

# Surfacing in the Ecofeminist Classroom

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## Abstract

After an overview of current debates in ecofeminist theory, this essay demonstrates how Atwood's *Surfacing* is a central text in the ecofeminist classroom. Published in 1972, Atwood's novel anticipates many contemporary debates in ecofeminism. *Surfacing* underscores the damaging impact of patriarchal structures, while also assigning responsibility for environmental degradation to men and women both.

## Résumé

Après un survol des débats courants sur la théorie éco-féministe, cet article démontre comment *Surfacing* d'Atwood est un texte central dans la classe d'éco-féminisme. *Surfacing* souligne l'impact des structures patriarcales, tout en assignant la responsabilité pour la dégradation environnementale des hommes et des femmes.

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This fall (2005) and for the third time, I taught Ecofeminist Literature, an upper level course that I have learned to begin with Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*.<sup>1</sup> The course's goal is to engage ecofeminist theory through literature, and texts included Le Guin's *Always Coming Home*, Erdrich's *Tracks*, Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer*, Shange's *Sassafrass, Cypress, and Indigo*, and Smiley's *1,000 Acres*, but the core text - the novel with which we began and to which we continually returned - was *Surfacing*. Atwood's 1972 novel is of utmost importance because it provides a remarkably rich rendering of ecofeminist issues, and - as art so often does - anticipates (what were to become) central points of debate for ecofeminist theorists.

## Ecofeminism and Ecofeminist Literature

The strategy for the course is to introduce ecofeminism - its history, central concepts, and primary areas of debate - through reading literary texts that resonate with ecofeminist concerns. While I assembled a reserve shelf with major works in ecofeminism for student use, I did not require reading in ecofeminist theory. Thus, in early sessions, I began class with presentations on feminist theory (a review for most), ecocriticism (new to many), and ecofeminism in broad terms (generally new to all). Our discussions of ecofeminism became more complex and refined as different literary texts raised, complicated, or challenged various ecofeminist positions or debates.<sup>2</sup>

As we continually rediscovered, ecofeminism is not a narrowly defined area of study, and is more than a simple marriage of feminism and ecocriticism.<sup>3</sup> Ecofeminist theory interrogates how patriarchy simultaneously institutionalizes the exploitation of the body of the earth and the female body. Predicated on the assumption that man stands to nature as male stands to female, patriarchy inscribes itself as superior and in opposition to both woman and the earth. Such institutionalized domination, however, is not isolated to the feminine and the natural. There are undeniable connections

between the gendered construction of the nonhuman world, the notion of the earth as a wilderness to be tamed, and the appropriation of land from indigenous peoples and cultural Others under colonialism and neocolonialism. Ecofeminism is far more than a single-issue movement, as it sees connections between all forms of oppression. Karen Warren, moreover, sees solutions through making connections (Cuomo 2002, 9; Warren 2002, 48). There has been considerable debate over the gendered basis of ecofeminism and whether this basis detracts from addressing social oppression and environmental exploitation on a global level (Birkland 1995). However, Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva have "made colonization and racism central without losing sight of the crucial role of gender in maintaining these power relationships" (1993, 180). At the same time, as Greta Gaard points out, "although ecofeminist theory is internally diverse, with ecofeminists working in North America, South America, Asia, Europe, and Australia, ecofeminists have yet to develop theory for a cross-cultural ecofeminist ethics" (Gaard 2001, 2).<sup>4</sup>

Arguing for a theoretical frame that sees the interconnectedness of all life systems, and thus denies the dualism or dichotomy upon which industrial culture has built its sovereignty, ecofeminists are faced not only with the challenge of theorizing how the exploitation of the earth relates to the exploitation of those constructed as Other, but also with the challenge of locating and taking appropriate political action in the world. The primary debate since ecofeminism's inception in the mid-1970s concerns essentialism. Are women somehow more organically connected to the natural world? Should ecofeminists reject or claim the longstanding association of women with the earth? Social ecofeminists generally find the essentialist position problematic as it reinscribes the equation of the feminine with emotion, irrationality, and the body. While attractive to radical ecofeminists and those who practice Goddess worship (and a persuasive rallying point for activists), locating women as privileged repositories of ecological awareness simply inverts the very dualities that ecofeminism rejects. Nonetheless, due to their reproductive capabilities, their political/economic position, and their identification with other oppressed groups, women are recognized as particularly crucial stakeholders in locating a

more sustainable relationship with the natural world.

