

**ENVIRONMENTALISM IN POPULAR CULTURE. GENDER, RACE, SEXUALITY
AND THE POLITICS OF THE NATURAL**

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With British Petroleum's recent ecologically disastrous activity in the Gulf of Mexico, Noël Sturgeon's work could not be more timely in offering alternative perspectives from which to address the deeply entwined issues of global environmentalism and social justice. After the ramifications of the disaster became apparent, BP hastily launched a massive multi-million dollar public relations campaign which exhibited tropes of remorse, responsibility and commitment to rectify the worst effects of the disaster. Many of the BP employees featured in the slickly produced television advertisements were individuals native to the affected southern coastal regions of the United States, and included women and people of color.

Scenes of BP's local actors offering comfort and resolve to affected individuals and communities of shrimpers, hospitality workers and small business owners were interspersed with panoramic shoots of pristine salt marshes, beaches and deep blue seascapes, being patrolled by a flotilla of oil scrubbers in scenes which seemed to be an American and environmental twist on the evacuation of the British at Dunkirk during the early days of WWII. The disaster and subsequent public relations campaign played out through global media outlets, as BP battled to contain the environmental damage and its financial exposure.

As in any war, truth is the first casualty, and Sturgeon's work offers a methodology and theoretical tools to forensically examine assumptions regarding environmentalism and nature which inform cultural productions like BP's recent public relations campaign, to the cinematic narratives of mainstream Hollywood blockbuster film productions, as well as the marketing strategies of emerging industries associated with 'Green Capitalism.' In doing so, Sturgeon provides a distinct theoretical perspective, which attempts 'to show the utility of engaging' in what she calls a '*global feminist environmental justice analysis*' (p. 6). She employs a 'framework that aims at historically and culturally specific analyses of the intertwining of political economy, cultural production, and ideological representations'(p. 11). By engaging in what she claims to be '*a critical approach to any claims natural,*' Sturgeon argues that she has created a 'tool that allows us to get at aspects of environmental and human exploitation that we can miss using only the critique of dualistic constructions of inequality' (p. 11). Drawing upon the work of Gramsci and Barthes, Sturgeon trains her theoretical lens on American cultural productions, which have emerged and diffused globally during the last half century. Sturgeon states that ideas concerning what is 'natural' are central to the process of creating hegemonic (dominant) ideologies' and constitute 'an old insight, a founding principle of Marxist, deconstructionist and feminist analysis' (p. 12).

Sturgeon applies Gramscian principles to consider 'the specific role U.S. cultural myths have played in promoting 'ideas of the natural, *as nature* – in particular, popular stories about biology, evolution and environment' (p. 12). Sturgeon notes that dominant linear epistemologies often present 'nature as a foundation of truth' from which narratives of Western history often commence. Transformations from 'nature to culture,' and from 'primitivism to civilization' underlie a discourse which traces the social-economic shift from hunting-gathering to

agriculture, to barter, to industrialization, to the global capitalism of the twenty-first century. Such a teleology, Barthes observes, is informed by 'the very principles of myth; it transforms history into nature' ([1956] 1972: 129), leading Sturgeon to declare that 'for contemporary cultural studies critics, myths are not lies, legends or fairy tales, but the layering of deeply symbolic cultural narratives in such a way that the resulting logic seems natural' (p. 13). Sturgeon argues such logic is structurally embedded in Western and American psyches, and manifesting in the latter as a masculinist and militaristic mentality prone to a solipsistic sense of exceptionalism. Sturgeon's second chapter interrogates a selection of late twentieth century Hollywood films, which appropriate environmentalist and ecological themes to depict genocide and oppression against indigenous people during the colonization and westward expansion of the United States. According to Sturgeon, a pervasive 'Frontier Myth' generated by the following American cultural assumptions, acts as a subtext for many of these film's cinematic narratives. Firstly, natural resource and environmental destruction from industrialization and commodification is the inevitable result of 'progress.' Secondly, the 'primitive' is inferior to the 'civilized.' Thirdly, history is marked by social Darwinism. Fourthly, 'White' Americans were divined by Manifest Destiny to civilize and bring democracy to darker peoples and their feminized, virgin territories.

Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis, Sturgeon argues provides an intellectual basis to support these cultural mythologies. Jackson's thesis posits that democratic, masculine, honorable, innovative, individualistic, risk-taking and competitive American qualities were forged from the challenge of taming the West. Subsequently, late twentieth century Hollywood 'Westerns' reacted by providing revisionist narratives of the 'white cowboy as a man who is struggling with the guilt of acknowledging his complicity in genocide and imperialism,' and in

doing so ‘promote the figure of the Ecological Indian as a sign of truth’ (p. 54). The ‘Frontier Myth’ subtext to these films actually perpetuate the exceptionalism of American cultural myths and stereotypes, despite narrative lines which attempt convey the exact opposite.

