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Exploring the distance between ecofeminism and Women in Mining (WIM)

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ABSTRACT

While there is existing work on the relationship between gender and mining in strands of environmental studies and resource studies, this paper moves away from generic feminist analyses of the environment and gender. Turning to ecofeminism, I argue that most debates that borrow from ecofeminism do not go beyond the maternalistic perspective that mining is anti-woman and thus anti-ecofeminist. This paper speaks to the gap in the literature by examining a specific group of gendered actors under the lens of ecofeminism, that is, women involved in the Women in Mining (WIM) movement. WIM represents a liberal feminism demand for equal opportunities for women in the otherwise heavily male-dominated and highly masculinised mining industry. However, in its current iteration WIM has not located its work within the discourse of ecofeminism, nor have its predominantly white, middleclass key stakeholders identified themselves as ecofeminists. As such, the complex intersectionalities of race, poverty, gender, age, class, and ideo-geographies are often neglected. In response, this paper queries, can ecofeminism and WIM enjoy a mutually beneficial relationship, and what might the impacts be for both sides of such a relationship? This paper begins with a summary of how the epistemological lens of ecofeminism can offer new understandings of and activism in the mining industry more generally. The next two sections present conceptual dialogues regarding how ecofeminism can challenge and reshape hegemonic practices and perspectives of WIM in its current iteration; and vice versa, how WIM can inform and enrich our understandings and applications of ecofeminism. In closing, the paper reflects on the apparent populist rhetoric of the two schools as incompatible partners.

1. Introduction

In liberal democratic societies such as Australia and Canada, women have been recognised as a distinct category of people who do not have equal access to employment opportunities in the mining industry (see, for example, Queensland Resources Council, 2012; Women in Mining Canada, 2010). This recognition exists because of a much broader acceptance of the inequalities faced by women in the workplace, and because of a general political and social acceptance of the rights of women to participate in all industries and at all levels throughout the workforce. In mining specifically, it has been the motivator for the development and progression of a distinct Women in Mining (WIM) movement which has been visible in the industry since the mid-1990s. WIM is represented at the national level by organisations such as WIMNet (Australia), WIM Canada, and WIMSA (South Africa). Within each country there are also WIM networks or chapters at state, city, and provincial levels. Internationally, WIM is represented by the International Women in Mining Organisation; however, there is no formal connection between the various groups and no single manifesto for the aims of the movement they represent.

I use the term "movement" to describe the work being done to secure more equitable opportunities for women in the mining industry in these developed countries, but recognise that the use of such a term is risky. WIM is not a counter-culture movement as progressive or culture-changing as the movements that have focused on gay liberation, civil rights for black people, or even the women's movement. It certainly cannot be described as a wave of "oppressed people moving to liberate themselves from the oppressor's grip *and* from the internalised perception of self as victim which the oppressed bound to the oppressor" (Collard, 1989, p. 97; emphasis in the original). Given that many WIM organisations are funded and/or supported by the same mining companies they ask to accept more women into their workplaces, WIM is also certainly not a radical movement in any sense. Rather, it is a distinctly liberal feminist movement which has specific relevance to discussions about women and gender in mining in neoliberal, democratic societies.

In this article, I consider what it means to rethink the position of WIM through an ecofeminist lens. Can ecofeminism and WIM

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enjoy a mutually beneficial relationship, and what might the impacts be for both sides of such a relationship? Situated at the intersection of Gender Studies and Cultural Studies, this paper draws on archival research into scholarly and public literature on ecofeminism and industry work focusing on mining, as well as corporate and statutory reports on the WIM movement. I first offer a summary of what ecofeminism might have to say about mining beyond the conclusion/assumption that mining is bad for women. For the main part of this article, I focus on the possibility of a relationship between ecofeminism and WIM. Elmhirst and Resurreccion (2008) identify that "Arguments have been made for more context-specific and historically nuanced understandings of the relationship of specific groups of women with specific environmental resources [. . .]" (p. 7). My analysis takes the women who directly represent and who are indirectly represented by WIM as a specific group of women. It takes mined non-renewable resources as the specific environmental resources. It considers what WIM (a non-ecofeminist aligned movement) might learn from ecofeminism (which has ignored the specific interests of WIM), and vice versa.

2. The case for an ecofeminist interest in mining

Ecofeminism has been described as "the marriage of feminism and the radical ecology movement" (Hamad, 2013, p. 11). It aspires to build "new gender relations between women and men and between humans and nature" (Merchant, 1990, p. 100). It exists as a diverse academic discourse (Carlassare, 1994, p. 52; Phillips, 2014, 434–444 pp.) and as a "practical movement for social change arising from the struggles of women to sustain themselves, their families, and their communities in the face of maldevelopment[1] and environmental degradation" (Murphy, 1997, p. 49). Since its emergence in the 1970s, or even earlier (Diamond and Orenstein, 1990, p. ix; Gaard, 2011, p. 27), ecofeminism (*ecofeminisme*), has sought to offer a feminist response to the destruction of the environment as this destruction is seen to represent and impact on the continuing oppression of women (Carlassare, 1994, p. 51; Collard, 1989, p. 137; Warren, 2000, p. 21). More specifically, while ecofeminism primarily challenges the "oppression of nature" (Moore, 2008, p. 288), it is engaged in intersectionality and deeply intertwined with challenging other oppressions such as "sexism, racism, and homophobia" (p. 287).

