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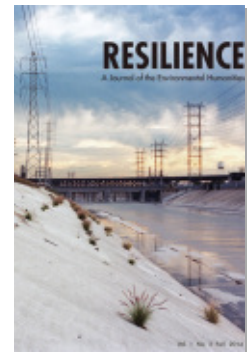
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## Indigenous Women, Feminism, and the Environmental Humanities

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# Indigenous Women, Feminism, and the Environmental Humanities

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*December 30, 2012 (fig. 1):* As the Idle No More movement spread from Canada throughout the United States, numerous flash mob Round Dances were held across North America, bringing greater awareness to the linked assaults on indigenous communities, environmental health, and climate change. In Minnesota more than a thousand Native people danced around drums in the Mall of America (MOA) rotunda, while shoppers watched and took photos from the two balconies above.

*December 31, 2013 (fig. 2):* Idle No More–Duluth leader Reyna Crow faces a MOA security officer, who demands that she leave the MOA and not hold the scheduled “protest.”<sup>1</sup> Both she and coorganizer Patricia Shepard were arrested and taken into mall security, while a small group of allies and two National Lawyers’ Guild advocates witnessed and recorded the events.

## What Happened to Make These Two Events So Different?

For one thing, MOA management was more prepared. Calling itself “the Hollywood of the Midwest” on its website,<sup>2</sup> the MOA is owned by the Canadian company Triple Five Group, which has pledged to support “development of mineral resources” and “production of oil and gas” on Native lands (Triple Five Group 2008); no wonder they oppose more dancing from an indigenous movement against resource exploitation. After reading Reyna Crow and Patricia Shepard’s press release



Fig. 1. Mall of America Round Dance, December 30, 2012.  
Courtesy of Native News Online.



Fig. 2. Reyna Crow faces arrest at Mall of America, December 31, 2013.  
Courtesy of the author.



Fig. 3. Outside the MOA with Idle No More, December 31, 2013. Courtesy of Native News Online.

announcing the planned Round Dance, MOA officials sent the women letters characterizing the 2012 Round Dance as “extremely disruptive” and threatening the women with arrest if their “political protest” were to be held again. This response contrasted sharply with the frequency of Michael Jackson–style flash mobs at the MOA (including Christmas carolers) as well as with the footage of the 2012 Round Dance at the MOA, whose “disruptive” presence merited applause and cheers of appreciation from the mall spectators.<sup>3</sup>

But a second distinction between the two events had to do with gender politics. As activists gathered on the public sidewalk (i.e., free speech zone) outside the MOA for a press conference at 3:00 on December 31, 2013, we were joined by an aggressive group of men from Idle No More–Twin Cities, who stated they had come to make sure that the Round Dance did not occur. Shepard and Crow stepped over to the men to plead with them to keep a unified front before the media, but the men remained a hostile presence. Evidently, the two Idle No More groups in Minnesota held different views and different leadership styles: the Twin Cities group had actively urged supporters not to join the planned round dance. Given these two barriers, our group of allies numbered fewer than fifteen (see fig. 3). What happened when we

entered the MOA quickly became surreal to anyone who has never witnessed institutional racism.

Entering the MOA through Sears, one of the corner anchor department stores, we found the seasonal chill of -9°F outdoors was replaced by the unseasonable silence of three uniformed guards stationed inside the department store. Where we exited Sears into the mall's rotunda, three more uniformed guards required all women to surrender our purses for a search, and baby strollers were also searched for drums. During the moments that we deliberated where to get coffee and warm up, our small group was quickly surrounded by a bevy of mall security and Bloomington city police who doubly outnumbered us. An MOA security officer confronted Reyna Crow, demanding that she leave the mall or face arrest. When she refused, at least ten armed guards surrounded this one indigenous woman and led her into a white hallway beyond white locked doors. Meanwhile, Patricia Shepard had gone in search of the Mall Administration Office to deliver gifts of tobacco, sage, sweet grass, cedar, and water and to invite mall administrators to join in the round dance, when she too was arrested.

