

“The center figure in a ménage à trios”: An Ecofeminist Reading of Sexuality

By Tia Lalani

Ecofeminism is an emerging body of criticism that deals with the link between the patriarchal oppression of women and the natural world. Although feminist theory offers a lens through which to perceive the unfair treatment of women in literature, ecofeminist theory goes the extra step in associating women and women’s bodies with nature, which allows patriarchy to degrade both simultaneously. In her article on “The Power and Promise of Ecological Feminism,” Karen J. Warren describes the framework of ecofeminism as one that works “both for re-conceiving feminism and for developing an environmental ethic which takes seriously connections between the domination of women and the domination of nature” (172). Though there are many ways to go about this potential re-conception, I believe an important factor to look at in terms of changing how one views both women and the environment is sexuality. Sex and sexuality are not often explored in the context of nature, and literature that seeks to incorporate sex with the natural world opens up new ways to think about nature. In turn, ecofeminist literature opens up room to question the mistreatment of nature and women combined.

Sex is often only thought of in terms of human beings and aspects of the natural world are rarely depicted in a sexual manner. The novel *Prodigal Summer* by Barbara Kingsolver, and the short stories “Gabimichigami” by Gretchen Legler and “Sandstone Seduction” by Katie Lee reveal sex as a way to interact with nature in an unorthodox way. *Prodigal Summer*, a novel comprised of the story lines of three main characters, expresses interconnectedness within nature which stems from the idea that everything is constantly reproducing, an ongoing site of

reproduction that is mirrored in the sexual relationships amongst the three characters in the story. “Gabimichigami” and “Sandstone Seduction” each describe a physical relationship with some part of nature. And the relationship presented in Lee’s story, specifically, is intensely erotic.

Although these texts rely heavily on female characters, they do not explicitly link females with their ability to connect sexuality with nature. Instead, sexuality is presented as a human experience. Thus the texts refrain from essentializing females with the ability to interact with nature in a different way than men. A downfall of ecofeminism is its tendency to partake in essentialism. In refuting any essential connection between women and nature, these texts offer a way to discover humanity’s potential to stop the denigration of nature. Ecofeminist theorists, Karen J. Warren and Janis Birkeland note the importance of sexuality when regarding women, women’s bodies, and the human connection with nature, while Gretchen Legler presents this through her story as well as an academic article on ecofeminism. These texts present an opposing outlook to dominant ways of regarding nature. Going against the grain, these texts start a process of reversing the domination of men over women and human over nature. Each of these texts embrace sexuality as a means of re-conceiving the way we think about both nature and other human beings, in accordance with ecofeminist ideals.

Prodigal Summer is a novel about sex and reproduction and demonstrates how reproduction is an integral process to the continuation of life. The title itself suggests a type of superfluity evident in how the world chooses to reproduce: each of the character’s dealings with nature exemplify nature’s tendency to be lavish and extravagant, or, in other words, prodigal, in terms of reproduction. In an article on Prodigal Summer, Priscilla Leder discusses how integral sex is to the subject matter, as each of the characters “engage themselves with reproduction—

breeding apples, chestnuts, and goats,” all the while discovering and paying attention to their own biology (229). By paying close attention to sex and reproduction in nature and in themselves, which Leder terms a “conscious human processing” of biology, each character promotes insight regarding reconceiving traditional views that include the domination of women and nature. Through the discussion of reproduction, *Prodigal Summer* acts as an ecofeminist text that enables one to change their view of nature. This process is especially evident in Deanna’s characterization.

