

# Undergraduate Research Symposium May 17, 2013 Mary Gates Hall

## Online Proceedings

### SESSION 1P

#### MCNAIR SESSION - DIVIDES OF POWER: ECOLOGY, IDENTITY, MEDIA, AND (RE)PRESENTATIONS

*Session Moderator: Devon Pena, Anthropology*

**295 MGH**

*1:15 PM to 2:45 PM*

\* Note: Titles in order of presentation.

##### **Can We Queer Ecofeminist Activism?**

*Katrina England, Junior, Philosophy, Westminster College  
McNair Scholar*

*Mentor: Lance Newman, English, Westminster College*

Ecofeminism is a movement which shows how the marginalization and subjugation of women by men parallels the domination and exploitation of nature by human beings. Interdisciplinary at its inception, ecofeminism draws from a wide range of fields including philosophy, ecology, english, and gender studies. Sometimes though, the values of these different fields conflict with one another in ways that question whether some theories can (or should) be put into practice. Queer ecocriticism, pioneered by Timothy Morton, is one such theory. Queer ecocriticism attempts to fuse ecological criticism with queer theory to challenge essentialist views of women and nature in existing environmentalisms. In *Queer Ecology*, Morton suggests that subjects only appear to fit neatly into stable categories like “women,” “humans,” and “nature” because we fail to perceive them on larger timescales. The best approach to environmentalism, he argues, is one which contemplates “ecology’s unfathomable” and “almost unbearable” intimacies—that is, one which recognizes our world as a cacophony of interrelated, messy, and untotizable “strange strangers” rather than a mere collection of discrete beings who can be categorized. What this “contemplation” means in practice, however, is unclear. Moreover, queer ecology appears difficult to reconcile with environmental activism, which often organizes strategically under essentialist labels like “women” or “human beings” to protect “nature.” So what is the interdisciplinary-conscious ecofeminist to do? Drawing from the work of ecofeminists Sherry Ortner and Val Plumwood, queer theorists, and environmental activists, my project investigates ways in which ecofemi-

nist activism might incorporate queer ecocritical theory into practice. If it’s true that, as Morton says, ecofeminism “is grounded on binary difference and [is] thus unhelpful for the kinds of difference multiplication that is queer theory’s brilliance,” activism informed by queer ecocriticism might be able to achieve its aims without relying on problematic, essentialist views of women and nature.

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##### **Does Non-Dualistic Gender Induce Slow Ecology?**

*Charity Jessop, Junior, English Literature, Westminster College*

*McNair Scholar*

*Mentor: Lance Newman, English, Westminster College*

In *The Left Hand of Darkness* by Ursula LeGuin, the humans inhabiting the planet “Winter” are genderless, and through the monthly phase called “kemmer” choose to develop either male or female sexual reproductive organs. With one equal gender either member of a relationship can choose pregnancy, and “no one is quite so thoroughly ‘tied down’ here as women, elsewhere, are likely to be—psychologically or physically.” Since there is lack of gender subjugation on Winter, nature is not regarded as being connected to the womanly tasks of nurture and reproduction as it is here on earth. Nature is not viewed as an “other” and is instead an active part of a human ecology rather than something to abuse or command. In similar regard: “Winter is an inimical world; its punishment for doing things wrong is sure and prompt: death from cold or death from hunger.” On Winter humans better survive by working with Nature and not against it. Reading this novel as an ecofeminist text involves uncovering details regarding the relationship between feminism and ecology. Viewing the planet Winter as a utopian example of the absence of dualistic genders provides a fascinating scope into what the impact

of a non-gendered society has on its environment: a planet where humans advance slowly and cautiously with respect for their natural world. This project examines the comparison between this model and that of ours on Earth. Winter's slow technological development is accented by its low level of significant cultural change, whereas on Earth technology develops rapidly as culture blends, infuses, and diversifies. From this example I find that dualistic gender, or the lack thereof, greatly impacts not only the behaviors of a society, but determines its rate and quality of technology, egalitarianism, and ecology.