is equipped to see itself as a material-semiotic actor occupying a landscape that is no less real for being discursive.\textsuperscript{16} The cyborg knows that existing in a material and discursive world means having identities and standpoints; it means having weight and interest in the system. The cyborg participates in the process of articulation with this in mind. This is part of what Haraway means when she continually insists that we must “cast our lot somewhere.” We hack in(to) the system for reasons, impure reasons, so we can never be innocently revolutionary or “simply oppositional” (MW 3). The disruption of the system of boundaries always means redrawing them, not escaping from them altogether. Leftists in general and feminists in particular often hold the idea that their cause is that of the innocent and violated. For Haraway, this is delusional. As embodied actors in a material-semiotic landscape, we are always implicated and always interested. Half organism, half machine, the cyborg’s “natural” state is miscegenation. “The cyborg skips the step of original unity, of identification with nature in the Western sense. This is its illegitimate promise that might lead to subversion of its teleology as star wars” (CM 151).

Haraway argues that resistance movements start to work differently when we think in these terms. New possibilities for coalitions open up, for instance, when we substitute cyborg feminism for essentialist feminisms that concretize gender structures by goddess worship or erase racial and other politics by defining “woman’s experience” in originary terms.

\textsuperscript{16} For one thing, as Anne Balsamo’s \textit{Technologies of the Gendered Body} does a good job of reminding us, discourse does not operate in a simply hyperreal, immaterial realm, but actually works to shape real, material bodies (1996).
From the perspective of cyborgs, freed of the need to ground politics in "our" privileged position of the oppression that incorporates all other dominations, the innocence of the merely violated, the ground of those closer to nature, we can see partial possibilities. (176)

Too often, Haraway fears, specific groups of resistance miss out on potential alliances because they are too caught up in their self-image as "merely violated." The cyborg, she believes, can embrace a greatly broadened feminist and leftist coalition politics. It can treat identity as unstable but important and redraw the boundaries of its own constituency at strategic intervals—sometimes allowing capitalists to be on its side, sometimes allowing computer jocks on board, and so on. The cyborg leftist can work against racism, sexism, heterocentrism, and imperialism while still leaving quite a lot open for play. Haraway suggests, then, that a cyborg might prefer the concept of "affinity groups" to that of "identity groups." The cyborg would encourage multiple and often ironic connections (jointings, in the sense of articulation) that are entirely reworkable.

In the end, Haraway leaves us, and cyborgian politics, with two linked, unsettling problems. First, the cyborg is anything but necessarily liberating, and second, some people are more likely than others to make bad cyborgs ("bad" in the simplified sense of the battle between the "good" cyborg and the "bad" cyborg in Terminator 2). In answer to an interviewer's fear that the cyborg could usher in technofascism, Haraway suggests that such fear is warranted but should not paralyze us. The cyborg just "is bereft of secure guarantees" (Int 7). Haraway prefers working within the dangerous social reality of our cyborg existence to giving up completely, or to inventing false guarantees of purity, identity, or necessity. Part of working without guarantees, however, means keeping a watchful eye on one's own actions. Accordingly, Haraway continually emphasizes the dangers of privileged actors doing cyborg resistance work. She doggedly
figures herself both “as an insider and an outsider to the hegemonic powers and discourses of my European and North American legacies” (MW 2) and worries about her own essentialization of Third World women (SK 191) and her colonization of Native American trickster metaphorics (Int 7). She knows that there is danger not only in playing with the tropes of military technology but also in having a privileged voice, a voice that has a tendency to reinscribe the conditions for its own power. Most important for this paper, and least developed in Haraway’s own work, is the danger of men trying to be leftist cyborgs.