Deanna’s story not only demonstrates reproduction because she becomes pregnant, but also because out of the three main characters, she is most in tune with nature and natural cycles. Although Lusa may know more scientific information about the insects she studies, Deanna understands the predator-prey cycle, which is mirrored in her relationship with Eddie Bondo, as well as how integral reproduction is to all species on earth, human and nonhuman alike. Perhaps the most obvious expression of this knowledge is the scene in which Deanna describes to Eddie the cycles of the moon, educating him on pheromones and noting that “any woman will ovulate with the full moon if she’s exposed to enough moonlight” (93). Deanna expresses surprise that Eddie did not already know the “obvious animal facts people refused to know about their kind” (93). Deanna’s surprise demonstrates one of the reasons a re-conception of the way people think about nature needs to be brought about in the first place. If people were to realize these “obvious animal facts” they may be less reluctant to distance themselves from animals that share the same traits we as humans do.

Reproduction is also discussed in terms of nonhuman nature, which is most evident with Garnett and his chestnuts. Though Garnett’s story is nowhere near as sexually charged as

Deanna's, it still thoroughly expresses the importance of reproduction. Garnett's entire life rests on his fight to find a genetically resistant chestnut tree able to survive the blight that has endangered the tree population; the reader learns that Garnett's actions are a direct attempt to fix his family's mistake of logging this particular species of tree into endangerment. Although all of his work revolves around the importance of reproduction, Garnett needs some help in realizing this, and gets the help from Nannie Rawley. Nannie represents an ecofeminist in that she realizes the significance of all living and nonliving things on this planet, and does her best to avoid harming nature. For example, Nannie refrains from such things as harmful pesticide use. Though Garnett's old fashioned ideals make him bitter and reluctant to accept Nannie's views on reproduction (in terms of evolution), Nannie is quick to point out his work with the chestnuts is just that of evolution, "It's a business of choosing things out, just like how [he does] with [his] chestnuts" (279). Garnett, ultimately, accepts Nannie's point about the importance of reproduction. This acceptance shows that although sex and reproduction seem like taboo subjects, they are an integral part of life on earth. The fact that Garnett cares about this tree is a testament to how every species on earth is as important as the next, a very ecofeminist notion, is achieved through the process of reproduction.

Prodigal Summer not only looks at sex in terms of reproduction, but also describes sexual relationships between characters. Deanna's relationship with Eddie Bondo is unconventional in that both characters are fully immersed in nature. Deanna is so immersed in nature that she almost does not know how to act when first coming upon Eddie Bondo. Her shock is indicative of her isolation, and the idea that it is possible for nature to be as much of a companion to someone as any human being. Deanna and Eddie's relationship is also fully invested in nature.

This is especially apparent in the way Kingsolver uses similes and metaphors about nonhuman nature to illustrate the attraction between the two characters, including Deanna's first reaction to Eddie Bondo touching her hand as "a pulse of electricity up the insides of her thighs like lightning ripping up two trees at once" (20).

Deanna also struggles with her attraction for Eddie because of the irreconcilable differences in their attitudes towards the coyotes. Deanna is not willing to overlook Eddie's hunt after the coyotes she is so invested in protecting. In her article on this novel, Laura Fine notes that "intellectually, Deanna realizes that she cannot change Eddie's values, but she still intensely desires him" (129). The fact that Deanna has this inner turmoil draws parallels between her and animals incapable of rational thought; ultimately, she allows her bodily hunger for Eddie to take over her more easily silenced logic. In her depiction of Deanna and Eddie, "Kingsolver insists on the connections between human and animal drives and desires," which allows the reader to draw connections between the sexual drive of humans and animals to an ecofeminist agenda (Fine 130).

Deanna and Eddie's relationship mirrors a predator-prey relationship that flips the conventional idea of male over female domination, which Leder mentions in her article. Leder points out how "the spontaneity and intensity of their sexual encounter makes them seem like predators in a sexual sense, out for immediate gratification" (232). Although it is obvious that Deanna develops strong feelings for Eddie by the end of the novel, she also displays other tendencies. For example, Deanna decides to keep their baby a secret from Eddie, and there is no indication that she is destroyed by his sudden departure. Patriarchal stereotypes of this situation would include Deanna seeking a husband in Eddie's character, and an opposition to raising a

child without help from a man. Laura Fine's article discusses the unconventional nature of this relationship in terms of gender roles and usual patterns of domination. Fine notes "while the male characters enact traditional masculine performances, the female characters do not play their conventional parts in the dyad" (124). The destabilization of gender stereotypes reinforces ecofeminism two-fold, by reversing the dominant order of man over women and nature, and by likening Deanna and Eddie's relationship to nonhuman animals.

