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Abstract:

This academic essay describes Ecofeminism as an intersectional concept regarding the complexities of capitalist production, exploitation, class, race, gender relations, and much more. Ecofeminism is defined by the manner in which women have interacted with the environment throughout history. In their book, *Ecofeminism*, Mies and Shiva assert that women's interaction with the environment is based upon a subsistence model where one only takes from the earth what is necessary for survival (note that gender is referred to in an essentialist manner). This is contradictory to patriarchal capitalism, which is reliant on the exploitation of labor and the earth for the profit of a few power holders- historically white men.

For this analysis, I discuss Puerto Rican attorney, Elizabeth Yeampierre's role as an Ecofeminist Warrior. In her social justice work, Yeampierre embodies intersectionality in the manner in which she combats environmental racism as seen through her work regarding: Brownfield site toxic exposure, Waste Management, and general environmental policymaking. Elizabeth Yeampierre embodies four tenets of Ecofeminism which are highlighted throughout this analysis: an ability to question and therefore dismantle power hierarchies, reception to community input in the formulation of unique, intersectional solutions, a valuation of human lives over capital gain, and an interest in exploring the way in which the degradation of nature connects with the devaluation of women and marginalized individuals.

Intersections of the Environment, Structural Racism, and Sociopolitical Change

Introduction to Ecofeminism and Elizabeth Yeampierre:

Environmental justice is quite an intersectional issue, and it integrates the complexities of capitalist production, exploitation, class, race, gender relations, and much more. Ecofeminism is the coalescence of these intersections, and it is rooted in women's ways of interacting with the environment through a historical lens. By and large, this environmental interaction is based upon a subsistence model, where one only takes from the earth what is necessary for survival, preserves biodiversity, and respects the earth's natural processes. In *Ecofeminism*, Mies and Shiva describe capitalism as a patriarchal structure, based upon limitless growth and accumulation for societal power holders- predominately white, upper-class men (Shiva, Salleh, Mies 2014, chp. 8). Throughout this analysis, I will focus on four tenets of ecofeminism, which are imperative in the institution of practical, intersectional, environmentally conscious, and sustainable change. These tenets include: an ability to question and therefore dismantle power hierarchies, reception to community input in the formulation of unique, intersectional solutions, a valuation of human lives over capital gain, and an interest in exploring the way in which the degradation of nature connects with the devaluation of women and marginalized individuals. Elizabeth Yeampierre embodies complex, compassionate, knowledge-based ecofeminist tenets in her environmental and racial activism, giving her perspective depth, complexity, and credibility as she works to change the status quo in a manner which acknowledges intersectionality; this is seen through her work regarding Brownfield site toxic exposure, Waste Management, and general environmental policymaking.

With the exploitative nature of capitalism in mind, Puerto Rican attorney, Elizabeth Yeampierre has worked to combat the environmental racism which plagues minorities in America. Yeampierre is well known for drawing a parallel between black suffocation at the hands of police officers to the breathing problems victims of environmental racism experience everyday (Gardiner 2020). In both instances, structural racism results in immense black suffering. After serving as a civil rights lawyer in Puerto Rico, Yeampierre made her voice heard regarding the intersectionality between systemic racism and environmental justice in the U.S., as she is now the Executive Director of UPROSE- a latinx community-focused, intersectional activist organization in Brooklyn (UPROSE). She also currently serves as the co-chair of the Climate Justice Alliance, which is an organization that works to create a more sustainable political economy by combating extractive and degradative systems of production while acknowledging environmentalism's intersections with race, gender, and class (Climate Justice Alliance). With the Climate Justice Alliance, Yeampierre runs an alliance of over seventy organizations working to eliminate environmental, racial, and class injustices by implementing Brownfield legislation and Waste Management practices in New York City (Gardiner 2020).

Elizabeth Yeampierre and the Tenets of Ecofeminism:

Elizabeth Yeampierre is strong in her ability to question and therefore dismantle power hierarchies. She readily accepts that exploitation underlies capitalism. Capitalism is built upon white supremacist structures which have historically relied on slave labor for growth. Socio-political structures, including: mass incarceration, police brutality, redlining, lack of access to quality education, and racism in hiring, have been integrated into our governmental system to maintain black devaluation. Mies and Shiva explain the scientific method itself as exploitative and short-sighted, as it views the earth's resources to be disposable, and it treats nature and