Chela Sandoval, a former student of Haraway’s often cited in Haraway’s own work, offers a hopeful (but somewhat parenthetical) perspective on male cyborgs. Her essay, “New Sciences: Cyborg Feminism and the Methodology of the Oppressed,” makes the basic argument that the oppressed have always practiced cyborg politics. The oppressed necessarily know how to be hackers and tricksters because they know all too well that boundaries are not real and that they are continually rewritten by the powerful to maintain hegemony. What Haraway’s “Manifesto” does, Sandoval suggests, is show that the wisdom of the oppressed can be used to bridge the apartheid of all different domains of leftism. Cyborgism, with its aptitude for flexible couplings, can link feminist subjects of various identity groups and theoretical persuasions and, even, “could very well bring the politics of the alienated white male subject into alliance with the subaltern politics of U.S. third world feminism” (409). This last claim, while intriguing, seems a bit dissonant with Haraway’s agenda. While it is true that the cyborg metaphor could prove empowering to disaffected white men living in the coding structures of technoculture, one could argue that, like the oppressed, the privileged have always been cyborgs. Manipulating
boundaries, redirecting information flow, and shifting identities are already part of the white male methodology of control. After all, in Haraway’s words, control and resistance are both cyborg semiologies. Even if Sandoval means that cyborg politics is good news for alienated leftist, white males, her statement (not discussed in any detail) merits substantiation and further qualification.

Haraway’s own treatment of the issue of the male cyborg is tellingly conflicted. She does write that as technoculture blurs the boundaries around categories such as “natural,” “corporate executives reading Playboy and anti-porn radical feminists will make strange bedfellows in jointly unmasking the irrationalism [of naturalized sex roles]” (CM 162). However, when asked in an interview to consider how a sympathetic man might read the final line in her “Manifesto” (“I’d rather be a cyborg than a goddess”), Haraway comes off as extremely suspicious of potential male participation in her project.

There’s a way in which the sensitive man is the androgynous figure, the figure who is even more complete than the macho figure. And more dangerous. That’s my resistance to the fact that I do like sensitive folks of all sexes. But the image of the sensitive man calls up, for me, the male person who, while enjoying the position of unbelievable privilege, also has the privilege of gentleness. Then it’s a version of male feminism of which I am very suspicious. On the other hand, that line is written to and for women, and I think I never imagined how a man might read it…. [My cyborg] is a polychromatic girl… who hasn’t really figured out a politics that makes the necessary articulations with the boys who are your allies. Its undone work. (Int 19, 20)

This quote, with its mixed tone of gravity and ambivalence, exhibits an obvious reluctance to go where Sandoval does with the “Manifesto.” In the same spirit, while Haraway’s troping on cyborg consciousness interests me as a leftist and as an environmentalist and while Sandoval’s optimism appeals to me, I feel obligated to engage both cautiously. To explore how environmentalism might fit into the whole
puzzle, let's turn now to a consideration of how the cyborg has been used in left-environmentalist theory.

**Cyborg Environmentalism**

Haraway maintains a certain distance from environmentalist discourse in her writing. She is more likely, for instance, to describe an act of “solidarity” with animals than to speak of our duty toward living things (PM 319). And though she emphasizes that nonhuman entities are actors in the articulation of worlds, she stops short of the common argument that if plants and animals are agents, we have moral obligations to them. For this reason, many people get frustrated with her “for not finally saying what the bottom line is on these things: they say well do you or don’t you believe that nonhuman actors are in some sense social agents?” (Int 4). Her answer is intentionally ambiguous: “The subjects are cyborg, nature is coyote, and the geography is elsewhere” (ibid.).

While Haraway shies away from environmentalist discourse, she does imply how cyborgism might transform environmentalism. As “coyote,” nature evades being cast as whole, pure, or transcendent and becomes an active, social construction, continually being reworked and rearticulated on a shifting terrain. This would make it necessary for much environmentalism to seriously reconsider how blithely it proclaims what nature is and ought be. Environmentalism can no longer be the political movement with the apolitical cause. Its tropes express historically specific and irreducibly heterogenous “hopes, fears, and contradictory histories,” not the will or essence of Earth (SI 3). The environmentalist in this discourse is entirely bound up in a process of articulation, living in the partial yet embodied landscape of boundary work.
Cyborg consciousness calls into question the parts of environmentalism that make Haraway uncomfortable. It warns that hegemonic practices can be imported into definitions of the “natural.” It also reminds technophobic strains of environmentalism that the division between technological and natural is less than clear and that much can be accomplished by transgressing that division. Finally, the cyborg challenges environmentalists to see that the health of the ecosystem is just one of many important things to fight for, that racism, classism, etc., will not go away when everyone learns to recycle, and that hegemonic practices continue to permeate environmentalist discourse.