### Teachable Moments

In my Literature of Environmental Justice course, we read Linda Hogan's *Solar Storms*, a novel about hydropower developments on First Nations territories in Canada, the legacy of colonialism, and its multiple assaults on Native women. Narrating teenaged Angel's search for identity and the origins of her facial scars, the novel also details four generations of indigenous women's resilience and survival, through their connections with the land and the animals, their insistence on accurate retellings of history and memory, their passionate commitment to community and family, and their creative and persistent work for justice. The conversations from this course were still resonant for me when I read the press release for the Idle No More events at the MOA.

Standing outside in subzero temperatures, I was surprised to recognize Reyna Crow, whom I had met earlier in the summer, when she spoke at the Critical Animal Studies conference in Minneapolis. Responding to the delisting of wolves in Minnesota in 2012, Crow had founded the Northwoods Wolf Alliance to stop the wolf hunts and to educate upper Midwest residents about the sacred relationship between Anishinaabeg people and the wolf, who is traditionally regarded as

their brother.<sup>4</sup> At the Critical Animal Studies conference, Crow spoke with a group of vegan scholar-activists about the inextricability of wolf survival and indigenous survival, and she found many allies. We spoke about the challenges of addressing sexism and racism within even progressive environmental democracy movements and about the intersections of these oppressive systems with speciesism.

After the event at the MOA, I looked up Reyna Crow on the Internet and learned she was also a founder of Idle No More–Duluth, an organization whose blogsite provides links to the Northwoods Wolf Alliance, North Shore Community Radio, and Sex Trafficking Awareness Month.<sup>5</sup> Crow is also a frequent contributor to *Duluth News Tribune*, which includes her degree in economics as part of her byline and lists her many columns on homelessness, white privilege, voting rights, police brutality, military spending, institutional racism, low-wage jobs, mining, the wolf hunt, and the linked rights of children and animals, both of which are violated by zoos and circuses. Recognizing the interdependence among environmental justice, species justice, media justice, and gender justice (to name only some of Reyna’s interests) had proven exhausting to my first-generation rural white students. “This class is a downer,” one male athlete had said in my Literature of Environmental Justice class—half joking, of course, though other classmates both agreed and then replied that they felt better informed and better able to take action as a result of the class.

Knowing the intersection of human, animal, and environmental injustices through her lived experience as an indigenous woman, Reyna Crow may also feel exhausted, but that doesn’t stop her from taking ecopolitical action for justice. Where does her standpoint appear in current formulations of the environmental humanities?

### Texts That Prompt Critical Thinking about the Environmental Humanities

Invited to name one text that alerted me to the power of the environmental humanities, I would be hard pressed to choose between the lyrical and ecopolitically astute writing of Chickasaw author Linda Hogan—whose works include *Dwellings*, *Solar Storms*, *People of the Whale*, and *The Woman Who Watches Over the World*—and the landmark work of the Australian feminist philosopher Val Plumwood, who synthesized the many diverse ecofeminist theories and insights into her



own “master model,” as presented in her work *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*. The hallmark of Plumwood’s work is the intersectional definition of the “master”—she neatly avoids terms like “patriarchy” and “masculinity” as being the prime culprits and instead describes the ways that oppressive systems function to construct a false identity for the dominant group. That identity is formed through a series of operations: hyperseparation, backgrounding, incorporation, homogenization, and instrumentalization. In my 1997 essay, “Toward a Queer Eco-feminism,” I expanded Plumwood’s categories to describe the linked operations of heterosexism and speciesism. Here, I’d like to update my analysis by showing the ways that Plumwood’s conceptual tool of the master model also describes climate change.

As many have argued (e.g., the United Nations, the World Health Organization, Gender CC), climate change is a problem produced by the world’s wealthiest nations but suffered disproportionately by the world’s poorest.<sup>6</sup> Within these distinctions, we can further qualify that it is the production, consumption, and waste of the world’s wealthiest that is the problem (climate change is one *result*); even further, we can point to data showing that these processes are heavily gendered. Poor women and girls are hardest hit by climate change–induced disasters, wars, and famines (Dankelman 2010; Seager 2006). Around the world, women’s gender roles restrict women’s mobility; impose tasks associated with food production and caregiving; and simultaneously obstruct women from participating in decision making about climate change, greenhouse gas emissions, and adaptation and mitigation.

