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## The naked word: The trans-corporeal ethics of the protesting body

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This essay brings feminist corporeal theories and material feminisms to bear upon the many naked protests occurring worldwide, asking how the naked body functions within these events. While most feminist corporeal theories remain within the demarcation of the Human, the naked protests considered here extend human corporeality into actual places, enacting nakedness as an ethical performance of vulnerability – the allied, mutual vulnerabilities of human/animal/environment. Taking up the concept of intercorporeality, as defined by Gail Weiss and others, I propose the term “trans-corporeality,” which emphasizes the imbrication of human bodies not only with each other, but with non-human creatures and physical landscapes. Feminist theories of performance, particularly those of Peggy Phelan (1993) and Rebecca Schneider (1997), are crucial for understanding the possibilities for expressing this sense of trans-corporeality, which redefines the human as material, and thus requires a critique, subversion, or evasion of the dominant modes of representation and the gendered scenarios of visibility. The performance artist/activist La Tigresa, who strips for loggers to save old-growth forests, and the many Bare Witness activists who spell out words with their naked bodies perform vulnerability as a trans-corporeal condition in which the material interchanges between human corporeality, geographical places, and vast networks of power, provoke ethical and political actions. Paying attention to particular corporeal actions, activities, practices, and events can help feminist theory reconsider “the body” as more than a site of cultural inscription. Moreover, the naked protests considered here extend the parameters of the political domain by seeking an ethical recognition of vulnerable, interdependent, interwoven, human and non-human flesh. The naked protestors, significantly, carve out a *space* for their politics as much as they assert a voice. In doing so, they emphasize what is often occluded by discursive models – actual places, material bodies, and other matters. This emphasis on political space is not only crucial for an environmentalism that must insist upon the value of particular places, but – when recast as trans-corporeal space – also for a range of issues, including environmental justice, environmental health, and queer politics, that demand a recognition of the coextensiveness of material needs, pleasures, and dangers.

**Keywords:** material feminism; corporeal feminism; environment; environmental ethics; naked performance; environmental activism; post-humanism

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Figure 1. No GMO. (From Bare Witness n.d. d.).



Figure 2. Peace. (From the Bare Witness n.d. d.).

[T]he empress [of feminist theory] is wearing too many clothes. Her fashion selections have become increasingly cumbersome, fussy, restrictive, and ostentatious, and I wish she once again would dare to display more sensate flesh.

– Judith Stacey (2001)

They stop their trucks because I'm bare-breasted. The poem keeps their attention. I want them to see in me an image of something beautiful, sacred, and vulnerable – just like the Earth.

– La Tigresa (n.d.)

Although Judith Stacey was speaking metaphorically about the encumbering discourse of feminist theory, if we undress her comment we may find quite a few feminists, environmentalists, and peace activists who “dare to display more sensate flesh.” Naked protests seem to be happening everywhere, in fact. Like everything else, they circulate on the web, new sites popping up daily. Stacey Kalish claims that an estimated “50,000 people have participated in at least 91 naked protests around the world” (Kalish 2003). From New York City, to Arkansas, from Cape Town to Sydney, naked bodies lay on the beach or the snow, spelling out bare, unadorned slogans such as “NO BUSH,” “NO WAR,” “TRUTH,” or “PEACE.” While many of these actions protest the war in Iraq, protesters in Mexico City stripped to oppose a Costco store that would destroy a historic site, protesters in Rome stripped in front of Dan Glickman, the US Secretary of Agriculture, to demonstrate their opposition to genetically modified soybeans, 600 people stripped on a glacier in Switzerland to protest global warming, and, in an action that may have inspired many of the others, Nigerian women forced Texaco to improve their village by “taking over an oil refinery and threatening to disrobe” (Steenberg October 2003). Most tenaciously, the self-proclaimed “ecotantric rap artist” “La Tigresa” strips for loggers to save the old-growth forests of the Pacific Northwest. Not surprisingly, many of the nude protestors happen to be women. While many forms of protest directly involve placing one’s body on the line – the hunger strikes of Gandhi or the suffragettes, ACT UP’s street theater, and the civil rights protestors who braved police dogs and water hoses – these protesting bodies have rarely been naked. How, then, are we to understand the significance of the naked body in recent protests? Are activist women simply capitalizing on the cultural currency of female flesh or, are they – quite literally – embodying another sort of ethics, another sort of politics? And can feminist theories of corporeality – as “overdressed” as they may be – help us to decode these practices, experiences, and images? Furthermore, how can we make sense of the strange disjuncture between these fleshy real-time events and their digital reproductions that circulate on the web?