Students in the seminar struggled with essentialism throughout the semester. Some observed that while they recognized and even endorsed the theoretical arguments for rejecting the notion that women are particularly connected to the nonhuman world, they nonetheless felt that their bodies had a special relationship to the earth. Most but not all agreed that women do not have a monopoly on connecting to the earth, and concurred that men could both be intimate with the nonhuman world and act as powerful activists on behalf of the earth, women, and cultural Others. Students in class took a variety of positions on the utility of a gendered approach to address neocolonialization and its attendant environmental degradation. Some agreed that the gendering of production and reproduction underwrites all of the dualisms upon which patriarchy is predicated, and thus an ecofeminist approach must be used to dismantle these dichotomies. Others held that race and class are the primary determinants of oppression when it comes to the abuse of labor and land by transnational corporations, and that such abuses need to be addressed head-on, without being diluted by a feminist agenda. Some students asserted that the term "ecofeminism" should be abandoned in favor of a more pluralistic or gender neutral one. The question of whether ecofeminism or any theory could address the inequities of race and class and gender and environment was the most difficult we debated, though it was far from the only one.

The many questions to which we turned (and returned) were prompted by the texts we read: How does the novel represent the connection between nature and women? Does the text destabilize or deconstruct a dichotomized worldview (culture/nature, male/female, material/spiritual, mind/body)? How does the text expose and critique the connection between patriarchy and environmental degradation? How are men depicted? Is the work heteronormative? How in this work does gender intersect with cultural Otherness and the environment? Does the text privilege the nonhuman, making it central and treating it as a living system? To what degree is the function of nature in the text merely metaphoric? How does the work make ecology important or central? Does the text voice the nonhuman world, and is such

voicing even possible? Does the work promote sustainability, biodiversity and/or recognize the interrelatedness of all living systems? Does it privilege or celebrate non-patriarchal ways of knowing the nonhuman world? Is the text (are all texts) anthropocentric? As shown below, Atwood's *Surfacing* intersects with many of these questions, and became a touchstone for most of the important and complex issues we addressed.

### Surfacing and Ecofeminism

Atwood began writing *Surfacing* in 1965 (Atwood 1984, 20) and published it in 1972 - two years before Francoise D'Eaubonne first coined the term "ecological feminism." While ecofeminism has evolved to raise increasingly subtle questions, Atwood's novel circumvents a number of the theoretical binds that have occupied ecofeminist theory during the past three decades. In short, the novel - because it can hold contradictory positions in suspension, articulate cultural myths while simultaneously turning them on their head, and is written with Atwood's particular irony and poetics - engages the problematics of ecofeminist thought in admirably complex and evocative ways.<sup>5</sup> It is not new to read *Surfacing* in terms of feminism, ecocriticism (though this term is rarely used), or even ecofeminism.<sup>6</sup> Feminist approaches to *Surfacing* are wide ranging, spanning the female characters' internalization of dominant cultural codes, the oppressive conduct of male characters and patriarchy more broadly, the search for the mother, the quest for a sense of a feminine self that escapes patriarchy, and the location of a new language that resists those linguistic formations that underwrite the power structure.<sup>7</sup> Feminist critics working on Atwood are generally sensitive to the way her work exceeds any particular movement or position; as a result, they often combine their feminist readings with concerns such as national identity, linguistic structures, psychoanalytic theory, Shamanism, and, as discussed below, nature.

Critics have observed the environmental dimension of Atwood's work in general and *Surfacing* in particular. Several scholars focus on the ecological qualities of Atwood's poetry - particularly *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, though such discussions readily move toward *Surfacing*, as it is often seen as the most poetic of her novels.<sup>8</sup>

Stefan Haag, for example, argues that Atwood "evokes an orality that connects the auditory to an eco-ontological reality and triggers a new attitude to our actions" (Haag 2000, 35). Ronald Hatch found that Atwood breaks down the binary of the individual versus the environment in "Backdrop Addresses Cowboy." Of the poem's final lines he writes that, "the reader now views the land as a sentient, existing being, and Atwood here comes close to creating an ecocentric or ecological view of the land" (Hatch 2000, 187). George Woodcock details the environmental aspects of the novel, noting that the "narrative is constantly drawing attention to the way the landscape has been repeatedly ravaged and robbed" (Woodcock 1990, 53). Woodcock concludes: "more than the colonization of Canada, more than the predicament of women, the matter of the environment is the great theme of *Surfacing*" (1990, 69).

