

Leave Rappaccini's Daughter Alone!¹: Applying Ecofeminism to Youth Education and Environmental Stewardship Through the Scout Organizations

Author's Statement

I have always loved French existentialism. My high school years were spent in the worlds of Camus, Sartre, and de Beauvoir. The existentialists understood my core beliefs of freedom, choice, and individuality. They inspired me to create my own meaning of my life, even if it meant opposing the institutions of the world.

Being authentic means making choices that define who I am, so when the time came to choose my 76-101: Interpretation and Argument class, the course *Are We Simply Monstrous? Medievalism in Mass Culture* deeply resonated with me. I was excited to have conversations about race, gender, and disability and to explore the blurred lines between hero and monster in our society today.

While we may not always be the “heroes,” I hope that this paper can help us realize who the “monsters” of our society are and what we can do to help those being affected. We are uniquely born into facts and accidents that shape who we are and define and restrict our opportunities. Beyond these circumstances, we have the ability to be the change in our society. Movements such as ecofeminism, that I fell in love with while researching this paper, are ways we can fight for the things that really matter, like inclusivity, accessibility, and togetherness.

I see the new Scout Code this work proposes not as an oath to swear by, but rather as a mindset for living. Regardless of if we are Scouts or not, we can make sure we are being responsible for others and our earth in our daily interactions. I believe that, in itself, would be a life worth living.

-Joseph

¹ *Rappachini's Daughter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne is a short story about a scientist named Dr. Rappachini who raises exotic poisonous plants in his garden for scientific knowledge and poisons his daughter so she can work with his plants without being harmed. This leads her to be isolated, as her touch and breath can be fatal to normal life.

Ecofeminism is a movement that has risen to prominence in the past few decades, recognizing a connection between women and the environment in the nature of their oppression. It is a direct response to the patriarchal capitalist social system that has caused the exploitation of natural resources for thousands of years. This exploitation has led to the appropriation of specifically feminine and sexualized language to justify the overconsumption of resources and the misogynistic portrayals of women. The common practice of gendering phrases that allude that the earth is to be indulged by men such as “fertile land,” “virgin oil,” and “Mother Nature” have become so normalized they have made their way into daily conversation. In attaching such characteristics to nature, man inherently justifies his exploitation of nature’s beauty and resources and perpetuates the idea that the ideal woman has no problem being controlled by a man.

In response to what has become an all too commonplace narrative of the environment, ecofeminist writer Stacy Alaimo demonstrates in *Exposed* (2016) the extent to which masculinity is connected to exuberant pollution and a rejection of environmentalism. She describes a *YouTube* video, titled “Rolling coal on hot babe,” where men driving a truck “purposely engulf a woman in a bikini in black soot, for kicks” (Alaimo 96). A former coal roller explains the appeal simply with the phrase, “It’s just a testosterone thing. It’s manhood” (96). Such mindless explanation shows that men are willing to exert their masculinity without any regard for women nor the environment. Fellow ecofeminist Louise Westling has noted how environmental domestication at home and conquest abroad are the perpetrators of ecological misogyny. Literature in the past “feminized” and “eroticized the landscape of colonization” (Westling 80). Through works of history and literature, this tendency has trickled down to our youth, who are conditioned to take on such ideals. As a result, a connection can be drawn between our youth

education and the perpetuation of sexism-induced oppression of nature, an ethos extremely normalized in our society.

As our crushing reality of climate change becomes more critical, it is necessary that we fundamentally change the ways environmental issues are represented, and this must begin with how we teach our youth. American scouting organizations encourage service and community engagement and as six of the twelve presidents who were eligible to become part of the Boy Scouts were involved in Scouting, it is apparent that the Scout organization exerts a great deal of influence over our political leadership. Through laws that fundamentally separate women from men in their interactions with nature, they are a prominent example of inherent environmental misogyny. We can use ecofeminism's ideologies to guide us to devise a solution for our youth. Through a practical, ecofeminist lens, we can rewrite the Scout laws to one shared law of equitable environmental stewardship that uplifts both women and the environment.