Produced through a nexus of colonialism; resource extraction; and the violation of the lives and labor of the poor, the indigenous, women, animals, queers, and ecosystems—neoliberal economics and empires enact Plumwood’s master model through their practices of consumption, domination, and control (Alaimo 2009; Somera 2009). As this economic and cultural model overtakes even our universities, threatening the survival of the humanities, environmental humanities scholars must not be tempted to become more like the master and perpetuate “business (colonialism) as usual” through “old-school” master-model versions of humanities disciplines (history, politics, philosophy, literature) that exclude or instrumentalize the voices, perspectives, and knowledge of indigenous communities, diverse women, queers, species, and ecosystems. Rather, we can use our location and skills as academics

to expose the interconnected root causes of climate change—through our teaching, scholarship, and engaged citizenship.

About interconnected root causes, for example, feminist scholars have invoked the concept of intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991; Collins 1990) in order to describe the “intra-actions” (Barad 2007) of race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, age, ability, and other forms of human difference, using this analysis to develop more nuanced understandings of power, privilege, and oppression. But fewer scholars have critiqued the humanism of intersectionality (Lykke 2009) or proposed examining the exclusions of species and ecosystems from intersectional identities, addressing the ways that even the most marginalized of humans may participate in the master-model process of instrumentalization when it comes to nonhuman nature, or “earth others” (Plumwood’s term). As an ecological identity and ecopolitical standpoint resisting the master model, ecofeminists once proposed the self-identity of “political *animal*” (Gaard 1998; Sandilands 1994, 1999), a view that resituates humans within ecosystems (thereby eliminating culture-nature dualisms) and faces us toward assessing ecosystem flows and equilibrium, while simultaneously attending to the well-being of transcorporeal individuals (Alaimo 2010). Joining a philosophical reconception of human identity with an ecopolitical exploration of economic globalization and its role in producing climate change, the environmental humanities could send a critical challenge to the technoscience discourse about mitigation and adaptation—as opposed to the *reduction and prevention* arguments (i.e., geoengineering) currently dominating responses to climate change.

Notice that Reyna Crow doesn’t need my updated theory. As her list of topics for the *Duluth News Tribune* editorials demonstrates, her standpoint as a working-class indigenous woman affords her a broadly inclusive perspective on the posthumanist intersections of the many linked oppressions, the urgency of climate change, and the importance of feminist environmental justice actions, locally and globally. But such views may or may not be foregrounded in the emerging articulations of the environmental humanities.

## Environmental Justice, Gender Justice, and the Environmental Humanities

So where do indigenous women’s perspectives appear in the environmental humanities? And where is feminism in the environmental hu-



manities? Comparing three introductory definitions of the environmental humanities from scholars in Sweden (Sörlin 2012), Australia (Rose et al. 2012), and the United States (Kaza 2005), we find there is widespread agreement on the inclusion of environmental philosophy, history, politics, literature, and writing—but less agreement on the relevance of environmental spirituality, feminism, indigenous studies, labor studies, or human-animal studies, to name only some of the issues addressed by Reyna Crow’s editorials (see table 1). Environmental justice is not directly listed in these recitations of primary humanities disciplines, nor is any iteration of feminism; at the nexus of these two perspectives, the scholarship and activism of indigenous women and women of color should be conspicuous.

Graduate programs in the environmental humanities are even more specific in their scope, listing core (required) courses as Environmental Foundations, Methods, Writing Seminar, and a Field Course, leaving room for electives, which is where courses such as Environmental Justice, Women and [other?] Natural Resources, Ecofeminism, and Native American Philosophy usually appear. These electives are also sometimes clustered and competing against one another in the “environmental activism” section, as if the content, methods, and perspectives offered by these courses could not fit equally well in course clusters of “environmental imagination” or “environmental thinking.”

My concern here is that *environmental humanities scholars can too easily perpetuate the limitations of the very knowledge systems we critique* if our definitions and program offerings replicate the culture/nature, mind/body, white/nonwhite, and human/animal binaries that have kept the humanities and sciences apart, and which impede our interdisciplinary collaborations in addressing the ecosocial emergencies of climate change.