As a case in point, Haraway discusses a magazine article about how Kayapó Indians are using video technology to help protest the construction of a hydroelectric dam on their land. The article’s author, obviously identifying as environmentalist and pro-indigenous, portrays the situation as an odd meeting of the technological and the traditional (read: “natural”). Haraway insists that, here and elsewhere, these categories conserve the divide between sophisticated and primitive and smuggle racism and imperialism in under the guise of environmentalism.

Noel Sturgeon and Peter van Wyck further this work on cyborgian left-environmentalism. Sturgeon, again, a former student of Haraway’s, advocates “cyborg ecofeminism,” and van Wyck, a Canadian academic, uses the cyborg in what he terms “weak ecology.” Neither author is as well known as Haraway, but each works within the same disciplinary lineage and helps explore the potential of Haraway’s work.

Sturgeon’s Ecofeminist Natures examines the schismatic and controversial history of ecofeminism from the perspective of a practitioner and a critic. She concentrates on three

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problems in ecofeminist theory: the debate about essentializing women, the separation of theory and practice, and division within the movement.

The debate about essentialism centers around the advantages and disadvantages of arguing that women are closer to nature than men (and that women, therefore, are “natural” environmentalists). Sturgeon agrees with many theorists that essentialist strains of ecofeminism simply reverse the valuation of two poles of an old, patriarchal dualism (that women are essentially natural and men cultural), but “natural” is now seen as better than “cultural.” At the same time, Sturgeon warns feminist theorists against making blanket condemnations of essentialism. Some essentialisms feed into hegemonic power structures, she writes, but others (or the same ones at particular moments) can be liberatory. Sturgeon insists that any critique of essentialism be based on the particular implications of particular essentialisms, not on the fact of essentialism alone.

Ecofeminism is not monolithic; it might even, Sturgeon suggests, find a useful tool in “strategic essentialism,” the intentional use of certain essentialist arguments at certain times for feminist ends.

Citing advice given to her to keep ecofeminist activities off her *curriculum vitae* lest people think she was not a serious academic, Sturgeon continues by lamenting the perceived need for feminist academics to remain aloof from ecofeminism. This sort of snobbery further separates the ivory tower from popular movements, she argues, and promotes a theory/practice divide. It also reflects the stifling, academic tendency to typologize. The question of who’s “in” and who’s “out” with respect to different sorts of feminism and environmentalism can be instructive, but Sturgeon feels that theorists spend far too much time generating ways to divide movements (for instance, essentialism/non-
essentialism) and not enough finding ways to unite them. Her answer to all these concerns—to employ strategic essentialism, bridge the theory-practice divide, and encourage a balance between internal critique and solidarity—is clear from the beginning.

Interestingly, Sturgeon repackages this agenda in the last few pages of her book under the name “cyborg ecofeminism,” because, she asserts, Haraway’s cyborg trope lends itself to strategic essentialism, practical theory, and flexible coalitions. Inhabiting continually shifting boundaries and not easily set in its ways, the cyborg keeps a critical eye on the sort of boundary maintenance that keeps essentialist and antiessentialist (or any other strains of feminist environmentalism) apart. The cyborg also sees nature as a genuine actor in the very real work of boundary maintenance. The idea that “natural” entities play a role in the social construction of nature makes them count in the equation but does not mean that the ecosphere is a “merely violated” guiding spirit. Cyborg ecofeminism, accordingly, should highlight the shared conditions and potential coalitions of women and nature but should not necessarily look to nature for a transcendental validation of feminism.

Sturgeon acknowledges throughout her book the distance that Haraway maintains from ecofeminism and its debates, but she suggests that Haraway’s work effectively represents a new type of ecofeminism. When she “playfully” names it cyborg ecofeminism, Sturgeon insists that she is not trying to invent a new school of thought (and more divisions within the movement) but only to suggest possibilities for a more inclusive and flexible feminist environmentalism. Cyborg ecofeminism should work in terms of articulation of and flow over boundaries, not in terms of inclusion and exclusion.
Sturgeon’s renaming is not meant to signify a

...new and more perfect ecofeminism, but rather to recognize as necessary the dance of critique and consolidation that is part of theorizing and political action; the dialectic of creating, deconstructing, and reforming political identities, new alliances, complex analyses, and creative oppositional strategies. Every theory aimed towards political change contains historically contingent arguments; each solution to political and theoretical problems will be historically transient. (195)

As Sturgeon surely realizes, this argument, like Haraway’s in the “Manifesto,” is relevant to more than just feminism. In most movements, the dance of consolidation and critique is not given its fair due. The cyborg has the capacity to remind any political group that a unified purpose is important but that an effective movement allows for as much difference as possible, to keep allies rather than turn them away. However, there is one point at which consolidation just seems too scary for Sturgeon. Reading the book with the question of this paper in mind, it becomes obvious that although she quotes the ecofeminist work of some men (Jim Cheney, for instance), Sturgeon, like Haraway, stops short of advocating alliances with privileged men.