humans as ‘guinea pigs’ in scientific development and capitalist growth. Non-power holding individuals, including women, children, and minorities, often serve as these guinea pigs. In fact, Shiva states, “Each disaster seems like an experiment, with children as the guinea pigs, to teach us more about the deadly substances brought into daily production and use” (Shiva, Salleh, Mies 2014, 82). Yeampierre explicitly recognizes that under patriarchal capitalism, white men have historically been global power-holders who have pushed the valuation of limitless growth and capital concentration into the hands of a few. Women, lower-income workers, POC, and individuals from less industrialized countries, serve as cogs in the machine of capitalist growth. Elizabeth Yeampierre feels that the acknowledgement of these power hierarchies is the first step to altering the status quo. In the journal article, “Power in Translation,” innovative power is discussed in reference to the institution of structural change. Innovative power is defined as “the capacity of actors to create and discover new resources,” and in creating transformative change, it is necessary that these new resources gather visibility amongst a governed body (Avelino & Rotmans 2009). Thus, Yeampierre works tirelessly in her activism to raise awareness of the world’s structural inequities and the necessity for systematic change regarding the environment, racial and class justice, and our growth-based capitalist economy. In fact, she got into advocacy and racial justice work combating Puerto Rican police brutality at the Puerto Rican Legal Defense Fund, but her work in Puerto Rico did not end there (Gardiner 2020). She has been heavily involved in publicizing education and supporting sustainability surrounding the territory’s recovery post Hurricane Maria. Elizabeth Yeampierre was in Puerto Rico as a member of the climate justice brigade addressing climate change, weather crises, and implementing sustainable energy sources (Klein 2018). Yeampierre is an encourager of Puerto Rico’s journey towards self-determination and resisting United States capitalist and corporate exploitation.

Puerto Rico is standing against energy privatization, which could enable non-renewable corporations to pressure an increase in renewable energy prices (Klein 2018). In her work, Elizabeth Yeampierre calls attention to the coercive nature of current power structures, and uses her personal agency and advocacy to increase community awareness and confront the offenses which are written-off as normative.

Throughout her activism, Elizabeth Yeampierre is quick to gather community input in the formulation of unique solutions to specific problems facing various localities. With UPROSE, Elizabeth Yeampierre coalesced community involvement in racially and socioeconomically diverse Sunset Park with the goal of decreasing pollution from Gowanus Highway which had caused high resident asthma rates (NIEHS 2016). She founded the Climate Change Resiliency Center, which aided community recovery after Superstorm Sandy by surveying individual community members about their needs and the ways they could rebuild their neighborhood sustainably (NIEHS 2016). She extended this “participatory model” to the creation of a greenway and blueway design for the waterfront in Sunset Park entirely headed by the community itself (UPROSE). Yeampierre’s efforts have brought the community together to address the intersectional issues of environmentalism, classism, and racism. Her valuation of community feedback and engagement can be seen through her leadership in the People’s Climate March, which gathered over 400,000 New Yorkers standing in solidarity against climate injustice (NIEHS 2016). One of the key components to effective change making is an ability to involve those affected by the change in policy decisions. Involving constituents in policy has proven to be effective within the *Holding Ground* documentary, especially in small-scale communities and neighborhoods. In this documentary, community coordination sparks revitalization efforts in Boston’s Dudley Street neighborhood, and local activism forces two illegal waste dumps to

relocate. The Dudley Street Neighborhood forms direct relationships with the neighborhood's residents by going door to door in order to survey community interest regarding improvement initiatives (Holding Ground 1996). The necessity of community feedback seen in *Holding Ground* connects with Mies' and Shiva's discussion regarding the fragmentation of knowledge. Scientific processes are fragmented into 'specialized' categories, which fail to validate a holistic perspective (Shiva, Salleh, Mies 2014, chp. 2). More and more, knowledge is seen as something that can only be possessed by elite 'specialists,' and community perspectives are ignored (Shiva, Salleh, Mies 2014, chp. 2). Yeampierre is working to combat governmental gate-keeping of political pull, as political leaders are largely seen to be the only 'specialists.' The praxis which determines who is considered knowledgeable must be widened, and community input should be valued.

True environmentalism can only be enacted through a valuation of human lives over capital gain, which Yeampierre articulates in her search for climate justice. Yeampierre states, "[Because of climate change] people are going to have to get used to the idea that we're going to have to learn to live with what we need and not with what we want" (NYU Law News). Capitalism leaves an endless trail of harmful consumption, and exploits the working class through colonization, ownership over the means of production, and the devaluation of labor that was once seen as valuable and sustainable (Harvey 2010, chp. 11). Particularly, scientific experimentation has wrought extreme environmental catastrophe, as seen by: Chernobyl, Love Canal, and the Exxon Valdez oil spill (Shiva, Salleh, Mies 2014, chp. 6). Such catastrophes alongside the continuous emission of environmental contaminants have caused long-term impacts, which perpetually expose people to harsh toxins, chemicals, and pollutants. Societal valuation of capital gain above all else, pushes the extortion of the earth and vulnerable

