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Ursprung: Reading for the Root

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abstract

In this paper, I am working out the concept of rootedness and add a novel meaning for *Ursprung* in relation to an ecofeminist ethics of alterity. This project emerges out of bell hooks' work on homeplace: "the one site where one could freely confront the issue of humanization, where one could resist. ... and by doing so heal many of the wounds inflicted by racist [and sexist] domination"(1990, 42).¹ She goes on to add, "homeplace ... a small bit of earth where one rests, is always subject to violation and destruction" (47). Thinking of Arendt's arguments in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, particularly that the uprooting of peoples accelerated their superfluousness and extermination, and as an outright critique of economic globalization, "Totalitarian domination, like tyranny, bears the germs of its own destruction" (1973, 478). So that, in this way perhaps, she presents us with a blueprint for what, has made the world unsustainable – a logicity that tears at its own roots. The rational economy (as outlined by Val Plumwood) uproots the spontaneity of (and maybe indigenesness) of *Ursprung*. The arguable 'inevitability' of global capitalization and market growth, especially as it has tyrannical and totalitarian roots, is in fact unjustified and unjustifiable phenomena.

I want to continue developing a 'reading for the root' guided by hooks' work on marginalization, place and healing. Her work points to a defense against the loss of regenerative power: "the imperialism of the dominant culture ... assures our continued oppression by destroying us from within ... a form of exploitation so vicious, so insidious that [it] is destroying ... women and their families" (hooks 1990, 47-48, quoting Radford-Hill).² The political consequences of uprooting the *Ursprung* of life is measured only in relation to the economic benefits. I want to demonstrate how market growth requires and encourages this uprootedness – misogyny uproots; the imperialist impulse uproots – leaving no value for the origin, for what may or could yet take root. The reproductive sphere of existence (as it has been a site of subjection not empowerment for both women and nature) continues to be erased in an effort to glorify global productivity.

the concept of rootedness and the patterns of uprooting

“Totalitarian domination, like tyranny, bears the germs of its own destruction” (1973, 478).

Arendt describes the conditions for totalitarianism and, as Elizabeth Young-Bruehl defends her in *Why Arendt Matters*, that the elements of totalitarianism remain with us – in how we ideologically construct Nature and History (Bruehl 46). In one of these elements, the one most relevant for my exploration, is the destruction of the private, intimate sphere of social relation (52) – one in which the members of families or neighbors in close proximity can no relate in a open, political, personal and, critical here, *spontaneous* way. Destruction of the spontaneity of relations between individuals in close proximity, I argue, has the character of imperialism such that those external dictates excites injustice. The injustice I hope to outline here is twofold: the one of destruction through the exercise of ideological uprooting and extermination of the spontaneity and diversity of life in its alterity; the other of the usurpation of reproductive power given to bodies – women’s bodies in particular – in the way that Irigaray argues that women are perceived to be inert – unable to ‘move’ according to the speculative, rationalist eye. In that women’s bodies may be disabled by the bearing of the material labors of home, family, and neighborhood or village, I call injustice and imperialism requiring ethical redress.

The sustained and labor of sustaining these proximal and intimate relations, I want to argue here is the character of home. I want to be careful that this concept of home is constructed critically and without romantic ideology of safety and security. As Chandra Mohanty argues it in *Feminism without Borders*,³ home is as easily a place of oppression and exclusion as well. Mohanty challenges homesickness as a “pursuit of safe places” (85), that are in fact “exclusions and repressions that support the seeming homogeneity, stability, and self-evidence of ‘white-identity,’ which is derived from and dependent on the marginalization of differences within as well as ‘without’” (87). The self that longs for home is to seek what should be exposed as “a repressive fiction” (99), as she models Minnie Bruce Pratt’s autobiographical narrative; the longing for home is seen an “entrapment, constriction, a bounded fortress that must be transgressed, shattered, opened onto that world that has been made invisible and threatening by the security of home” (91). This perceived homesickness needs to be destabilized and undercut as Mohanty (and Martin) argue it, turned onto itself into a “positive form of struggle” (103).