A number of scholars attend to the particular intersections of feminism and ecology in the text. Arno Heller finds that beginning in section two, "the novel takes on a feminist, or more accurately, ecofeminist orientation" (Heller 1996, 314). And, as early as 1978, Judith McCombs reads Atwood's texts from an ecofeminist frame. Working from Annette Kolodny's argument that American literature rests on the construction of man opposed to a monstrous feminine nature, McCombs shows how Atwood's work critiques this long standing literary tradition: "Where man against nature does, on occasion, surface in the nature writing, he is not endorsed but rather exposed and criticized....Atwood's poems and novels depict the man against nature myth as a masculine hang-up that is bad for man, for woman, and for nature" (McCombs 1978, 70). McCombs argues, moreover, that in "Progressive Insanities of a Pioneer" and in "Atwood's work in general, nature is not directly personified as female, but is defined by the man as man's opposite, and is described by the poem as having traditionally feminine as opposed to masculine attributes" (1978, 71). More recently, Coral Ann Howells has written that the "imagery [in *Surfacing*] encodes not only analogy but also harmony between human and non-human at the basic level of life processes, where the female biological cycle has its parallels in the life cycle of the forest....Indeed, *Surfacing* might be read not only as a psychological and

spiritual quest but also as the record of a gendered quest for a new language which is more responsive to an organic conceptualization of reality" (Howells 2005, 44). In another version of this essay Howells notes that the novel "now may also be read as eco-feminist" (1995, 52). In considering Atwood's more recent work, Howells underscores the author's broadening vision, which, while bleaker, expands beyond national (northern) boundaries: "In *Wilderness Tips* an identifiably Canadian voice addresses an international audience, arguing for our shared recognition of complicity in her strong warnings against global pollution as wilderness recedes into myth" (1995, 48).

Atwood's newer work continues to anticipate the political and theoretical trends that would seem to inform her work.<sup>9</sup> While *Surfacing* does not offer a global perspective, it does recognize the experience and history of non-English Canadians. As Janice Fiamengo has persuasively argued, the novel presents a "subtle and complex diagnosis of the settler-invader subject" (Fiamengo 1999, 152). I would stress that it is just this layering of concerns that makes *Surfacing* so apt for the ecofeminist classroom: the novel does not allow us to think about the exploitation of the female body and the land without also registering the dispossession of First Nations peoples.

As mentioned above, this class did not begin with a thorough discussion of ecofeminist theory. It began with *Surfacing* because Atwood's novel lets the reader apprehend the crucial elements of an ecofeminist position without oversimplifying them. The novel, for example, does and does not suggest that women have a particular affinity with the natural world, and this leads the class into its early discussions of essentialism. In Part III of *Surfacing*, the narrator merges with the wilderness: "I am not an animal or a tree, I am the thing in which the trees and animals move and grow, I am a place" (Atwood 1982, 187). While the narrator's self-dissolution and fusion with nature is crucial, she also recognizes that such fusion cannot be sustained; she chooses to "prefer life" (1982, 194) and "re-enter [her] own time" (1982, 197).

*Surfacing* prompts discussions of whether men and women can connect to nature in equally meaningful ways.

Naturized and patriarchal, the figure of Joe engages students in the complexities of ecofeminism. Some students insisted on Joe's patriarchal attributes, particularly in regard to sex. Yet, as much he participates in the making of David's offensively spectatorial film, "Random Samples," Joe is naturized nearly as much as the narrator's bird-like mother. Early in the novel he is likened to the American buffalo, and while by the end the significantly hairy Joe still "needs to grow more fur," he is nonetheless described as "undefined, outline but no features, hair and beard a mane, moon behind him" (Atwood 1982, 164). The narrator concludes that "he is only half formed, and for that reason I can trust him" (198). Registering multiple positions simultaneously, *Surfacing* suggests that women have a special bond with the earth, posits that there are limits on this bond, and offers that men, too, can have symmetry with nature.