Where Sturgeon avoids the question of cyborgism and men, Peter van Wyck barrels right through it, with nary a look askance.¹⁸ Van Wyck’s Primitives in the Wilderness happens to go over the exact terrain I had originally intended to cover in this paper. It moves from an examination of conservatism within biocentrist environmental movements to a suggestion that we use Haraway’s cyborg figure as a role model for a more partial, more leftist, and less fundamentalist environmentalism. Having stumbled across a book that already attempts this argument, I see a new question: Is biocentrism really the only urgent problem with environmentalism? I think one could argue that privilege, not

¹⁸ As does Michael Zimmerman in his Contesting Earth’s Future pp.355-367. However, Zimmerman only engages Haraway as one of a number of “postmodern” environmental philosophers that he finds interesting.
biocentrism is at the root of environmentalism-gone-awry. While biocentrism is especially well equipped to disguise the political as scientific or natural, the practitioner may deserve more interrogation than the practice. Privilege can corrupt any form of environmentalism, biocentrism or not, and any form of environmentalism, in the right hands, can do good work. What the cyborg has to say about this is a timely question left out, I fear, by van Wyck.

Primitives in the Wilderness begins with a detailed critique of the paradigmatically biocentrism environmentalism known as “deep ecology.” Deep ecology falls short, van Wyck argues, because it avoids critiquing modernity from the inside, as a part of it, and instead prefers to associate itself with nature, a realm which it locates outside of modernity. The result is a critique of modernity that takes on a transcendent air and ends up seeming extremely, well, modern. As van Wyck writes, “By developing only a superficial and ultimately reactionary analysis of the ‘modern,’ deep ecology remains deeply entwined within the very historical forces it attempts to contest” (2).

Ostensibly, deep ecology stands for the abolition of modern dualisms like the nature/culture divide, but, like some ecofeminisms, it ends up working only to reverse the valuation of the terms. “These acts of boundary jumping never really challenge the boundaries, only our position in relation to them. The boundaries remain intact, but a prohibition is imposed against the side that once held an unnatural sway over the other (106).” Deep ecology preserves the nature/culture dualism and strays from mainstream modern attitudes only in that it treats culture as a resource for nature, rather than the other

He ends up making no strong claims about whether or not his fellows in the field of Environmental Ethics should pick up on her work.
way around. Ironically, by taking on the role of nature's spokesperson, deep ecologists seem to position themselves as the sole beneficiaries of culture-as-resource. Such a project, in van Wyck's mind, is reactionary, not revolutionary. This maneuver, he points out, is not one of immersed partiality—the kind that biocentrism claims to exemplify—but a quintessential "move to the outside." With its ubiquitous picture of Earth from space, deep ecology's purportedly partial subject looks down on everything to proclaim that certain acts are natural and good (coyotes eating rabbits) and certain acts are unnatural and bad (humans eating coyotes). This move to the outside is even more stunning when we consider that deep ecologists claim to speak on behalf of blue marble Earth. Transcendence and fundamentalism authorize too many ugly things to be left unchecked and unquestioned in the hands of the privileged.

As an example of the sort of dangers inherent in deep ecological practice, van Wyck discusses deep ecology's well-known reverence for hunter-gatherer societies. These societies, for the deep ecologist, represent a lost golden age and a model for the future.