I follow bell hooks' lead as to the definition of homeplace as the material conditions of belonging, not the 'growing up place' that Mohanty cautions against in her critical re-evaluation of home. As imperialist rationalism dictates, home is a given in the political order of even the most democratic society. There is no right to home as human and as declared in the context of global ethics. Only the material resources by which people can sustain themselves is declared a right and, even then, there is no political or economic guarantee of returning to roots – the conditions by which the intimate relations make possible a sense of place and standing.

It was really three images that come to mind that also intrigued me in thinking that I could read for the root,⁴ to develop the concept of *Ursprung* as part of an ethics of alterity:

- Wangari Maathai's Green Belt Movement advocacy. She describes stripping down naked in protest to the deforestation and commercial development of the Uhuru Park in her homeland of Kenya. In the documentary, *Taking Root*, she makes an analogy between the abuse of the land as a tearing of the backs and flesh of the women who lived there.
- The image of the long, fabric-like root systems of perennials held up by Wes Jackson of The Land Institute on a video defending polyculture against monocultural, annual grain-based food agriculture. He argued for the future of food security and to prevent an irredeemable soil erosion in the Midwest, we need to cultivate plants that have elaborate and well-established root structures.
- And, strangely, but bear with me, the argument by Mill against Kant's meta-ethical approach to ethics in the Groundwork. Mill argues in his General Remarks in *Utilitarianism* that, "The truths which are ultimately accepted as first principles of a science are really the last result of a metaphysical analysis practiced on the elementary notions with which the science is conversant; and their relation to the science is not that of foundations to an edifice, but of roots to a tree, which may perform their office equally well though they never be dug down to and exposed to light" (2).

In each of these three cases, there is an ethical import to the meaning of rootedness and defending the power of the root. Unlike Holmes Rolston's argument, in which beauty can lead to duty and that the aesthetic experience is a defensible approach to environmental obligations

(citing Leopold's Utilitarian application in which he says 'a thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, the stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.' [327]), a conservative approach is insufficient as it is interested. Less a read for the defense of rationalized duties, a list of argued, morally defensible standards, I approach this with a read for the root of all injustice toward alterity. In this way, as long as injustices are everywhere ("infinite" according to Levinas) and most often covert operations 'without a face' and 'without a name', the articulation of duties will be insufficient.

Wes Jackson does not show the elaborate root systems in order to peak our aesthetic interest; rather, it is to demonstrate the material difference between the root systems that we employ in agriculture and what may be possible in future food and ecological cultivation. Mathaai does not strip naked to uplift; rather, it is to reprimand. She speaks for those not spoken for in the way their standing is in the land, bound not to abstract moral claims; instead, it is the materiality of these trees, these spaces and the trust established when one is bound to home. The possibility of the return – that there is an obligation to the expansion of radical ethical possibilities for what is other and not-yet while not a defense and conservation of interests / interestedness – is the powerful statement worth investigating here.

So, Bettina Bergo's reading of Levinas is most useful at this point for me. In *Between Ethics and Politics: For the Beauty that Adorns the Earth*, Bergo characterizes Levinas' idea of sociality. First, she quotes Levinas directly:

The contemporaneousness of the multiple is tied around the dia-chrony of two: justice only remains justice in a society where there is no distinction between neighbors and distant ones, but where there also remains the impossibility of passing beside the one who is nearest.⁵

And she questions this society as viable. To this question, she adds, "Levinas would not reproach us if we accuse him of utopianism. He embraces utopias." So, Bergo explores the antinomy of justice as concerning the "question of origin: origin of society, of the good state, and of philosophical and scientific rationality." Quoting Levinas again:

The foundation of consciousness ... is justice. Not that justice causes a pre-existent mediation to intervene. An event such as mediation – synchronization, comparison, thematization – is the work of justice.⁶

And, finding a way around the problem and non-sensical quality of looking for origins, what here I hope to do is model the form of mediated interrelation that requires proximity and the tentative assumption of ‘all things being equal,’ *Ursprung* will be a conceptual construction so that we dig up no roots per se; rather, we add character to the possibility of material, ecological interrelation. An ecological sociality that might be utopian, defensible perhaps only in its hypothesis.