While *Surfacing* resists simple conclusions about gender and nature, it repeatedly shows that patriarchy exploits the earth and the female body in similar ways. Student readers quickly see that Anna's body is a site of patriarchal commodification and that she has internalized the mandates of patriarchy. Anna's carefully made up face is reduplicated in the three princesses the narrator paints as she attempts to illustrate a collection of Quebec Folk Tales - though unlike Anna with her make-up, the narrator has considerable trouble staying within the requisite lines. When her third princess gets out of control, the narrator ends up "adding fangs and a moustache, surrounding her with moons, a fish and a wolf" (1982, 54), blurring not only the boundaries of gender, but those of the human as well; the image anticipates the life-altering visions the narrator has later in the text.

Throughout *Surfacing*, moments of gender exploitation are layered with images of the domination of nature, a layering we carefully traced in class. Significantly, David's film includes not only the striptease that he strong-arms Anna into performing, but also his many acts of environmental conquest - paltry as they may be. After cutting down a tree, David and Joe - in a parody of strained masculinity - stick their axe in it and take turns "shooting each other standing beside it, arms folded and one foot on it as if it was a lion or a rhinoceros" (Atwood 1982, 81). Too

self-consciously cynical to film himself with the fish he has caught, David insists on shooting its innards, and finally, he films the lynched Heron, which I read as the symbolic center of the text. As David looks at the mutilated bird he comments, "it looks so great, you have to admit" (1982, 117). David has no sense of complicity in the heron's destruction, and his entitled masculinity is echoed in the "Americans" on the lake, the narrator's married lover, and, to a lesser degree, the more ambiguous Joe.

The text offers continual reminders of the degradation of nature, especially through images of destroyed, slashed or marked trees. Beginning in the first sentence, the narrator notes, "the white birches are dying, the disease is spreading up from the south" (Atwood 1982, 3). A few pages later she refers to "dead Elm skeletons" (1982, 5) - a reference that summons Carson's analysis of the pesticide-based mishandling of Dutch Elm disease. Environmental destruction is infiltrating the Canadian wilderness from the south and is emblemized in the binocular toting Bill Malmstrom. A representative of the (ironically named) Detroit Branch of the Wildlife Protection Association of America, Malmstrom wants to buy the island because their place on Lake Erie "is, ah, giving out, so to say" (1982, 94). Significantly, there is a "flourishing little branch" of the Association in Canada. As the text evolves, it becomes clear that Canada has complied with compromising its environment. The lake was flooded sixty years before to create the dam that "controls the lake" (1982, 13), and allows for logging. While leading David, Anna, and Joe on a search for her missing father, the narrator describes "Gigantic stumps, level and saw-cut remnants of the trees that were here before the district was logged out. The trees will never be allowed to grow that tall again, they're killed as soon as they're valuable, big trees are scarce as whales...The forest thickens and I watch for the blazes, still visible after fourteen years; the trees they're cut on have grown swollen edges around the wounds, scar tissue" (1982, 43).

Here the blazed, scarred trees double for the female body, gesturing toward the physical and psychic scar tissue the narrator has accumulated from the abortion her lover, a married art professor, arranged for her to have. Significantly,

the narrator recalls her lover (in her false history he is her husband) carving his initials on a fence - "leaving his mark" bigger than the others (1982, 44). Continually, the commodification and exploitation of the land is overlaid with that of the female body and vice-versa. This central ecofeminist concept was understood by the class as a whole.

Highly attuned to the binaries that underwrite hegemonic structures and capable of holding opposing views in suspension, *Surfacing* brings students to a crucial recognition: as much as women and the environment are often exploited and depleted simultaneously, no one is innocent when it comes to environmental degradation. Living on this earth means consuming resources - necessitates having an environmental footprint. Megan Kelly, an undergraduate in the course, recognizes that the narrator needs to come to terms with her complicity in the earth's destruction. As she writes:

The central action of the text is the unnamed narrator's journey toward self-discovery. Crucial truths of the narrator's life and personal development are hidden behind a hierarchical worldview. The narrator positions herself in opposition to patriarchal structures, but this very positioning creates a false binary that blinds her to her own life history. Until the narrator is able to complicate her understanding of the world beyond such oppositional structures as good versus evil or hierarchical constructs which privilege one gender above another, she fails to grow and develop personally. (2005, 5)

*Surfacing* traffics in binaries - male/female, culture/nature, American/Canadian, to name only a few - yet the text, as critics frequently note, continually complicates, blurs and dismantles the very dichotomies it evokes. The narrator, as Megan writes, wants to hold onto the binaries of innocent versus guilty, good versus evil. As her journey progresses, however, she comes to understand that she resides within both categories of the oppositions.

