

Non-Innocent Intersections of Feminism and Environmentalism

BY NINA LYKKE

*Response to Stacy Alaimo:
“Insurgent Vulnerability and the
Carbon Footprint of Gender”.*

It was a great pleasure to act as discussant to the key-note address of Stacy Alaimo at conference *Gendering Climate and Sustainability* in Copenhagen, March 2009. Alaimo’s feminist materialist and eco-critical stance resonates a lot with my own take on the debate on sustainability and eco-critical feminism. I agree very much with Alaimo that a radical rethinking of epistemologies and ethics is urgently needed, and that the issue of climate change makes it even more important to push for new approaches. I also think that feminist epistemologies and reflections on ethics can make important contributions to the general discussion. I shall comment on two issues: 1) Alaimo’s notion of trans-corporeality and its epistemological implications, and 2) the question of intersectionalities between feminism and environmentalism.

TRANS-CORPOREALITY AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

I shall begin my intervention with a praise of Alaimo's notion of 'trans-corporeality', which she, in the beginning of her paper, defines as 'the recognition of the substantial interconnections between human corporeality and the more-than-human world' (Alaimo this volume:29), drawing on her more elaborate discussion of the same issue (Alaimo 2008). The notion of trans-corporeality takes Donna Haraway's epistemology of situated knowledges an important step further (Haraway 1991). I think that it forcefully mobilizes the point that situated knowledge production is not only about reflecting upon and taking responsibility for our embodied localization in terms of intersections of power differentials, based on gender, class, race, sexuality, geopolitical position etc. This is important, but what is even as important is to recognize that the knower's embodiment is not only about her/his individual body in a bounded sense, *but* about an unbounded bodily embeddedness in the material, earthly 'environment' – which we, moreover, should not talk about as 'environment' because this term keeps up the illusion of something separate from 'us' (= humans).

With a plea for a trans-corporeal feminist epistemology, Alaimo challenges the illusionist 'god-trick' of positivism, i.e. the epistemological belief in a neutral, god-like knower, who can step 'outside' and take a look at environmental problems, gender issues etc. from a detached distance. Via her analysis of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (E.P.A.) website's discourses on climate change, Alaimo spells out how dangerous this approach is, when it in a paternalistic way (falsely) reassures us that it is possible to establish a view from above/outside – the positivist god's eye view – and from this elevated position 'control' the events. Confronting the E.P.A. discourses with the 'Ice Pedestal' of Kirsten Justesen as well as Spencer Tunick's photos of

people who make a naked protest against global warming, disrobing on a melting iceberg, Alaimo makes the point that the god-trick becomes even more absurd when it is mobilized vis-à-vis the issue of climate change.

This confrontation of the E.P.A. discourses and the artworks of Justesen and Tunick has inspired me to twist Alaimo's analysis a bit, and ask if it is possible to imagine that climate change could spell out to broader audiences how pressing the need for an epistemology of situated knowledges is. Can we talk about the emergence of a new kind of 'obviousness' as far as our inescapable implicatedness in our research 'objects' is concerned? Is the fact that we are all 'in the belly of the monster' (Haraway 1991:188) – that we have absolutely no way of 'stepping outside' and take up the position of the god's eye view – perhaps becoming obvious on a *new* level, when it comes to the debate and analysis of climate change?

To make this question clearer, let me say that I can perhaps understand why some scientists are led to believe in the illusion of the positivist god-trick, when they are dealing with small-scale, locally delimitable scientific problems. But confronted by the problems of climate change which basically pose a threat to all living beings on Earth, it would seem to be more difficult to maintain a belief in the god-trick. So my open question is: could the issue of climate change perhaps pave the way for a shift away from the positivist epistemologies on which mainstream science is based?