How Women Have Been Linked to Nature in Media

One of the most apparent links between the oppression of nature and women can be found in related jobs, such as fracking. In diving into the roots of fracking, and how it represents the misogynistic foundation of American capitalism, we find that the term "fracking" is a euphemism for the word "f*ck" (Plumer). This is a deliberate choice of vocabulary to describe the action of drilling the ground. As a frac pump drills the earth for its various resources, a parallel distinction can be made with a man penetrating a woman in heterosexual intercourse—an exploitative sexual metaphor that portrays women and nature as sexual conquests.

Paradoxically, despite their supposed historical association with nature, women are severely underrepresented in the fracking industry, only making up 5% of the boards of the 500 largest

mining companies (Women in Mining). This results from a society that codes fracking and other jobs related to capitalist exploitation and indulgence as masculine occupations.

In addition, a connection can be drawn between the oppression of nature and women in the exploitative maternal metaphors used in our media. On March 20, 2022, when Dr. Mehmet Oz appeared on Sean Hannity's *Fox News* show, in reference to the war in Ukraine, he stated, "I'm in Pennsylvania where there's natural gas under my feet that could...help our allies in Europe wean themselves off of their dependence on Russian natural gas" (Bense). In his declaration of full support for fracking in Pennsylvania, Dr. Oz used the word "wean," which is defined as "to accustom (an infant or other young mammal) to food other than its mother's milk," (Merriam Webster). The appropriation of such a maternal, feminine word in the context of natural resources shows how normalized the gendering of nature is in the media. Furthermore, Oz's use of the word inherently justifies and encourages dangerous resource consumption, which in turn continues the oppression of both women and the earth.

The exploitability of nature has become most apparent with the rise of post-9/11 masculinist consumerism during the Bush and Trump administrations. Both administrations were aggressively dismissive of climate change, neglecting the needs of the "feminine," proliferative earth in favor of man's consumerist desires. Two weeks before the 2020 presidential election, President Trump's campaign aired an ad featuring a testimonial by fracking technician "Jennifer," who said she would lose her job if Joe Biden ended fracking (Donald J. Trump). Advertisements such as "Jennifer" cover up the true motives behind these administrations' stances on fracking—to feed into hypermasculine consumerist desires while neglecting the needs of the earth. As a result, the interests of corporate leaders do not align with those of environmentalism.

In fact, such elites go on further to aggressively undermine the platforms of candidates against fracking, such as Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. Challenging the masculinist view of environmentalism, Ocasio-Cortez and the proposed Green New Deal clearly recognized the gender pay gap as an issue related to climate justice. In his extremely publicized rejection of the Green New Deal, claiming it will turn, “our country into a Ninth World country,” Trump demonstrated his internal bias against ecofeminism, connecting feminization to the loss of power (NY Post). Based on this clash in ideas, women in power clearly understand the need to preserve nature while men in power choose to exploit nature as a resource.

With the severity of the issue of environmental misogyny in the media, it is no wonder that we see a disparity in purportedly nature- and equality-focused scout organizations. A 2011 study conducted by Kathleen E. Denny for the *Gender & Society* journal found that Boy Scouts are offered proportionately more opportunities for scientific and field pursuits than Girl Scouts, who are encouraged to do more art activities (Denny). If the so-called mission statement of the Scouts of America is to promote a better world, why are Girl Scouts discouraged from interacting with nature? This is, in fact, exemplified in geoscience-related fields, with only 8% of US geology professors being women, according to a study conducted by Mary Anne Holmes of the University of Nebraska at Lincoln (Holmes). In this way, environmental organizations such as the Scouts perpetuate the idea that nature is only to be accessed by men, suggesting that such organizations propagate a message of environmental misogyny.

Rhetorical Analysis of the Boy Scout Motto and Related Memes

The Boy Scout Motto is “Be Prepared,” meaning that as a Boy Scout, you are, “always in a state of readiness in mind and body to do your duty” according to the *Scouting for Boys* handbook (Baden-Powell). Due to the nature of the work of the Boy Scouts, one can infer that

the motto applies to “being prepared” in the face of wilderness or survival. Such a connotation paints the environment as a foe that is to be conquered, continuing the ethos of hypermasculine resource extraction found in fracking and its advocates. With the Girl Scouts rebuking the 2017 decision of Boy Scouts to accept girls, citing sexual assault as a main concern (ABC News), a parallel can be drawn between sexual assault and environmental exploitation, championed by the motto of “being prepared.”