The deep ecological response to the twentieth-century ecological condition is to wish away the harmful effects of the "modern" by imagining a story wherein modern humans have strayed from their pristine and ecologically benign roots. (2)

Deep ecology's story about primitives posits a fundamental opposition between contemporary humans who inhabit the culture side of the nature/culture dualism and the fantasized premodern or posthistorical subject who inhabits the nature side. Both sides of the opposition are homogenized, and the gap between them is neatly swept clean. The modern human is considered sick and the ecological subject is considered one with the planet. To erase difference in this way is no small sin in the eyes of van Wyck. The most dangerous consequence of such erasure is that those moderns labeled primitive and those
moderns who strive to attain primitive status lose political subjectivity. “No longer a potential site of resistance, the ecological subject is undifferentiated from its context. This subject is no subject at all; it becomes a desubjectified organ of Nature” (106). This disguises hegemony, and thus makes deep ecology, at least as received in the United States, into a very convenient and comfortable cause for privileged male environmentalists. In the deep ecological view, political struggle between groups of humans along race, class, or gender lines becomes irrelevant. Those who already exist in harmony with nature have no political problems of their own, and those of us who are not in harmony with nature need, first and foremost, to worry about the ecosystem. Once we are back in touch with Nature, a uniform, biotic matrix will subsume our political differences and problems.

Ultimately, van Wyck turns to Haraway and her cyborg for alternatives to these sorts of narratives. His reading of Haraway focuses on cyborg epistemology, and he identifies in it a “weak ontology” from which we might derive a “weak ecology.” He sees pragmatism in Haraway’s straddling of deconstruction/science and other divides and in her notion of political, situated knowledge.

We have both radical constructionism on the level of knowledge claims, and a kind of scientific realism. There is no particular transcendence involved here; just the acknowledgment that boundaries and meanings are constructs, and their fabrication speaks more to forms of human agency than it does to ontological certainty; this I would call a form of weak ontology. (115)

This weakening of thought avoids fundamentalism on one side and political or moral paralysis on the other. Weakening our thought actually strengthens our politics, because it highlights our implication in the process of meaning-making and calls attention to our

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19 Van Wyck makes a point to distinguish the less authoritarian Arne Naess from American deep ecologists
highly differential and politicized existence. Cyborg politics (like weak ecology) is a situated practice. "Its transgressive character is retained only in relation to the boundaries it challenges. It does not dream of a metalanguage..., a position of strength, a position above and beyond" (133). In answer to Sturgeon's fear about academics and politics, theory and practice collapse because both occur in the same situated, partial space, somewhere between the rarefied zone of philosophy and the more tangible experience of "real" worlds.

A cyborg's weak ontology, van Wyck continues, would never generate or even dream of generating an ecology of depth (deep ecology). At the same time, it would not foreclose on the possibility of confronting the global environmental crisis. "Rather it [allows] the problem to be thought in all its terrifying complexity" (112). The environmental crisis does not admit of easy answers, only of consequences that may hurt and boundaries that can be disputed. The cyborg gives up on simplistically speaking for the trees (135), looking for salvation in nature (113), and dismissing cultural politics as unnatural (106)... all projects that van Wyck finds especially problematic in deep ecology and, ultimately unnecessary for a strong political movement.

Although van Wyck does not get into it, I believe his idea of cyborg environmentalism avoids the traps of some other ecological theories of situated knowledge. There is a body of bioregional literature, for example, that agrees with Haraway that we have nonhuman partners in the construction of social reality but that goes from there to infer a sort of moral, environmental imperative.20 The argument reads

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20 See, for instance, Cheney (1989).

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that when we have situated knowledges, we find that our situation begins to demand
care—and thus, an environmental ethic—from us. The whole notion of moral
imperatives makes me (and Haraway, I think) nervous, but I also take issue with
bioregionalists' treatment of the "natural" (to the exclusion of the cultural or political) as
the only important aspect of situatedness. The argument that situated knowledges
demand an environmental ethic presumes that it is only animals and watersheds that
might demand care from us. What about refrigerators, political campaigns, and cracked
city sidewalks? Aren't they part of our surroundings, too?

The cyborg can have a morality based on situatedness, but there is no limit to what its
situation might be, or to what sort of morality might spring from that situation. The
closest Haraway ever gets to espousing bioregionalism is saying that her cyborgian
epistemology "makes room for surprises and ironies at the heart of knowledge
production," and that this "is not comfortable for humanists and others committed to the
world as a resource" (SK 199). Cyborgian epistemology does not necessarily defy or
support pillagers of the ecosphere; Haraway and van Wyck agree that there are no
guarantees here. Cyborg consciousness merely allows for contestation; in van Wyck's
words, "The cyborg is a wager" (115).