On the one hand, the E.P.A. discourses that Alaimo analyzes seem to prove me wrong in invoking hope here; they indicate that the positivist illusion is still going strong, and that the planet-wide problems of climate change rather reinforce than push towards a final collapse of the positivist god-trick. As Alaimo convincingly demonstrates, this kind of powerful official discourses on climate change seem to

freeze a rigid divide between a hegemonic knower's position of universal man-doctor and a vulnerable patient-object, cast metaphorically in a feminine position. There is not much hope to be found in this traditional, hegemonic figure of thought. However, on the other hand, as the analysis of Alaimo also suggests, there are other official discourses on climate change (e.g. the ones of the World Health Organization) that take the threats more seriously. So it is perhaps not totally far-fetched to imagine that climate change might push towards a collapse of the positivist illusion of the detached knower, precisely because the problems to be solved appear as so over-arching that it should become obvious that the way in which an epistemology based on the god-trick theorizes the conditions of knowledge production is totally unsustainable.

I think it would be important to trace such tendencies to epistemological collapse in mainstream science that would make it possible for feminist and radical environmentalist movements to set up new alliances.

THE TROUBLED INTERSECTIONALITIES OF 'WOMEN' AND 'NATURE'

Another important part of Alaimo's argument puts focus on UN texts on the issue of gender and climate change, in particular a paper from the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (2008). I think Alaimo makes an important point when she spells out how the text, which is clearly inspired by feminism, nevertheless, continue to instrumentalize 'nature' as 'resource', or as she phrases it 'severs its feminist position from any sort of environmentalism' (Alaimo this volume:31). However, I shall suggest that the currently among feminists much debated notion of 'intersectionality' (cf. e.g. *European Journal of Women's Studies* 2006; *Kvinder, køn & forskning* 2006) can be mobilized as a useful

analytical tool that can carve out the problems involved in the UN text and push further the debate on new ways of articulating political points of exit from the dilemmas.

The notion of 'intersectionality' refers to the ways in which power differentials based on gender, race, class, sexuality, nationality etc. mutually interact – or 'intra-act' – which I, with a notion, coined by Karen Barad (2007), prefer to articulate it in order to stress how categories mutually transform and construct each other. I have argued for intersectionality as a useful tool for critical feminist analysis of the ways in which all these kind of power differentials work together (Lykke 2003, 2005, 2008 and 2010). As part of research on cultural constructions of dolphins (Bryld and Lykke 2000), I have also, together with my Danish colleague Mette Bryld, argued for an inclusion of the human/'nature' or 'earth others' axis¹ in intersectional reflections (Bryld and Lykke 2000:28 f).

I think that the human/earth-others axis has been suspiciously neglected in current feminist debates on intersectionality (at national as well as international levels) and I must admit that, to a certain extent, I have reproduced the negligence myself. Besides my most recent book (Lykke 2010), I have dealt with the inclusion of the human/earth-others axis in special books and articles (e.g. Bryld and Lykke 2000), while I, in my more general publications on intersectionality (Lykke 2003, 2005, 2008), have left the human/earth-others axis in the black box 'etc'. I have not done this happily, believe me. But I have often felt that it took special efforts to break through the 'nature'-blindness of other branches of feminism than eco-critical and environmentalist feminisms, and that special arguments were needed to persuade broader feminist audiences about the importance of the human/earth-others axis.

So let me, against this background, sum up some strengths and weaknesses of the

feminist intersectionality debate. On the one hand, it has made the important point that gender cannot be analyzed in isolation from other social categorizations such as race, class, sexuality, nationality etc. When gender is separated out, problematic power differentials are easily reproduced. A case in point is postcolonial and anti-racist feminist critiques of white middle-class feminism's tendency to universalize its own political goals without taking into account how power differentials in terms of class, race and ethnicity have profound consequences for political agendas and priorities (cf. e.g. Mohanty 1988). One of the strengths of the feminist intersectionality debates of the last decades has been to spell out these problems. However, while, on the one hand, making important points about the gender-race-class-sexuality-nexus, feminist intersectionality debates have, on the other hand, tended to stick to a problematic anthropocentrism, not taking power differentials along the lines of human/earth others-axis into account.