It must be also observed that since the majority of Hollywood films are produced by white males of European descent involved in one of the most competitive industries on the face of the earth, it is only correct to assume that narratives structures will be influenced by such environments and the ideological perspectives which they generate. And perhaps that is Sturgeon’s point. One of the targets of her critique is Kevin Costner’s film *Dances with Wolves* (1990). While commending Costner’s use of Lakota tribal historians and actors, Sturgeon claims that by employing contemporary members of the tribe, Costner’s narrative belies his message that Lakota culture became extinct, by citing the film’s epilogue:

Thirteen years later, their home destroyed, their buffalo gone, the last band of free Sioux submitted to white authority at Fort Robinson, Nebraska. The great horse culture of the plain was gone and the American Frontier was about to pass into history. (Blake: 1990)

One could argue, after reviewing the film, that Costner’s epilogue was speaking to the industrial scale destruction of the Great Plain’s enormous buffalo herds by ‘white hunters’ supplying the mid nineteenth century fashion industry. The horse culture of the Lakota did evaporate as a result. Costner further emphasized this point by establishing Tatanka, a visitor’s center in Deadwood, South Dakota, to memorialize this environmental and cultural tragedy. Furthermore, the buffalo hunting sequence which forms the narrative bridge of Costner’s film strongly supports such a reading of the epilogue, despite the essentialist denotation of the ‘American’ Frontier. Though far removed from the vibrant horse culture of the nineteenth century, Lakota participation in Costner’s film offers proof of cultural survival, despite Sturgeon’s argument to the contrary which ironically invokes a ‘noble’ suffering Indian myth to support her book’s

thesis. The caveat being that filmic narratives can be read to support or refute any number of arguments, and theoretical perspectives.

In contrast, Sturgeon's deconstruction of the *Message of Chief Seattle*, an 'Ecological Indian' media construct is right on target. An environmental prophecy attributed to Seaathl, a late nineteenth-century leader of the Susquamish and Duwamish peoples in what is now western Washington, the message conveys the Chief's vision that: 'Every part of the Earth is sacred to my people . . . the Earth does not belong to man –man belongs to the Earth' (p. 65). Seized upon by environmentalists and the counterculture of the 1970s as a source of indigenous ecological wisdom, the 'message' was incorporated into studies and literature. In reality, Chief Seattle's environmental treatise was actually composed in 1971 by Ted Perry, a white scriptwriter. This illustration highlights the validity of Sturgeon's arguments concerning the appropriation of indigenous cultural systems in revisionist films and other forms of media to construct the 'natural' elements of the American Frontier and propagate this mythology for hegemonic purposes.

The book's second section *Naturalizing Reproduction* dissects coupled messages of heteronormativity and racism in which naturalistic narratives support the hegemony of the white U.S. nuclear suburban family as the only 'natural' family unit. Sturgeon specifically examines the explosion of environmentalism as a key theme in children's movies in the 1980s and 1990s, and subsequently focuses on the emergence of the penguin as a cinematic motif used in American cultural wars to promote, in one context, Christian conservative and, in another, gay family values.

The book's final section, *Naturalizing Globalization*, pragmatically links environmental and social questions together with broader systems of global conflict and the global economy.

Sturgeon interrogates films such as *Courage Under Fire* (1996) and *Jarhead* (2005) as cinematic tropes which manufactured consent for the two recent US military expeditions into Iraq under *père et fils* Bush. Analyzed in conjunction with a plethora of war-themed video games emerging in the 1980s and 1990, Sturgeon aptly illustrates the links between cultural consumption and militarism. In particular, she discusses *America's Army* (2007), a game designed for the US military as a recruiting tool, in conjunction with the wider cultural consumption of more commercial games such as *KUMA/WAR* (2007). Currently in Afghanistan, U.S. drone bombers are piloted remotely via joystick consoles by service personnel based in the Nevada desert. These 'digital warriors' were specifically recruited from the ranks of young gamers who honed their skills on Xbox entertainment technology first introduced in 2001, and illustrates Sturgeon's contention regarding the link between US cultural production, consumption and militarism. Building on critiques of the American Frontier myth established in the first section, Sturgeon explores how anti-colonialist, feminist and environmental justice perspectives are linked in critiques performed by global peace and justice activists to question militarism and violence. Linking contemporary filmic tropes framing the U.S. invasion of Iraq to war-related video games, Sturgeon examines how such media-technological interfaces contribute in promoting popular cultural mythologies of divine and genetic determinism to substantiate masculinist tropes of American state-sponsored violence.

The book's final chapter explores how imperialistic narratives anchored in images of racial and sexual purity have informed, fostered and infested the green, organic and natural products industry during its spectacular growth in the past decade. It radically questions how 'Green Capitalism' is connected to or undercuts sustainable fair trade and related labor practices, and in a prescient manner (Sturgeon completed her final draft in 2007) dissects the tropes

currently employed by BP in its media campaign to salvage its corporate image and financial solvency after perpetrating one of the largest environmental disasters in history.

Sturgeon's thesis unfolds over the book's three sections, and she provides a variety of case studies, which can be adopted for the classroom, seminar or public discourse. Though some points are thought out better than others, Sturgeon's arguments will provoke debate, thoughtful reflection, and a timely re-appraisal of pressing cultural-environmental issues. More importantly, for radical geographers her work attempts to forge solid links between postmodern tropes, activism, global environmentalism and social justice. In conclusion, Sturgeon asks how 'can we see environmental problems clearly when nature is made to be a repository of ideological narratives to justify social inequalities?' (p. 14). It is by generating such incisive questions that *Environmentalism in popular culture* provides such an engaging and thought provoking study for our times.

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