The narrator first begins to respond to her complicity with environmental domination after she encounters

the lynched heron, about mid-way through the text:

It was behind me, I smelled it before I saw it; then I heard the flies. The smell was like decaying fish. I turned around and it was hanging upside down by a thin blue nylon rope tied round its feet and looped over a tree branch, its wings fallen open. It looked at me with its mashed eye. (Atwood 1982, 116)

Initially the narrator is confident that the Americans on the lake perpetrated this "senseless killing" (1982, 123). She asks herself, "Why had they strung it up like a lynch victim?" and concludes, "to prove they could do it, they had the power to kill" (1982, 118). Throughout this section, the narrator maps ever-increasing horrors onto the Americans, separating them off from herself. They are the type who "got drunk and chased loons in their powerboats for fun, backtracking on the loon as it dived, not giving it a chance to fly, until it drowned or got chopped up in the propeller blades" (1982, 122). While some have read the heron primarily as a symbol, it is crucial that we first register it as the image of a real bird - a living thing, tortured and displayed. Yet also, the reference to lynching aligns the heron with Emmett Till and other lynch victims, imbricating environmental degradation with brutal acts of racism. Students registered discomfort with Atwood's decision to appropriate to an animal some of the most horrific episodes of racial violence in America. Whose rights take precedence?, we were moved to ask. Where is justice most needed? Or might it be most effective to address, as ecofeminism avers, all modes of injustice and abuse simultaneously? Is such an approach possible?

Certainly, *Surfacing* shows us that some change is possible. The narrator alters her own practices, respecting more carefully the environment around her. When David catches his second fish, she refuses to kill it. And, while earlier in the text she could "take out the little frog, the ultimate solution, and hook it on securely while it squeaks" (1982, 61), she now releases the frogs she has jarred for fishing into the lake. Her release of these frogs reinscribes her earlier failure to rescue the snakes, toads and frogs her

brother had jarred and hidden in the woods, yet also evokes the abortion which she still remembers as a birth: the doctors "stick needles into you so you won't hear anything, you might as well be a dead pig, your legs are up in a metal frame...they take the baby out with a fork like a pickle out of a pickle jar" (1982, 79). Students understood the narrator as both the perpetrator and victim of violence.

Having convinced herself that the "innocents get slaughtered" because of the Americans, the narrator is "furious" when she discovers that the Americans on the lake are, in fact, Canadian. The distance she has projected between herself and them collapses, and she increasingly comes to understand her own guilt. Encountering the heron on their return, for example, the narrator: "felt a sickening complicity, sticky as glue, blood on my hands, as though I had been there and watched without saying No or doing anything to stop it...The trouble some people have being German, I thought, I have being human" (Atwood 1982, 131).

The collective recognition brought about by such passages became a core experience in the seminar. We are all human; we are all responsible for the violence we perpetrate and the violence we permit. Surfacing does not allow us to locate the problem over there, constructing ourselves as innocent victims and others as evil (a position that undergraduates at a women's college sometimes too readily to adopt), but rather insists that we, too, are part of the problem. Atwood pushes us to recognize that humans - "men and women both" - are the problem. In *Surfacing* the narrator recalls helping her brother throw the "bad kind" of leeches on the campfire, noting, "I didn't mind so much, if only they would die; but they would writhe out and crawl painfully, coated with ashes and pine needles, back towards the lake" (Atwood 1982, 133). A few pages later, Anna - after her forced striptease - climbs out of the lake "like a burned leech" (1982, 137). And we recollect, as well, the dolls that the narrator and her brother mutilated: "we gnawed the fingers, feet and nose off our least favorite doll, ripped her cloth body open and pulled out the stuffing" - an act that resonates with the narrator's abortion, but is also complicated by the fact that the children were pretending they were nonhumans - "a swarm of bees"(131) - as they attacked.