Placing indigenous women and feminist environmental perspectives more prominently in these definitions and program offerings of the environmental humanities is not only strategically useful; it’s also intellectually honest. Indigenous women’s experiences and activisms, like feminist environmental activism and scholarship, have crossed the disciplinary boundaries of the humanities, social sciences, and physical sciences at least four decades (for feminist environmentalisms—or millennia, for indigenous knowledge) before the concept of “environmental humanities” emerged.

TABLE 1: Disciplines and Perspectives Defining the Environmental Humanities\*

<i>Environmental Humanities Disciplines and Perspectives</i>	<i>Sverker Sörlin (2012) Sweden</i>	<i>Stephanie Kaza (2005) Vermont, USA</i>	<i>Deborah Bird Rose et al. (2012) Australia</i>
Environmental Philosophy	X	X	X
Environmental History	X	X	X
Environmental Politics	X		“Political Ecology”
Environmental Religion and Spirituality		X	
Environmental Literature, Writing, and Ecocriticism	X	X	X
[Environmental justice]	Cites Rob Nixon’s <i>Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor</i> (2011)	X	“Indigenous knowledge”
Environmental Art & Culture		X	“Environmental Anthropology”
[Environmental Feminism]		“Ecofeminism”	“Ecofeminism,” and notably the work of Val Plumwood
[Human-Animal Studies]			“Posthuman geographies”; “Multispecies ethnographies”

\*Where terms differ, I list the author’s exact terms in quotes; where fields are not directly mentioned, I put these in [square brackets].

Consider Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962), which combined field observations, scientific data, and eloquent prose to expose the toxic links among pesticides, environmental degradation, and multispecies health: Carson’s work is often credited with sparking the environmental movement of the 1970s but is rarely seen as a precursor and foundation for the resurgence of the feminisms of the 1960s and beyond. Like Carson, Dian Fossey’s and Jane Goodall’s work are usually classified as primatology, but academic training for these women came well after their field research was already underway. Like Barbara McClintock’s work with corn, both Fossey and Goodall had “a feeling for the organism”

(Keller 1983, 198) that powered their work more completely than their belated scientific training. Could their research more aptly be described as environmental communication or posthumanist environmental anthropology? If so, these women's work should be included in the environmental humanities. Was Wangari Maathai's Green Belt Movement a feminist movement, an environmental justice movement, or a sustainable agriculture movement? How can we find a disciplinary framework sufficiently inclusive to describe Winona LaDuke's record of accomplishments, which includes forming the White Earth Land Recovery Project, running for vice president on the Green Party ticket, authoring numerous scholarly and fictional texts, and standing up to the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency in an effort to stop tar sands pipelines from crossing Native lands?

The writing and activism of women scientists and of indigenous women leaders and the knowledge produced by the interdisciplinary fields of indigenous studies and women, gender, and sexuality studies defy restrictive disciplinary categorizations—as do the environmental humanities. It's the environmentally attuned methodologies that bring us together. In North America the signature of many indigenous methodologies includes listening to and honoring the leadership of women elders. In women's studies the signature of a feminist methodology is its inclusiveness, which involves *bringing together* diverse forms of knowledge, acknowledging situated perspectives and listening to the information provided by each, creating structures for collaboration whereby the research subjects can themselves set the agenda, express needs, and benefit from the scholarly endeavor. Just as women's studies has been known for “asking different questions” (Schiebinger 1999), the humanities have been lauded for their ability to foster critical thinking, an asset many see as marketable to the “corporate and financial sectors” of the world that “have been notoriously challenged in the ethics department, to say the least” (Jay and Graff 2012). But not all definitions of the environmental humanities include feminism or place the perspectives of indigenous women with other core disciplinary perspectives at the center of study.