This subversion can also be likened to what Karen Warren describes as radical feminism in her essay on making connections between feminism and ecology. Warren notes that radical feminism suggests a patriarchy that "oppresses women in sex-specific ways by defining women as beings whose primary functions are either to bear and raise children or to satisfy male sexual desires" (114). The representation of Deanna, Lusa, and Nannie for that matter, as strong and independent women who do not necessarily need a man in their lives, proves that this novel would fit in well with denying the social conventions radical feminists see as present in our current society. Although Warren mentions one drawback regarding radical feminism, which is its tendency to essentialize, Kingsolver refrains from this tendency. Warren negates essentialization by mentioning that it is humans that "are essentially embodied," not only females (114). Birkeland also notes that "'essentialism' would be inconsistent with the logic of ecofeminism...since all life is interconnected, one group of persons cannot be closer to nature" (22). Even though all of these texts deal extensively with females, they in no way link the experience of nature and sexuality specifically to females. Though Deanna's facts on women and ovulation may seem like an essentialization, she discusses men's attraction to women on specific days of their cycle, which renders males just as close to natural cycles as females are.

Thus, Kingsolver simultaneously refutes essentialism, and uses sexuality in order to reinforce the principles behind ecofeminism.

Gretchen Legler's short story "Gabimichigami" also describes a relationship between two humans. Although the story is not overly sexual, the context includes instances of sexuality, which allow the main character to connect with nature in a way not often explored by other writers. The narration of the story is a point of interest because it switches quite abruptly from first person to third person and back again through the course of the short piece of writing. The change in narration allows the reader to understand that both characters are interacting with nature in an unorthodox manner. When describing the actions of the nameless main character stripping naked in an attempt to be closer to nature, the story is written in third person, while Craig, the narrator's companion, stays behind and watches. The narrator "wonders if he will think she is strange" as she wanders into the forest in the nude, but Craig makes no comment on it (116). The story also notes that "the air is still and as warm as she is" and the last lines of the story echoes this feeling she had, although it is in Craig's terms, as he asks her to listen "'For nothing,' he says. 'There is no sound.'" (116, 117). Although this is only a slight connection, Craig's acceptance of what society would most likely deem strange behaviour is an acceptance of the main character's need to be closer with nature. Although he does not take the same approach in relating to nature in the way that the female character does, Craig undergoes a similar spiritual connection to their still campsite. This connection is representative of the relationship that exists between these two characters and the important relationship they seem to have with nature. Lastly, a relationship with nature is also demonstrated in Katie Lee's story "Sandstone Seduction". Though this story deals extensively with the narrator's relationship with the canyon,

the narrator also mentions a sexual relationship between her and another human being. The narrator admits to enjoying the caress of the canyon more than that of her lover, which is representative of bringing an inanimate part of nature directly into her relationship, in a sexually explicit manner no less, as she feels “as if [she] were the center figure in a ménage à trios” (63). The idea that the narrator regards the canyon as a literal figure in her relationship with another human demonstrates Warren’s ecofeminist idea of taking part in a relationship with aspects of nature, instead of simply holding power over it (“The Power and Promise of Ecological Feminism,” 198). Lee’s narrative uses a human relationship to illustrate an unconventional way to regard nature in an approach that is not oppressive, similar to both *Prodigal Summer* and “Gabimichigami”. It is thus that the most powerful association each of these stories make with ecofeminism through sexuality exists in the relationships various characters have with nature as opposed to another human being. By looking at nature in a way that fosters love, admiration, and even sexual pleasure, one would be much more likely to develop a healthy equal relationship with nature as opposed to one of domination.