Continually, *Surfacing* shows women as both victims of patriarchy and perpetrators of violence against nature, often in concert with men. The narrator, after she has come to accept the truth of her own history, states: "I leafed through all the men I had known to see whether or not I hated them. But then I realized it wasn't the men I hated, it was the Americans, the human beings, men and women both. They'd had their chance but they had turned against the gods, and it was time for me to choose sides" (Atwood 1982, 155).

Finally, as much as *Surfacing* complicates oppositional thinking, it also fosters the recognition that when it comes to human practices, there is a time we must "choose sides." There is a moment when our nuanced conceptual responses to the world must translate to practice.

While the narrator does not engage in activism in the text, she sees the possibility of action - a possibility that is the gift that comes with our recognition that we are not merely victims. As the narrator states at the beginning of the closing chapter: "This above all, to refuse to be a victim. Unless I can do that I can do nothing. I have to recant, give up the old belief that I am powerless and because of it nothing I can do will ever hurt anyone. A lie which was always more disastrous than the truth would have been" (Atwood 1982, 197).

As a child, the narrator had a fear of power - associating it only with evil "I had no idea what I would do with the power once I got it; if I'd turned out like the others with power I would have been evil" (Atwood 1982, 33). After her visionary immersion in nature, she has a better understanding of the uses of power; she recognizes that the heron "had no spokesman" (Atwood 1982, 131). She knows she must go "back to the city and the pervasive menace, the Americans. They exist, they're advancing, they must be dealt with, but possibly they can be watched and predicted and stopped without being copied" (Atwood 1982, 195). Gesturing toward advocacy and seeking a means of action that is not simply a version (a copy) of destructive American practices, the narrator - not whole I think, but transformed - accepts the possibilities of power. In the final moments of the text, Joe returns for her - "balancing on the dock which is neither land nor water" (Atwood 1982, 199). A man located

somewhere in the "spaces between" (Atwood 1982, 186), Joe also holds the potential for good action in the world. He may or may not be included in the narrator's new life, but the potential is there.

*Surfacing* is an important text for many reasons, but its pedagogical richness is surely among the most significant. I believe that what we can and cannot achieve in the classroom is driven by the texts we select, and by the ways certain texts sometimes exceed our own understanding. When I first taught *Surfacing* (about nine years ago in a first year [freshman] seminar entitled "The Environment: a Literary Approach"), I chose it for sound reasons: its treatment of going into the bush; its recognition of how we (foolishly) seek to order nature through manuals and guidebooks; its representation of human interference with and even violence against the nonhuman world; its suggestion that through immersing ourselves in nature we may find redemption. I did not know at that time how I would grow into the novel, nor did I know that I would eventually be teaching and writing about ecofeminism. In many ways, this novel brought me to ecofeminist thought. As I began to read ecofeminist theory, I found that some of the most salient issues it raised were already present in this novel. Imbricating issues of ecology, feminism, and cultural Otherness, engaging some of the most complex debates in ecofeminist theory, and evoking the multiple (sometimes contradictory) subject positions we inevitably hold, *Surfacing* provides an organic introduction to ecofeminism for teachers and students alike.

This novel teaches that even the simplest of human acts reflect political realities and unequal power dynamics. Early in Section II, and while plunking blueberries into her tin cup in the company of David, Joe and Anna, the narrator ruminates on picking berries as a child:

I was remembering the others who used to come. There weren't many of them on the lake even then, the government had put them somewhere else, corralled them, but there was one family left. Every year they would appear on the lake in blueberry season and visit the good places the same way we did...[B]ut when they saw that we were picking

they would move on...disappearing around a point or into a bay as though they had never been there...[Once] we passed two of the children standing by the side of the road with tin cans of blueberries for sale. It never occurred to me till now that they must have hated us. (1982, 86)

The passage, like so many in *Surfacing*, prompts troubling questions about colonization and the appropriation of nature, about who gets full human status and who gets "corralled," and taught conveniently to disappear. It hints at the financial realities that drive certain peoples' relationships to the natural world. Simultaneously, it teaches the need to recognize our own complicity with such injustices and abuses, and our obligation to work in a productive way against environmental degradation while respecting others, especially in cross-cultural contexts.

After reading *Surfacing*, Margaret Whitford, one of Chatham's MFA students, wrote the following: "To be human is to be imperfect, and to live fully involves loss. The appropriate response to our vulnerability, however, is not to seek control over the world around us. Rather, our redemption is found in honoring all life, both human and nonhuman. Every step we take results in destruction, in death of some kind. Atwood's admonition to us is to tread lightly and to be grateful" (2005, 11).