Although he has quite a bit in common with Haraway, van Wyck differs from her in
that he places so much of the blame on biocentrism. The temptation to place the blame
there is great, especially for a critical mind immersed in a heavily biocentrist
environmentalist scene like today's. We should remember, though, that hegemony
underlies the problems of particular worldviews like biocentrism. Bringing privilege to
the foreground of our critiques of worldviews makes a difference in the conclusions we
come to. On the last page of his book, van Wyck alludes to this: "We might also ask if, in the end, it is a luxury of the strong to even imagine a strategy of weakness. This seems like an important question, but the answer to this will have to remain open" (135). He leaves it at that, as if dispensing with a concern raised by one of his editors.

It is an important question, though, especially when one realizes that van Wyck's cyborg environmentalist is unmarked in terms of race, class, gender, sexuality, etc.—giving me the uneasy feeling that his cyborg is none other than our old friend, the unremarkably white, middle to upper class, heterosexual male. Van Wyck ends his book exactly where it began: with a question about how to deal with the problem of privilege in left-environmentalism. In a way, the weak ecologist sounds a lot like Haraway's "sensitive male," and we have already seen what Haraway thinks about him. Cyborg strategy is a wager, for sure, but van Wyck should be more conscious of the sorts of inertia that might make his cyborg environmentalist just another "chip off the old block" of white male hegemony.  

Beyond Innocence and Guilt?

This paper set out to see if Haraway's cyborg trope could help white, middle to upper class, heterosexual, male left-environmentalists avoid replicating hegemony through their activism and theory. The short answer, I believe, is not necessarily. Haraway makes it very clear that her cyborg is not about guarantees. The cyborg is only a metaphor for what type of subjects we have always been, what type of subjects we have become, and

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21 I take the phrase from White Guys, Fred Pfeil's study of changing forms of white straight masculinity in music, film, and men's movements (1995).
what type of subjects we might become. It is meant to show those who would resist
patriarchy that they already have the tools for hacking into systems of meaning and that
they need not rely on those narratives of alienation and salvation (Marxism, Christianity,
psychoanalysis, etc.) that have let them down many times before. The cyborg is not a
savior, but it does open political space and opportunity.

Consider the space that has been created for leftism and environmentalism in general.
To begin with, the cyborg can help leftists see that boundaries are movable and
contestable. With this understanding, Haraway believes, leftists can more effectively
tinker with the dualisms (male/female, civilized/primitive, etc.) that have traditionally
founded race, gender, class, and sexuality-based hierarchies. Cyborg leftists can also
trouble the boundaries of kinship typologies used for dividing people and movements
along philosophical or any other lines. The cyborg frees leftists of the search for a
mythical past and the identity of being innocent and merely violated and thus allows the
movement to deal with the complexities of its situatedness. Finally, cyborg leftism
allows for ironic, shifting coalitions. As embodied, artifactual entities, as tricksters,
cyborg leftists can take very seriously the moral and political agendas closest to their
hearts while keeping open minds about most everything else. Marxists need not eschew
alliance with postmodernists, nor Catholics with pagans, nor New Agers with
cyberfeminists, to mention only a few examples of real or potential friction (and alliance)
within the left.

Cyborg environmentalism holds similar potential. It occupies the divide between
natural and artificial, suggests that we are all cyborgs, and maintains that the distinction
between biological and technological or cultural systems is fuzzy at best. This radically

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challenges environmentalisms founded on a stable image of nature. Nature becomes elusive and negotiable; we can’t find it (or its essence) just by sitting in one place long enough and observing, and its meaning is not completely relative and “up for grabs.” Denied the possibility of a morally, metaphysically, or politically simple environmentalism, cyborg environmentalists could be more likely to notice when their rhetoric or actions work to conserve hegemonic structures or when their politics are being erased in the name of a notion of “ecological integrity” drawn too rigidly, too much supported for its own sake.