In *Prodigal Summer*, after her husband’s death, Lusa develops a very strong bond with the farm left to her in her husband’s will. Although Lusa starts the story loving a human being and continues to miss him throughout, it is clear that she becomes attached to the land and regards it as more than just a chance at profit. Lusa often questions why she has chosen to remain on the farm after Cole’s death, and as the story goes on, realizes that she has fostered a strong connection with the natural aspects of the farm, including “the odors of honeysuckle and freshly turned earth, and ancient songs played out on the roof by the rain. Moths tracing spirals in the moonlight. Ghosts” (239). Her love and acceptance of the farm is used as a metaphor for a new

lover, after the death of her husband. Laura Fine notes this occurrence in her article, as she sees Lusa “develop a new understanding of and relationship to her farm...forging a deeper connection to her land through weeding, picking fruit, and studying the insects” (129). This relationship with nature is also reminiscent of Warren’s intention of a loving perception of nature, which Lusa fully embraces.

Lusa also puts a lot of emphasis on the nature of love and attraction among different species and the similarities between them, which one often neglects to think about. She discusses the scent of honeysuckle, which her husband sends wafting across the field to her at the window as “the full, straight truth of their attachment” before his death (46). Lusa likens this experience to those of moths who “tell their love across fields by scent” through “a language that could carry nothing but love and simple truth” (47). This parallel between humans and insects demonstrates that we may have more connections to other species than we often think. Lusa also mentions the role of pheromones in human attraction more than once throughout the novel, which is similar to the communication used by moths and other insects. Kingsolver solidifies this idea by vividly describing the moth dreams Lusa has about Cole, although the insect appears to her in the dream instead of a vision of her husband. These erotic dreams once again discuss the importance of the moth’s “scent [that] burst onto her brain like a rain of lights, causing her to know him perfectly” and the fact that this scent was “a wild, sweet aura that drove her to a madness of pure want,” describes a sexual connection that may not necessarily only exist in human beings (79). This comparison illustrates that we as humans have forgotten some of the similarities that exist between our species and other animals in nature and that in remembering

them, one can hope to change the dynamic that exists between what is considered nature and what is considered human.

A human relationship with nature is more apparent in Legler's short story "Gabimichigami". In describing the desire of a woman to go through the woods naked in an attempt to feel nature in slightly sexual way, Legler presents an unconventional idea that once again may change the way one thinks about interacting with nature. The main character neglects clothing, though "walks outside without any shyness," which allows her to feel a part of nature without being bogged down by human conventions of proper behaviour (116). Her experiences are slightly sexual, as she puts a spruce branch "onto her shoulder and rubs it around there... picks up a long pine needle and puts one end of it into her mouth," as well as when the narrator "imagine[s] her bare skin against this rock" (116, 117). Though these scenes are not as explicitly sexual as those from *Prodigal Summer* or those within "Sandstone Seduction", the main character still goes outside of what are deemed normal boundaries and interacts with nature in a very physical way. It is this interaction that provides a way to think about nature as something to connect with on a deeply physical level, an interaction celebrated by ecofeminism.

Lastly, "Sandstone Seduction" represents a very physical and erotic relationship with the environment. The narrator personifies the canyon as she describes "the rock sucking at [her] back...against [her] body like warm silk" and how she will let "the water caress [her]" (63).

These personifications let the canyon take the place of more than just an inanimate object, which provides a much different way of looking at nature than is currently practiced by most. Legler notes this in her article, mentioning that nature "has been inscribed in the same way that women's bodies and sexual pleasure have been inscribed in patriarchal discourse, as passive,

interceptive, docile” (233). As a method to changing this, she asks for the exact thing that Lee illustrates (and Legler does in her own short story, for that matter): developing a “rich erotic relationship between the human female speaker and the landscape” (Legler 232). Legler once again recalls Warren’s ideas on creating a relationship with nature. In Lee’s story, the narrator’s relationship with nature is one of sexual stimulation and pleasure, which helps to rid people of the ideas inscribed by the patriarchal discourse in an attempt to end the similar and connected oppression of both women and nature.