One of the most difficult goals of ecofeminism is "the challenge of locating and taking appropriate political action in the world" (above). *Surfacing* teaches about ecofeminism in the most complex of terms while also asserting the importance of social responsibility. It must, for the heron "had no spokesman."

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#### Endnotes

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1. This was a hybrid class - for advanced undergraduates (primarily English or Women's Studies majors) and graduate students in Chatham's MFA in Creative Writing - a program with an explicit environmental, place-based focus. Chatham is a women's college with co-ed graduate programs. My fall 2005 roster included 16 students - 9 undergraduates, and 7 MFA students; fifteen female and one male. Other course texts included *Blue Vinyl* (documentary), *Silent Spring*, selections from *Sisters of the Earth*, Proulx's *That Old Ace in the Hole*, and Josephine Johnson's *Now in November*.

2. As Sydee and Beder note, "ecofeminism is an umbrella term entailing positions and standpoints as diverse as Goddess-worship, lesbian separatism, Christian ecofeminism and socialist ecofeminism. This diversity is not a contradiction but at the very heart of the theory and practice of ecofeminism" (2001, 282).

3. Ecofeminism challenges a number of positions held by environmentalists, especially those of hard-line deep ecologists, who reject anthropocentrism in any form, and thus limit the possibilities for yoking environmental and social justice.

4. In her 2001 essay, "Tools for a Cross-Cultural Feminist Ethics," Gaard notes that "ecofeminism's internal diversity is finally being noted, and a variety of taxonomies have been developed" (2001, 23, f.n.1). Gaard's thoughtful discussion of the Makah whale hunt controversy underscores the necessity of generating pluralistic and contextual responses to cross-cultural environmental issues.

5. It is not new to see *Surfacing* as a novel more nuanced than theory (including theory penned by Atwood). Janice Fiamengo finds that the novel is "conceptually in advance of theory," writing, "many of Atwood's statements in *Survival* seem to support the simple binaries of oppressor and victim. In *Surfacing*, however, Atwood emphasizes the schizophrenic position of the one 'subjected to an imperial power' but also 'an agent of that power' [Bennett 175]" (Fiamengo 1999, 152).

6. As Atwood wrote in 1976, Surfacing was reviewed in the United States almost exclusively as a feminist or ecological treatise; in Canada it was reviewed almost exclusively as a nationalist one. Canadians derived from it, not the "man is to woman as culture is to nature" equation, but "man is to woman as technology is to nature as the United States is to Canada as dominator is to dominated." American reviewers tended either to ignore this or to take "American" as merely metaphorical." (1976, 340)

While beyond the scope of this essay, Canadian nationalism and the centrality of the wilderness for Canadian identity is a crucial concern of the novel. For important discussions of Surfacing's intersections with Survival, and Atwood's early and more recent theories of national identity, see the work of Coral Ann Howells.

7. See, for example, Carol P. Christ, Sherrill E. Grace, Barbara Hill Rigney, Danielle Schaub, and Hilde Staels.

8. Richard Hunt argues against seeing Atwood's use of landscape as figurative, finding instead that it "is very often transpersonal and represents an effort to subvert the deleterious effects so often associated with self-interest" (242). A cluster of critics attends to Atwood's representation of animals, focusing often, but not exclusively on *The Animals in That Country*. See, for example, Susan Gingell's "The Animals in Atwood's Country" (1984) and Ian Marshall's persuasive "Forget the Phallic Symbolism, Consider the Snake: Biocentrism and Language in Margaret Atwood's 'Snake Poems'," (2001).

9. Again regarding Wilderness Tips, Howells writes that,

Atwood weaves together family life, Canadian history and literary tradition, ecological destruction and creeping urbanization, pointing out that the wilderness myth is really a white male colonial fantasy and that its values encode a vision of Canada which for all its appeal to Canadians of a certain class and age, is seriously in need of updating. Indeed, Atwood exposes the myth of the

wilderness as merely romantic nostalgia in an urban multicultural Canada. (Howells 2002, 203)

We might also think about the serious warnings regarding global warming, environmental devastation, and bioengineering that are offered by Oryx and Crake.

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