***Ursprung* and the ecophenomenological gesture**

To question the idea of an ethical sociality and of Levinas’ almost neglect of more dimensional account of justice, I turn to Daniel White’s description of “The Quilt of Ecosociality” in his *Postmodern Ecology*. He summarizes Karen Warren and Jim Cheney’s idea of an ecofeminist ethics that is like a “quilt-in-the-making.”⁷ Warren and Cheney reject any “isms of domination” into the quilt such that the patchwork is a construct of remedy for the exclusions and discrimination against persons as well as for the destruction of non-human nature (180-181). Yet, in considering Warren and Cheney’s hypothesis, White reads for an “electropolis” in which creativity, technology and play dominate the interchanges and the landscape, as he seems to argue it, because we find ourselves so attracted to fantasy and not to reality. In this way, any future consideration of justifiable interrelation must resource the power of the virtual and mimics the dynamics of gameplay (236-239).

John Pizer develops an argument for theorizing the radical origin in *Toward a Theory of Radical Origin: Essays on Modern German Thought*. Here, Pizer argues, using G.E. Lessing’s parable of the ring (180-181):

How ... can we endeavor to find origin and the use of origin as a heuristic principle ... respectful of pluralism and the alterity of the Other? ... Lessing ... provides a hint toward an answer. He shows us in ethical terms what the

philosophers claim ... should govern *Ursprung* as a methodological principle; the probing of origin should ... be grounded ... in facticity, and in the here-and-now of human morality.

In order to develop my adaptation of *Ursprung*, I don't feel compelled to draw from the moral tale. I return to Arendt. She argues in her *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* that, as she reads Kant,

The way imagination produces synthesis is by "providing an *image for a concept*." Such an image is called a "schema." ... Here Kant calls upon imagination to provide the connection between the two faculties [of sensibility and understanding, so that] ... we have an intuition of something that is never present..., and by this he suggests that imagination is actually the common root of the other cognitive faculties, that is the "common, but to us unknown, root" of sensibility and understanding.⁸

And so, tentatively, this rootedness can be treated as a schematic by which to engage injustice and the possibility of future justice that does not equivocate and level the alterity of others proximal and distant. No image of roots and root systems can be adequate as the schema might be in its guidance toward possible understanding, as Kant says when he says, according to Arendt, "the schema of the triangle can exist nowhere but in thought" (82).

We have already seen this uprootedness occur in ways that accelerate conditions of terror and extermination. As this uprooting is both political and existential, I think there is a direct connection to be made with Hannah Arendt's depiction of totalitarianism:

... uprootedness and superfluousness ... have been the curse of modern masses since the beginning of the industrial revolution and have become acute with the rise of imperialism at the end of the last century and the break-down of political institutions and social traditions in our own time. To be uprooted means to have no place in the world, recognized and guaranteed by others; to be superfluous means not belonging to the world at all (1973, 475).

As long as the conditions for socio-political uprooting are in place, we have ‘cleared the way’ for a superfluosness of worlded existence (to which I add: can be both *human* and *non-human*).

The *superfluosness* of worlded existence permits the possibility of extermination (as it is conditioned by totalitarianism) and this permissiveness is already operating in the creation of *surplus*.¹ When we take more than we should – a consequence of the imperative to find markets and make markets everywhere – the devaluing of what then is considered ‘extraneous’ to the market is left to waste.

The economic drive to read for the surplus in terms of profit generating potential [and what here does non-human surplus translate as? Bounty? Why does it lead to being read as excess?] is inherently uprooting in a mastery over nature. This is the uprooting that makes space ‘habitable’ for human occupation; what is surplus as profit is also cycles into the environment conditions for scarcity. Scarcity means places ripe for new markets in a global economy; a landscape must become dependent on commerce to satisfy critical need.

The root here is an anchor to the earth and that which emerges spontaneously from the earth. Terrestriality that transcends the earth from which it comes has an original phenomenality that I think is worth not only developing a theoretical schema for but necessary in that it is a defensible construct that adds possibility to the work of the environmental injustices to non-human nature. If we consider Mathaai’s ethico-political affiliation between her body and her homeland, the preservative stance is not to ‘give standing to the trees’ in the sense of Christopher Stone’s approach, but to intimately affiliate herself to the possibilities of that natural landscape that are destroyed by commercial development. We replace the root with nails; we fasten our architecture to the dirt and give place to our furniture and our fixtures. We weed out what is non-human and make space.