Each of these stories represent characters that rely heavily on sexuality and nature and, in doing so, create unconventional ideas that attempt to repair society’s tendency to regard women as well as nature as beings that are there to be oppressed rather than respected. *Prodigal Summer* demonstrates the importance of reproduction, especially through Deanna’s interaction with nature, Deanna’s pregnancy, and Garnett’s life’s work of re-establishing the great American chestnut tree. Kingsolver also comments on sexual relationships between humans, depicted most thoroughly by Deanna and Eddie, which represents a relationship fully connected to the natural world and which acts to deny conventional gender roles of domination and subordination. Lastly, Kingsolver expresses the importance of a sexual relationship between humans and nature, most evident in Lusa’s gradual growth of love for the farm and her ability to point out the similarities that exist between the human and other species. Gretchen Legler’s narrative “Gabimichigami” also notes the importance of a relationship between both humans and nature. The author echoes her contention by writing of a rich erotic relationship between the female speaker and the land in a story that will help rid readers of their narrow-mindedness in terms of relating to the natural world. This last point is demonstrated especially well in Katie Lee’s short narrative “Sandstone

Seduction” which illustrates the pleasure that can be obtained from experiencing nature in a very physical way.

The texts I have examined in this paper, importantly, delve into ecofeminism and ways of re-conceiving the way we think about both nature and other human beings. Although not extraordinarily popular, these texts are only few of many that deal with nature in a sexualized manner. If humanity was less interested in “othering” the natural world and more interested in regarding nature in a committed and loving manner, then our dominion over nature would cease. If we were all willing to regard the natural world as “the center figure in a ménage à trios,” ecofeminism would have its re-conception, and the oppression of women and nature would be one more step towards abandonment.

Works Cited

- Birkeland, Janis. "Ecofeminism: Linking Theory and Practice." *Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, Nature*. Ed. Greta Gaard. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1993. 13-59. Print.
- Fine, Laura. "Reframing Responses to Masculine Performances in Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer*." *South Carolina Review* 42.1 (2009): 123-131. MLA International Database. Web. 15 Mar. 2012.
- Kingsolver, Barbara. *Prodigal Summer*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc, 2000. Print.
- Leder, Priscilla. "Contingency, Cultivation, and Choice: The Garden Ethic in Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer*." *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 16.2 (2009): 227-243. MLA International Database. Web. 15 Mar. 2012.
- Lee, Katie. "Sandstone Seduction." 2001. *Sisters of the Earth*. Ed. Lorraine Anderson. 2nd ed. New York: Random House Inc, 2003. 62-65. Print.
- Legler, Gretchen. "Gabimichigami." 1995. *Sisters of the Earth*. Ed. Lorraine Anderson. 2nd ed. New York: Random House Inc, 2003. 115-117. Print.
- Legler, Gretchen T. "Ecofeminist Literary Criticism." *Ecofeminism: Women, Culture, Nature*. Ed. Karen J. Warren. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1997. 227-38. Print.
- "sexuality, n." OED Online. March 2012. Oxford University Press. 2 April 2012: <http://www.oed.com/login.ezproxy.library.ualberta.ca/view/Entry/177087?redirectedFrom=sexuality>
- Warren, Karen J. "Feminism and Ecology." *Readings in Ecology and Feminist Theology*. Ed. Mary Heather MacKinnon and Moni McIntyre. Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1995. 105-23. Print.

Warren, Karen J. "The Power and Promise of Ecological Feminism." Readings in Ecology and Feminist Theology. Ed. Mary Heather MacKinnon and Moni McIntyre. Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1995. 172-95. Print.