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Transgressionⁱ

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“It is not just that deconstruction cannot found a politics, while other ways of thinking can. It is that deconstruction can make founded political programs more useful by making their in-built problems more visible. To act is therefore not to ignore deconstruction, but actively to transgress it without giving it up.”¹

Transgression is not a beginning or end point. Transgression is not timeless or universal property. Transgression is a relational and localised action; it manifests in certain expressions and/or arguments as they respond to hegemonic laws and rules. And, to paraphrase Eve Sedgwick: what is transgressive today, may not be tomorrow.² Here, I consider Spivak’s claim about the usefulness of deconstruction in relation to the pursuit of place-based justice. How can Plumwood’s famous essay “Shadow Places and the Politics of Dwelling”, which is prescriptive of a particular eco-justice route to place, be thought of in terms of transgression?

The familiar criticism of poststructuralism that Spivak responds to in the epigraph is that it is relativist, immaterial and apolitical (and the writing is bad). The endless pointing out of the paradoxes of binary thinking, or when a text or law contradicts itself, seems its sole, naval-gazing aim. Maybe Derrida could be charged with such criminal forms of abstraction, but many feminist poststructuralists were almost always seeking material forms of justice by looking at the flimsy and contradictory terrain on which hierarchical forms of thought, identity and action were built. Pointing out the internal contradictions and double standards of, for example, a Patriarchal system that relies on gestational maternal labour but marginalises and devalues it at the same time, generates a vital point of critical and material *political* leverage. It is through the observation of the paradox of the law that reproductive justice can then materialise both in theory and practice.

We tend not to consider Plumwood a poststructuralist feminist. She is a feminist analytic philosopher by training. But, nonetheless, she cites Derrida at a key moment in *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*: “Dualism, as a way of construing difference in terms of the logic of hierarchy (Derrida, 1981), has been discussed by many feminist and ecological thinkers.”³ Despite the use of the passive voice, Derrida is invoked here at the point Plumwood begins to break down the dualistic logic of Western forms of mastery of nature. Thus, we can think of Plumwood as a feminist poststructuralist insofar as she deploys the key methodology in deconstruction in establishing her eco-feminist theory of mastery: she points out how hierarchical (human exceptionalist Western hierarchies) and dualistic thought produced the ecological crisis. Subsequently, she engages in the deconstruction of Western hierarchical

¹ Spivak, “Feminism and Deconstruction, Again,” 134.

² Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Queer and Now.”

³ Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, 32.

dualisms (man/woman, culture/nature, white/black etc.) to ground a new environmental politics via the construction of a world based on the “non-hierarchical concept of difference.”⁴

The means by which feminist and queer scholars and activists have historically moved from hierarchical dualisms towards a non-hierarchical system of difference (non-binary gender, diverse sexualities, e.g.) is through the critical and material practice of transgression: transgression of gender norms (early feminist stories are about liberation from obligatory domesticity, about going to university, getting a job) or transgression of normative performances of sexuality (being proud of one’s counter-hegemonic desires, refusing to be closeted). But, as Judith Butler points out with regards to gender, any act of transgression is always circumscribed by the hegemony: a transgressive performance of gender in Butler’s eyes is “not freedom, but how to work the trap one is inevitably in.”⁵ There is more to transgression than these familiar examples, but the point stands: the move towards challenging a hierarchical binary structure of man/woman or culture/nature requires transgression. Transgression is an act of breaking the hierarchical law of dualism. Just as being a woman getting a job, or being proud of one’s sexuality means different things today than it did, say, at the time of Women’s Suffrage or Stonewall, any act of transgression is only as transgressive as the dominant structure of the moment in which it is articulated or performed. “*To act is therefore not to ignore deconstruction, but actively to transgress it without giving it up.*”⁶ Transgression is, as Spivak obliquely infers here, a relational process that can break even the flimsy law of deconstruction. Taking a position in a struggle at a particular place and time can be done, recognising it is an essential stage in a process towards something better, if not a timeless universal truth.

In “Shadow Places and the Politics of Dwelling” Plumwood again challenges dualistic logic, but this time it is the dualism of the “nice” places and the “not so nice”, or shadow places.⁷ She urges us to consider how we might bring the two together in non-dualistic ways. The critical transgression of this essay is thus seeing the two as co-dependent terms; breaking the law that keeps here and there conceptually separate. The nice place and its not so nice shadow are oppositions that rely on each other, but with a privileged term (the nice place) that subordinates and dominates the other one (the not so nice shadow). The desire to cultivate an “ecojustice route to... place”⁸ is the desire to manifest the concept of non-hierarchical forms of difference in environmental thinking about place: where there are *no longer* nice and not so nice places, but *different* places, *different* bio-regions, *different* cities and *different* ecologies. Once Plumwood enacts the inaugural transgression of deconstructing the hierarchical logic, it is up to us to rethink the relation between a place and its shadow. At least within our circle, the concept has started to shift the dominant ways in which we, environmental humanists, conceptualise place to such an extent that it is no longer transgressive to point out the relation between nice and not so nice. What counts as transgression has changed.

Thus the next step for us, which is central to the formation of the Shadow Places Network itself, is *what now?* What acts – of critique, policy formation, planning, creation, action – can transgress the dominant ways in which nice places are constructed at the expense of not so nice ones? What are the differences and similarities between places and their shadows

⁴ Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, 60.

⁵ Kotz, “The Body You Want,” np.

⁶ Spivak, “Feminism and Deconstruction, Again,” 134.

⁷ Plumwood, “Shadow Places,” 140.

⁸ *Ibid*, 148.

and how can we make these differences non-hierarchical? These questions are broadly applicable and the answers, especially in relation to their transgressive potential, change depending on context.

The enduring method yielded from feminist poststructuralism is transgressing the hierarchical logic of dualism to arrive at non-hierarchical forms of difference. Easier said than done, to be sure. But it is central to why some of the most famous and successful feminist thinkers adopted the method, whether in the name of this particular philosophical tradition (like Spivak) or not (like Plumwood). What the method yields for environmental humanities more broadly plays out, to some extent but by no means exhaustively, in the wake of Plumwood's meditation on dualisms in *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*. What this method can bring to thinking about shadow places depends on what questions one is asking about place. If the question seeks to break down the unjust hierarchy that defines nice and not so nice places, transgressing the dualistic laws that enable place-based exploitation and extraction will be useful. In other words, the basic principle of Plumwood's argument in "Shadow Places and the Politics of Dwelling" is to think about how to diminish the exploitation and extraction that make certain places nice. While no single action will enable one to arrive at this ideal theoretical goal, incremental, iterative and transformative transgressions can challenge dominant and unjust place relations in the meantime.

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ⁱ Hamilton, Jennifer. "Transgression." *An A to Z of Shadow Places Concepts* (2021). <https://www.shadowplaces.net/concepts>

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