Irene Klaver in “Phenomenology on the Rocks” assists me in an ecophenomenological approach and constructing a schema for Ursprung as a place that permits the rootedness as original and worth preservation, rather than inherently suspicious to human projects. Klaver describes how Merleau-Ponty gets to the ‘utterly something new’ that is also a “nexus – neither ‘historical’ nor

¹ The somewhat ‘essentialist’ meaning of *surplus* in market economics needs further examination along with the assumed condition for market-building: *scarcity*.

‘geographic’ – of history and transcendental geology ... the simultaneous *Urstiftung* of time and space ... [the] fundamental problem: the sedimentation and reactivation.” Klaver is connecting this phenomenological approach in her pursuit of stone. Rock symbolizes an anchoring and weight that links places to sentiment (160). She argues that in phenomenologically reading stone, she challenges the critique of globalization as not just patterns of uproot but an indication of ways in which we desire a ‘return to earth.’ As she states it, “Stone endures, bears weight, withstands the elements” (161). The rock, in the gravestone, the borders of territories and in foundations of buildings, operate as silent witnesses.

Musing on the root itself, might allow us to think the land as a place for non-human possibilities, and not simply become a lament on the history of uprooting and uprootedness. Klaver turns to Goethe’s reading of granite, as the *Urgestein* – a ‘primal stone’ (166). She explicates how he uses the Ur prefix to “denoting the primal, original, the very first – a little word reading for the ultimate origin of things. Foucault describes Nietzsche’s critique of the pursuit of *Ursprung* as a “lofty origin,” when we believe “things most precious at the moment of birth.” This belief can devolve into an exercise in “retrieving what is lost,” instituting a traditional history. Foucault follows Nietzsche on his position that *Herkunft* as (heritage and of the body) and *Entstehung* (emergence and arising) are more exact in meaning for the making of an “effective history.” This distinction from Nietzsche is used by Foucault to develop the genealogical approach.

And treating *Ursprung* phenomenologically, as an attempt to bring it in as an ecophenomenological idea, I feel compelled to bring Heidegger in on the scene. For Heidegger, art has the quality of a springing forth, of sudden emergence, that is phenomenologically original. The quality of “springen”⁹ for me is evocative of all the ways in which it seems that it should be impossible that life can spring from rock, from dirt spontaneously. Terrestiality emerges out from itself in a way wholly non-human. Isn’t this what we search for when we look for life on other planets? When we search it is not always with the goal of looking for a new home (although there are always human interests that seek the good of the self without a regard for alterity). The wonderment that comes from even the possibility that there could have been, might be, may have been life elsewhere is an ultimate intrigue. It is not strange that when we search for life elsewhere, we look for the evidence of water first. Heidegger also associated *springen*, the springing forth with

water. As Brenda Machosky reminds us in her reading of Heidegger's Aesthetics, the "Ur" for Heidegger, "adds primordiality" (53).

Wade Sikorski reflects on the experience of home and draws from Heidegger's concept of Enframing to draw out an understanding of wilderness.² In working out this interpretation, reveals an intent that, I think, can provoke at the same time a new directive for ecological feminism: "Looking for a home when the whole world seemed lost and homeless, I built to keep my life, my home, and my thought from being displaced by the logic and imperatives of Enframing ... by situating my thought in my life and my place, I hoped to recover from my homesickness" (26). Sikorski goes on to add: "And maybe too, Derrida is right. You can't go home because home is always already different from itself, the way it was supposed to be ... I still don't know if home, a place where things are safe, is ever possible" (27).