populations. These are the populations Yeampierre works to protect through her green initiatives in Sunset Park, and her advocacy against Brownfield hazardous waste exposure. She successfully spearheaded a grassroots community movement against the installation of a 520-megawatt power plant in the Sunset Park vicinity, which blatantly stood against capitalist growth to ensure the safety of the area's residents (UPROSE). Due to their lack of capitalist power, marginalized communities are readily exploited with low wages, poor working conditions, and unfair working hours, in order to produce surplus-value for corporate owners (Harvey 2010, chp. 11). In his *Companion to Marx's Capital*, David Harvey quotes Marx's statement, "Capitalist production, therefore, only develops... the social process of production by simultaneously undermining the original sources of all wealth- the soil and the worker" (Harvey 2010, p. 234). On top of her community-based activism in New York City and Puerto Rico, in which she advocates for the communities most detrimentally impacted by capitalism's environmental footprint, Yeampierre has engaged in a number of educational discussions in which she articulates a necessary transition to a more subsistence-based way of life. Through her work advocating for policy change and sparking community agency in fighting for their own wellbeing, it is clear that Elizabeth Yeampierre values human life above all else. In her interviews and discussions at United States speaker forums, she is able to educate a diverse, international audience about the structural causes of accumulation by dispossession- capitalism.

Lastly, Elizabeth Yeampierre engages her exploration of the degradation of nature in a manner which connects with the devaluation of women and marginalized individuals. When analyzing her work and accomplishments with the Climate Justice Alliance, her passion for coalescing interdisciplinary solutions which address multiple socio-political issues is striking. Like the first and second wave feminist movements, the environmentalist movement is largely

non-intersectional. It has historically failed to acknowledge the structural racism which permeates the impacts of not only environmental destruction, but also mass incarceration and police brutality (Gardiner 2020). In connection with Mies' argument regarding the unfeasibility of 'lesser developed' countries "catching up," Yeampierre acknowledges the legacy of colonialism, which in combination with naturalized and inherent slavery throughout history, has established environmental extraction and dispossession as normative under capitalism (Gardiner 2020). Mies notably explains industrialized countries' colonization of Africa, South America, and Asia, as they extracted resources and labor, and made them dependent upon global power holders for economic prosperity (Shiva, Salleh, Mies 2014, chp. 4). Mies states, "Today, a similar colonial relationship exists between Man and Nature, between men and women, between urban and rural areas" (Shiva, Salleh, Mies 2014, 56). Yeampierre is well aware of these "colonial relationships" which exploit minority bodies and assume they don't possess the resources and political 'know-how' to advocate for themselves. With the Climate Justice Alliance, Yeampierre led an initiative to combat the risk of exposure to toxic chemicals from a nearby Brownfield site given the occurrence of a storm surge, and she passed specific legislation regarding Solid Waste Management in New York City (NIEHS 2016). She thoroughly understands that the black Americans who have been systematically discriminated against- in healthcare, housing, education, and the workforce- are the ones who are most affected by environmental hazards and corporate irresponsibility. With the Climate Justice Alliance, Elizabeth Yeampierre articulates that policies such as the Green New Deal aren't holistically effective unless they focus on dispersing resources to "frontline communities," oftentimes low-income, minority neighborhoods facing environmental toxicity (Gardiner 2020).

Reflections on the Ecofeminist Praxis:

Ecofeminism embodies immense intersectionality and breadth of perspective. It values the protection of biodiversity and the earth above growth, scientific development, and capitalist gain. This perspective seems on-par with Karl Marx's theoretical framework in *Capital*, in which he articulates that the exploitation of non-power holding members of society is inherent under capitalism, as surplus-value cannot be acquired unless a business owner is competitive in the market (Harvey 2010). To do so, prices must be kept low; thus, worker hours and wages are manipulated to meet these stipulations and labor is outsourced to countries with low minimum wages (Harvey 2010). The exploitation of marginalized communities under capitalism connects with environmental degradation and environmental racism, which affects people's health and quality of life. Personally, I am interested in going into the management side of healthcare within the nonprofit sector. As Elizabeth Yeampierre actively articulates, health explicitly ties into structural racism and climate change caused by senseless capitalist destruction disguised as 'growth.' According to a journal article which discusses the disproportionately heavy impact HIV/AIDS has on black mothers, it is made very clear that social determinants, including gender, occupation, and race, compound to impact one's health and access to quality healthcare, and this impact is worsening over time (Caiola, Barroso, Docherty & Relf 2014). Thus, I will do everything in my power to integrate the ecofeminist: ability to reject current power structures, valuation of human life over capital gain, effort to engage community members in policy decisions, and acknowledgement of intersectionality and complexity. I hope to work within the nonprofit sector of healthcare, hopefully at a free clinic, in order to bring relief to structurally disenfranchised individuals, who are denied what should be a human right- healthcare.

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