The authors I have discussed leave one hole in their work: the question of white, middle to upper class, heterosexual, left-environmentalist male cyborgs. This pattern is understandable. My character, in a sense, already speaks fluent cyborg. Born a warlord of systems of meaning, trained as border guard for dualisms and kinship-designations, and indoctrinated as a giver and taker of power, he already occupies the shifting terrain of cyborg consciousness. His most sacred task, arguably, is to secure complete power through exclusive access to cyborg consciousness. Disenfranchised people who might clearly see the contestability of borders and hierarchies are continually policed, lest they step out of line or do irreparable damage to the operating system. So does this mean that the inertia of privilege will necessarily make my character a “bad” cyborg, even if he tries to be a “good” one? Perhaps, but to quote Haraway slightly out of context, “that doesn’t mean we have to give away the game, cash in our chips and go home.” The places where cyborgism might fail us, she argues, are exactly, “the places where we need to keep contesting” (Int 8).
Haraway closes her “Manifesto” with a useful image from her background as a biologist. Reiterating that cyborgs are outside of the sort of alienation-salvation narratives that call for born again souls and societies, Haraway stresses that the cyborg is more comfortable with regeneration than with rebirth. It mutates in a context, never born of nowhere or by discrete parents. In this respect, the cyborg reminds Haraway of salamanders.

For salamanders, regeneration after injury, such as the loss of a limb, involves regrowth of structure and restoration of function with the constant possibility of twinning or other odd topographical productions at the site of former injury. The regrown limb can be monstrous, duplicated, potent. We have all been injured, profoundly. We require regeneration, not rebirth, and the possibilities for our constitution include the utopian dream of the hope for a monstrous world without gender. (181)

Although stylistically awkward, it is telling that she calls a world without gender a “possibility” of a “dream” of a “hope.” Her syntax indicates that she sees the possibility as distant. Gender still matters here and now. My character cannot escape his maleness, but he can develop odd topographical growths, like “pro-feminism” or “anti-racist environmentalism.” Haraway puts her hope in the power of monsters (cyborg or salamander), in the way the system screws up and burps out a potent remainder. What this means for the leftist, environmentalist, white man, I think, is that the cyborg can open up a space for resistance beyond innocence and guilt. 22

We know that the assumption of innocence is problematic. I remember, for instance, the account of a male rape survivor whose rapist, between bouts of punching and penetration, would sometimes stop to comfort his victim, tearfully proclaiming that they were both horribly wounded by society. What the rapist said was most likely true—the

22 Thanks to Annabel Bradford for help with this idea.
victim was intimately wounded, and the rapist had likely not had an ideal life—but woundedness does not justify atrocity.

While acknowledging a tyrannical history can be important, the assumption of guilt can be problematic for the privileged leftist. A certain type of guilty feeling, for example, can make white guys afraid to identify as feminists or to work on minority issues or in minority communities. The fear of their own sexist and racist attitudes (or worse, the fear of having them pointed out by the other) can paralyze these potential resisters. Guilt here acts like the Wilderness Retreat, as a segregatory mechanism that postpones radical change. This aspect of guilt is counter-productive. While white guys should not forget that the deck is stacked in their favor, they do not need to accept the deck at face value; as its illegitimate cyborg children, they can reject the system of domination and subvert its prejudiced allocation of extra "points."

Furthermore, white guilt, heterosexual guilt, male guilt, class guilt, and Western guilt can actually all preserve elements of hegemony. This family of guilt assumes (and enforces through daily interactions) that the other has been reduced to something irreparably and shamefully wounded and that the self alone carries the difficult responsibility of magnanimously welcoming the other in(to the unmarked white society of the self). Guiltily avoiding the eye of an African American on the street, for example, carries with it the assumption that the African American has been made socially and culturally inferior (by the system) and communicates that s/he is an untouchable outsider unable to regenerate autonomously.

The cyborg bears good news here. White, middle to upper class, heterosexual, male left-environmentalists can move beyond the airy spaces of innocence and guilt to inhabit
the lively, real, material-semiotic spaces of boundary work and embodied discursiveness.

As cyborgs allied with the disempowered, they can do an "inside-job" on a system that continually violates and subjugates people, plants, and animals alike. Embracing cyborgism may also help left-environmentalist men take their identity less seriously, avoid feeling purely evil or hegemonic, and resist the often insecure need to take extra points for being sensitive, environmentalist, or leftist. White guys can and should participate, albeit cautiously, in the very conversations that indict them. This is a hard lesson to learn, and when it is easy, we should ask why. This means surrendering the comfort of acting as a talking head for environmentalism and leftism; it means taking an implicated stance somewhere down with the "rabble"; and it means always running the risk of disconnecting the wrong wires. The cyborg will not necessarily solve all our problems, but good things don’t often come with guarantees.
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