While Klaver's reading of the rocks that stand for and in the landscape, signaling the here and now in testimony and weight, root might yield depth, entangling us with our terrestriality in a non-neutral, non-anthropocentric way. The interconnectedness of root and the spontaneity of how vegetation can 'take root,' has a slippery temporality as compared to the rock. I think, like Klaver, this approach can have an even greater import when we read it in relation to the global context, especially, as I would like to argue it, the economic trumps and usurps the ethical relation at every turn.

the value of reproductive power in a global context

Reclaiming home, as the place of reproductive power (and not as a sphere for privatization and domestication) is important to the feminist standpoint. bell hooks gives a valuable definition of homeplace: "one's homeplace was the one site where one could freely confront the issue of humanization, where one could resist. ... and by doing so heal many of the wounds inflicted by

² He describes how misappropriation of 'displacement' as 'progress': "The inefficient and nonproductive are swallowed up and dis-placed by the more efficient and more productive, and the whole economy is made more rational as a result. Resources – human as well as nature's – are recentered, distributed, and used in a way that maximizes their utility for a global economy" (25). What he finds in Heidegger's idea of *Enframing* is, "humanity will build and live differently, will think first of home and act first locally" (29).

racist [and sexist] domination”(1990, 42).³ She goes on to add, “homeplace ... a small bit of earth where one rests, is always subject to violation and destruction. ... domestic space has been a crucial site for organizing, for forming political solidarity” (47).

Economic globalization has genuinely rendered this idea of homeplace meaningless by attaching “leisure-class sexist notions of women’s role[s]” (*ibid.*) as well as systematically encouraging an ethic of homelessness. In 2009, hooks continues her meditations on home in thinking about her attachments to the quilt made by her grandmother, one that her mother called “nasty, ragged” but that she took with her when she left home as symbolic of her connection ... to home” (161).

Chris Cuomo takes care to distinguish the idea of home from domestication: Arguably, this liberatory conception of homeplace is to counter all the ways in which domestication is exercised, since, “Domestication is logically and practically related to oppression ... because it entails changes in desire and affection” (Cuomo 1998, 104).⁴ Our attachment to homogenization and the safety that is assumed in establishing domesticity needs critique and resistance in an ethically urgent way. Yet, the ecological component of this feminist stance is in treating the environmental consequences of these oppressions as intimately tied in with the “healing of wounds” and giving life “new meaning.” And, supporting this approach, Chris Cuomo argues, “These feminist ecological revisions [of ‘traditional understandings of the ethical universe’] can be useful, especially in ... helping those of us who are interested to alter practices and institutions that are unjustifiably destructive and harmful” (111).

This loss of regenerative power could be understood as (another) form of “social aggression”: in which, “the imperialism of the dominant culture ... assures our continued oppression by destroying us from within ... a form of exploitation so vicious, so insidious that [it] is destroying ... women and their families” (hooks 1990, 47-48, quoting Radford-Hill).⁵ This aggression is generalized toward alterity in a way that, as Teresa Brennan argues it, increases “the exhaustion of the modern subject” and makes the environment “less animate” so that “the

³ She continues this definition: “the importance of homeplace in the midst of oppression and domination ... rather [than] the perfect embodiment of a woman’s ‘natural’ role” (1990, 43, 45).

⁴ Cuomo is distinguishing how feminism should address oppression – not for how it causes suffering, but for how it alters desire.

⁵ hooks is quoting Sheila Radford-Hill, which, to be clear, was speaking directly to *black women’s oppression* of which I’ve adopted and extended. From Radford-Hill, “Considering Feminism as a Model for Social Change” in *Feminist Studies, Critical Studies*, (Teresa de Lauretis, ed. University of Indiana, 1986).

less animate that environment is and the slower time becomes in natural reality, the greater the ego's need to speed things up, its anxiety, its splitting, ... its 'cutting up' in its urge to know, its spoiling of all living nature ... means that any feeling of connection will only be experienced through the ego's lens, assimilated to a subject-centered world view" (2000, 174).¹⁰

Wild places become manicured in the making of markets and marketplaces. Wild places are surplus and overgrowth that require weeding. The manicure of the nonhuman is masterful; it can even appear ecological and profitable. What are we trying to uproot? As Wes Jackson had implied, vegetation and future food depend on long, extensive root systems, not short growth of crops with high seasonal yields. Nothing good gets to stay; rather, it gets plucked, packaged and shipped away. Not all uprooting should be considered unethical. Roots can mean more than a 'growing up place' (Mohanty 90). The transgression of boundaries is part of the reproductive power of root systems as when plants fruit and flower other than where the farmer plants them (a punishable offense if you use Monsanto seed). Even now the seed has been implanted with an exterminator gene preventing it from taking root anywhere or any other time except as it can provide growth to maintain profit.