Upon a quick Google Search “Boy Scout be prepared meme”, the front page produced alarmingly sexist results.

When she asks
if you brought
protection



In addition to the disturbing appropriation of sexual imagery to the Scout organizations, which house members ranging from ten to seventeen years old, the interpretation of the Boy Scout motto in such a context shows how internalized misogyny is within the Boy Scouts. With such

intentions found in the above memes, it does not come as a surprise that today's political leaders exemplify such attitudes towards the environment.

Rhetorical Analysis of the Scout Laws

The Scout organizations further demonstrate this inherent misogyny in their Scout Laws.

The Girl Scout Law reads:

I will do my best to be honest and fair, friendly and helpful, considerate and caring, courageous and strong, and responsible for what I say and do, and to respect myself and others, respect authority, use resources wisely, make the world a better place, and be a sister to every Girl Scout.”

On the other hand, the Boy Scout Law reads:

A Scout is Trustworthy, Loyal, Helpful, Friendly, Courteous, Kind, Obedient, Cheerful, Thrifty, Brave, Clean, and Reverent.

The Boy Scout Law is much more individualistic than the Girl Scout Law, with no characteristic of a Boy Scout being related to one's relationship with others nor the environment. Upon further analysis, a direct comparison can be made between certain phrases in both laws, such as “use resources wisely” in the Girl Scout Law and “thrifty” in the Boy Scout Law. While thrifty is defined as the quality of not being wasteful, the Girl Scout Law is much more resource specific, demonstrating an extremely different level of stewardship expected from each. In their career choices, women are expected to uphold preservation and caringness, while men are not taught responsibility, thereby divorcing them from any duty to the world around them. With every Scout having sworn by their law to become part of the organization, it is apparent that such expectations and qualities are instilled in men and women since their youths, which in turn influence their future careers.

This disparity in education is furthered with the portrayal of the Scouts in the media. At an Ohio Fourth of July Parade in 2018, an announcer made headlines for calling the Boy Scouts “the future leaders of America” while the Girl Scouts are “just having fun.” Such dispositions can be seen in our leaders today, with politicians affecting hypermasculinity such as Dr. Mehmet Oz and Donald Trump enacting the same principles outlined in the Boy Scout law.

Conclusion

In order to combat the patriarchal oppression of the environment and change the public’s perspective of the environment, we must fundamentally change the education of our youth to emphasize equal environmental stewardship. We must combat the “boys tie knots while girls tie bows” stereotype that pushes boys to control and conquer nature, and instead propose a new image of equality to the Scout organizations, through a shared law. Drawing together aspects of both laws, the shared Scout Law would state as such:

SCOUT LAW

I will do my best to be

- Honest and trustworthy
 - Courageous and caring
 - Considerate of the world around me
 - Responsible for what I say and do
- and to
- Respect myself and others
 - Respect authority
 - Make the world a better place
 - Togetherness

This new proposed law emphasizes community and care for others and the environment as essential to the development of the youth. The majority of the characteristics in this law are derived from the Girl Scout Law, as the goal is to combat the hypermasculine, highly individualistic pursuit of resources that the Boy Scout Law encourages. Above all, togetherness is encouraged, in regards to both the treatment of women and the environment.

Given the current political platforms of hypermasculine corporate politicians such as Donald Trump and Dr. Mehmet Oz and the urgency of climate change, it is evident that the education of our youth in such leadership organizations plays an immense role in perpetuating misogyny in our society. It is a failure of the Scout organization that the two groups are so fundamentally different that the issue of girls crossing over into the Boy Scouts is so controversial. Given the influence it has over our society, Boy Scout law must not be so individual and instead favor a shared law emphasizing the idea of togetherness. Such a shared law written in the lens of ecofeminism would change the perspective of what it means to be a woman and what it means to practice environmentalism. It would empower young girls to pursue careers normalized as exclusive to men, such as geoscience-adjacent industries, and end the patriarchal overconsumption of the environment. As sociolinguistics reminds us through how “language informs culture and culture informs language,” the laws that our youth are guided to live by are essential to the future of our society.

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