### Facing Climate Justice: How Will the Environmental Humanities Respond?

Women's leadership is traditional in most North American indigenous cultures. In fact, the Idle No More movement was organized at

a November 2012 teach-in by four indigenous women—Nina Wilson, Sheelah McLean, Sylvia McAdam, and Jessica Gordon—in response to Canadian prime minister Stephen Harper’s omnibus budget bill C-45, which diminished the scope and powers of the Navigable Waters Protection Act (NWPA) of 1882.<sup>8</sup> The NWPA had presented a significant barrier to industrial development, especially to projects such as pipelines that crossed many rivers on First Nations lands. Now, bill C-45 threatens the sovereign rights of First Nations people in Canada, making changes to the control of First Nations lands (essentially making them easier to lease) and thus facilitating the Enbridge Northern Gateway Pipelines Project plan for numerous pipelines transporting bitumen from Alberta’s tar sands to the Pacific Ocean, the Gulf of Mexico, and beyond to China. From December 2012 and into 2013, Idle No More grew with numerous flash mobs of round dancers across North America, gaining national and international attention through Attawapiskat chief Theresa Spence’s hunger strike. By the end of the year, *Foreign Policy* magazine had named the four women founders of Idle No More among its list of “100 Leading Global Thinkers of 2013” (“Idle No More Founders” 2013).

On the front lines of climate change around the world, indigenous women, poor women, and women of the two-thirds world understand what is at stake (Mohanty 2003). Their vision and voices—their scholarship and fields of knowledge—need to be central to any definition of the environmental humanities.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Greta Gaard** is a professor of English at the University of Wisconsin–River Falls. She is the author of *The Nature of Home* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2007) and *Ecological Politics: Ecofeminists and the Greens* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), editor of *Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, Nature* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), and coeditor of *Ecofeminist Literary Criticism: Theory, Interpretation, Pedagogy* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998) and *International Perspectives in Feminist Ecocriticism* (London: Routledge, 2013). Her essays have appeared in *American Quarterly*, *DEP*, *Ecozon@*, *Feminismos*, *Environmental Ethics*, *Ecologist*, *Ethics and the Environment*, *Hypatia*, *Interdisciplinary Studies on Literature and Environment*, *Signs*, *World Literature*, and other volumes of feminist, environmental, queer, and cultural studies research. She has served on the executive council of ASLE (Association for the Study of Literature and Environment) and continues to serve on the editorial board for ISLE: *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*.

*A founding member of OccupyMN, Gaard's activist involvement in MN350. Org, Minnesota Voters for Animal Protection, OutFront Minnesota, BareBones Productions, Common Ground Vipassana Meditation Center's Queer Dharma group, and her gardening, all ground her scholarship.*

#### NOTES

1. The Round Dance is a spiritual and social ceremony for healing; it often celebrates the water or the ancestors. Calling this cultural practice a "protest" misreads the purpose of the dance in a way that seems culturally uninformed at best.

2. MOA, "Overview," <http://www.mallofamerica.com/about/moa/overview>.

3. See "Idle No More Round Dance Mall of America," YouTube video, 5:30, posted by Doug Cook, December 29, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vn5PFHlmak>.

4. An indigenous community land trust founded by Winona LaDuke, the White Earth Land Recovery Project responded to the 2012 wolf hunt by declaring the entire reservation a Ma'iingan (wolf) sanctuary. See "Ma'iingan (the Wolf) Our Brother," White Earth Land Recovery Project, December 22, 2012, <http://welrp.org/maiiingan-the-wolf-our-brother>. See also the Northwoods Wolf Alliance homepage at <http://www.northwoodswolfalliance.org/>.

5. For more on Idle No More–Deluth, see their blog at <http://idlenomoredeluth.blogspot.com/>.

6. For more on these institutions, see Public Health and Environment Department, *Gender, Climate Change, and Health*, Geneva, Switzerland: World Health Organization, 2009, <http://www.who.int/globalchange/GenderClimateChangeHealthfinal.pdf>; United Nations Inter-Agency Network on Women and Gender Equality, "Women, Gender Equality, and Climate Change," WomenWatch, [http://www.un.org/womenwatch/feature/climate\\_change/](http://www.un.org/womenwatch/feature/climate_change/); and the homepage for Gender cc: Women for Climate Justice, online at <http://www.genderrcc.net/>.

7. My summary here draws on descriptions of the University of Utah's Master's in Environmental Humanities and on the emerging Master's in Environmental Arts and Humanities at Oregon State University, Corvallis.

8. For more on the NWPA, see "Navigation Protection Act," *Wikipedia*, last modified May 27, 2014, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Navigation\\_Protection\\_Act](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Navigation_Protection_Act).

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