Among all this concern for both women and the environment, we nevertheless find a gap in the literature by ecofeminist theorists in the relationship between gender and mining, and particularly in regard to how this relationship impacts on women who (seek to) work in the mining industry in liberal democratic countries. Existing works in related fields reviewed below include environmental science, where gender has not been a focus; gender and resources, which has focused more on forests, animals, and agriculture than on mining; and gender and mining, which has not adopted ecofeminist perspectives.

In their criticism of how environmental social scientists have ignored the issue of gender, Banerjee and Bell (2007) lament that "ecofeminism has been given surprisingly little emphasis in environmental social science" (p. 4). They show that the terms "sex", "gender", or "feminism" appear in only 3.9% of citations for articles in five of the top journals in environmental science between 1980 and 2005. A search of the terms "ecofeminism" and "mining" in the entire database for the same journal in which their article was published—*Society and natural resources: An international journal*—produces only one article.[2] A closer reading of this article reveals that it does not in fact include the term "mining" in its abstract, keywords or main body; and is actually concerned with the subject of deforestation. A much broader search for the same terms via the online database available through the University for New South Wales brings up only three citations[3] which comprise two articles[4] and one doctoral dissertation.[5]

Researchers have certainly explored the link between gender and resources (Das, 2011; Jacobs, 2014; Kameri-Mbote, 2007; Li, 2009; Loots, 2007; Lunb and Panda, 1994; Radel, 2012). Not all this research refers specifically to "ecofeminism". Despite this, given the interests of the authors in exploring the rights of women to have better access to resources, we could argue their writings assume an ecofeminist position. In this body of work, however, the term "resources" refers to items which provide daily sustenance for humans (e.g., food and water). Some ecofeminists also understand resources to include forests, animals, and agriculture (Agarwal, 1994; Buckingham-Hatfield, 2000; Resurreccion and Elmhirst, 2008; Rocheleau et al., 1996a, 1996b; Warren, 2000). A definition of "resources" more relevant to the mining industry, and explorations of the relationship between women and mined resources, are noticeably absent. Indeed, the referencing of such resources and mining specifically in ecofeminist literature is scant and fleeting (Collard, 1989, p. 145; Mies and Shiva, 2014, p. xxix, 44, 100; Rocheleau et al., 1996b, p. 293).

Women (and men) have engaged in campaigns against mining operations in ways which might be seen to deploy/employ ecofeminist idea(l)s (Gaard, 2011, p. 31; Merchant, 1980, p. 66; Mies and Shiva, 2014, p. 3, 246; Rocheleau et al., 1996b, p. 14). Ecofeminists have also expressed concern about the impacts on women and on the environment of hazardous (nuclear) waste and chemicals (Collard, 1989, 138–141 pp.; Diamond and Orenstein, 1990, p. x; Merchant, 1990, p. 102). They have argued that "the natural world has been thought of as a *resource*" and that "it has been exploited without regard for the life that it supports" (Plant, 1990, p. 155 ; emphasis in the original). In the first chapter of her seminal ecofeminist work *The death of nature*,Merchant (1980) offers an informative account of dominant attitudes towards the mining of minerals in history. Since then and within ecofeminist research, however, there has been no attempt to analysis the practice of resource extraction—"mining"—in a way which does justice to the diversity and importance of ideas about the relationship between gender and the environment which have emerged and are otherwise important in this same discourse.

There has been, for example, no consideration of how "woman" or "environment" are constructed in and through mining. There has been no discussion about how mining works as a "double-edge sword" which can provide both development and destruction (Bridge, 2004, p. 225). There is no evident interest in rereading mining in a way that might destabilise the dominance of masculinity (in mining) which elsewhere has been identified as helping sustain the practices of global neoliberalism which strengthen gender inequities (Radcliffe, 2006, p. 525). Salleh

[1] Shiva (1990) defines "maldevelopment" as "a new source of male/female inequality" (p. 192) and "the violation of the integrity of a living, interconnected world" which is "simultaneously at the root of injustice, exploitation, inequality, and violence" (p. 193).

[2] The article is "Women and community forestry in Nepal: Expectations and realities" by Irene Tinker (1994).

[3] The scarcity of research which explores ecofeminism and mining is backed up by additional searches in the databases of the University of Western Australia and the University of Utrecht which show 6 and 1entries respectively.

[4] "Negotiating gender: Experience from Western Australian Mining Industry" by Silvia Lozeva and Dora Marinova (2010) and "Protecting the botanic garden: Seward, Darwin, and Coalbrookdale" by Donna Coffey (2002).

[5] "Nature's women: Ecofeminist reflections on Jabiluka" by Monika Nugent (UNSW, 2002).

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