The cycle between surplus and scarcity has become a vicious circle rather than a self-sustaining cycle of reproduction.¹¹ This is feeding the schema of home and the accompanied 'homesickness.' When the uprooting is determined by the invisible hand of markets, it is the master's work, growth and birth for the master's bidding. The power to uproot in order to promote global production is, at its heart, misogynist. As long as the focus, the 'good' of the vegetative capacity of life is the "meat of the fruit" the consumable-visible, the productive measure of growth, we remain limited if not also vicious in our schema of what life could mean as it 'springs forth.' The sprouting of new life, what taking root and bursts out from the ground is a possible impossible even in the context of barrenness. Root can be radicalizing and Ursprung is the primordial possibility of new placement. For the sake of expanding ourselves non-anthropocentrically, as a gesture to the alterity of nonhuman nature, and to transgress our fear of the foreign and desire for safety, both a feminist and ethical relation is to reread our relation to rootedness as the complex binding to terrestrial-ity.

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Endnotes

¹ She continues this definition: "the importance of homeplace in the midst of oppression and domination ... rather [than] the perfect embodiment of a woman's 'natural' role" (1990, 43, 45).

² hooks is quoting Sheila Radford-Hill, which, to be clear, was speaking directly to *black women's oppression* of which I've adopted and extended. From Radford-Hill, "Considering Feminism as a Model for Social Change" in *Feminist Studies, Critical Studies*, (Teresa de Lauretis, ed. University of Indiana, 1986).

³ With Biddy Martin, "What's Home Got to Do with It?"

⁴ Without drawing from all the ways in which root operates in theoretical language, and without more than a mention to the approaches that take on a similar theme (thinking here of Deleuze and Guatarri's work on rhizomatic analysis) but in lieu of a more literary and deconstructive analysis of root, I defer to a phenomenological methodology.

⁵ Citing OBBE 159.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Citing Warren and Cheney's "Ecological Feminism and Ecosystem Ecology" in *Hypatia* (vol 6, no. 1), Spring 1991, pp. 179-197.

⁸ Arendt citing Kant's On History.

⁹ See Michael Inwood's *A Heidegger Dictionary*: "Springen , 'to leap, jump, spring', was Heidegger uses two main word-groups: 1. originally 'to spring up, burst forth' and applied especially to springs or sources of water. Sprung , 'spring, leap, jump', once meant a 'spring, source'. The verb erspringen , 'to leap/spring forth [er-]' has now been supplanted by entspringen , 'to rise, arise, spring from, etc.', but the corresponding noun, Ursprung , survives in the sense of 'origin'. It originally meant the 'leaping/springing forth, source [esp. of water]'. (Ur - was originally er - , 'forth', but has come to mean 'original, primordial'; hence Ursprung can be felt as 'original, primordial leap'.) Ursprünglich , 'original, initial, first; natural, unspoilt, "re-resourceful",' was first used by mystics, but became common in the eighteenth century under the influence of the French original. Ursprünglich(keit) does not mean 'original(ity)' in the sense of 'novel(ity), eccentric(ity)'. It suggests the 'primitive, primeval, primordial'. Ursprung is close to Herkunft , 'origin, extraction, descent, lit. where something comes from', but Heidegger distinguishes them (cf. OWA, 7/143, 64f./202). 2. is 'to catch, grasp, seize, capture'. Hence anfangen was originally 'to take hold of, grab', but came to mean 'begin, start'. Anfang is 'beginning'; anfänglich , 'initial(ly)', is close to ursprünglich." (Blackwell, 1999).

¹⁰ Thinking of Brennan on necrophilic power to uproot reproductive power by valuing commercial viability and production of capital. Are we still in a death drive? Brennan's suggestion of a "prime directive" has always intrigued me.

¹¹ In a more global context, when women are the water-bearers, they are bound to the earth by the reproductive labors. When commercial industry provides the water infrastructure, we see the possibility of profit-generating enterprises taking hold of the landscape but also taking away the potential power those most intimately related to the land. Subsistence becomes bare life unless we see the reproductive, sustaining labor as worthy of reward.