Alaimo's critique of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women documents makes it clear, how anthropocentric and reductive constructions of nature as a mere resource and object for domestic use can slip almost unnoticed into a political text, which, to some extent, is built on critical feminist arguments. I think Alaimo's analysis makes a strong argument for a forceful and systematic inclusion of the human/earth others-axis in feminist intersectionality analysis, *but* without interpellating the debate on intersectionality. The point I would like to make here is that I think Alaimo's argument would be even more strengthened by reference to the intersectionality debate.

When Alaimo, for example, stresses the problem that the UN document 'severs its feminist position from any sort of environmentalism' (Alaimo this volume:31), the problem can, I think, be usefully rephrased within the framework of the intersectionali-

ty debate. Against this backdrop, the problem of the UN text can be pinpointed as a lack of critical reflections on the notion 'women' as an intersectional category – i.e. as a lack of reflections on the ways in which gendered power relations are entangled in relations along the lines of the human/earth-others axis of power.

Alaimo criticizes the way in which the UN document talks about 'marine resources which comprise a major source of women's livelihoods' (Alaimo this volume:32) in the region in question without reflecting on the value of marine ecosystems in and of themselves. She warns against this kind of feminist stance, which makes 'woman' stake her political claims in a move which transcends nature and installs it as a resource for her 'freedom'. Instead, Alaimo argues for agency which starts from an insurgent vulnerability and trans-corporeal connections. I think this is an important ethical and political stance. But I also think that an analysis in terms of intersectionalities could have exposed more clearly what it would imply to shift the perspective to an analytical approach to the categories 'women' and 'marine ecosystems' which would radically recognize their complicated trans-corporeal connections. More precisely, I think that an intersectional framework could help pinpoint the dilemmas exposed in the UN document. Such a framework would require that the specific character of the power relationship between 'women' and 'marine ecosystems' and, in particular, the tensions and potential conflicts of interests between the two were taken into account. It would also make it clear how 'women', for example, either may contribute to the depletion of the 'marine ecosystems' or, conversely, sustain their development, and that no innocent in-between position is possible. One of the lessons that I think can be learnt from intersectional analysis is that we all (including non-human others) are always caught up in multiple intra-acting axes of power which may

mutually reinforce each other, but which may also mutually draw in different directions as far as power and interests are concerned. Against this background, all ‘purely’ radical positions from which ‘purely’ critical stances and ‘pure’ alternatives may emerge appear as illusionary.

WRAP-UP

To wrap up this comment, let me underline that I find Alaimo’s suggestion that we should base a new feminist epistemology and ethics on a critically trans-corporeally grounded stance in insurgent vulnerability to be a very promising one. I would, however, like to bring in more forcefully the issues of complicity, tensions and conflicting interests not only between ‘the vulnerable’ and hegemonic powers, but also among ‘the vulnerable’ themselves. Alaimo herself stresses that the notion of ‘vulnerability’ might be a slippery one, associating to passive, innocent victimhood. Against this background, I think it is politically as well as theoretically important to emphasize that a position of vulnerability is not per se an innocent one, and, through an intersectional analysis, to expose that no one – not even the most vulnerable – are ‘innocent’ when it comes to trans-corporeal intra-actions. Trans-corporeality implies that we are all ‘in it together’ – and that ‘the one does not stir without the other’ as Luce Irigaray once poetically phrased it (Irigaray 1981). This is one of the things, I like very much about Alaimo’s notion of trans-corporeality.

NOTE

1. I use the term human/earth-others axis instead of the perhaps more straightforward shorthand human/nature-axis in order to avoid the slipperiness of the category ‘nature’ and its conventional associations to a binary and dualistic relation to ‘human’. With the term human/earth-others axis I refer to the complex power relations between humans and the world of animals, plants, minerals etc., drawing on feminist eco-theorist Val Plumwood’s (1993) poetically way of naming the latter.

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