Intriguingly, these naked protests, which display the “sensate flesh” that Stacey calls for, are occurring at the same time that a new wave of feminist theory develops. This recent feminist theory takes matter seriously as it works to formulate models that retain the political incisiveness of discursive critique yet open up new avenues of approach to that which is not, by definition, within the purview of discourse – namely, human bodies and non-human natures. The work of feminist science studies scholars Donna Haraway, Karen Barad, and Nancy Tuana is especially notable for its robust understandings of material forces. Feminist corporeal theories, such as the

work of Elizabeth Grosz, Elizabeth Wilson, and others, seeks to re-engage with the materiality of the body, connecting the theoretical formulations of the discursive turn with serious attention to the flesh. While a full discussion of this theory is beyond the bounds of this particular essay,<sup>1</sup> we may well consider whether a similar impulse or ethos runs through the desire to take matter seriously in theory and to display the flesh in political practice. While most feminist corporeal theories remain within the demarcation of the Human, the naked protests considered here extend human corporeality into actual places, enacting nakedness as an ethical performance of vulnerability – the allied, mutual vulnerabilities of human/animal/environment. Taking up the concept of intercorporeality, as defined by Gail Weiss (1999) and others, I would like to propose the term “trans-corporeality,” which emphasizes the imbrication of human bodies not only with each other, but with non-human creatures and physical landscapes.<sup>2</sup> Feminist theories of performance, particularly those of Peggy Phelan and Rebecca Schneider, are crucial for understanding the possibilities for expressing this sense of trans-corporeality, which redefines the human as material, and thus requires a critique, subversion, or evasion of the dominant modes of representation and the gendered scenarios of visibility.

### **Exhibiting nothing: or, the ontology of the striptease**

Discussing the work of the artist Robert Longo, Hal Foster argues that in a mass media age, “images function in a discourse of ‘crisis’ to reinject a sense of the real into our lives (which is why images of war are so privileged)” and that “such events often seem to be produced in advance as media spectacles (whose importance is judged in terms of ‘effect’ or ‘impact’). One is confronted with the spectacle of events produced so as to be reproduced as images and sold – of a history first scripted, then translated into pseudohistorical simulations to be consumed” (1985, 89). Since the 1980s, when Foster wrote that passage, the Internet has multiplied the extent to which events are “produced so as to be reproduced as images.” The naked protests occurring throughout the globe as well the performances of La Tigresa function to “reinject a sense of the real” even as they are scripted events performed for public consumption. Although they have little else in common, when La Tigresa bares her breasts and hundreds of protestors take off their clothes and spell out a word, they bare themselves as a political action. Perhaps, in the first instance, the message is obvious: this is the last resort; we’ll do anything we can to stop the war or stop the logging. The stripping also underscores the truth of the message – it is being expressed without veiling, without covering, *sans vestment*. Hear us, these bodies say, we are elemental, we are without guile or guise. Many of the protestors self-consciously exploit the metaphorical “truth” of nakedness, wrapping their flesh in naked convictions and exposed intentions. One world peace protester in Glastonbury says, “I was nervous, but I wanted to show my naked commitment to the truth” (Wells Journal 3 April 2003). And the headline in the Bare Witness website reads “Kiwi protestors spell out the ‘naked truth’ about GE” (Bare Witness n.d. a). Against the rather cynical, but no less credible sense that this is an easy way to get publicity, lies the idealistic vision of the naked body, suggesting a common



corporeality, a shared vulnerability. Such slogans as “Disrobe to Disarm,” in fact, link the lack of garments with a lack of armaments (Common Dreams 24 June 2003). The naked spectacle of these inert and nearly indiscernible alpha-bodies perform a politics of undressing, disclosing a common, trans-corporeal ground.

Unlike the passive alpha-bodies of peace activists, La Tigresa (aka Dona Nieto) stands, bares her breasts, and actively “strips for the trees.” Her action joins strange bedfellows: pro-sex feminism and a goddess-worshiping strain of ecofeminism; environmental monkey-wrenching and pornography, “sacred sex” and gritty political protest.<sup>3</sup> Does her action suggest self-commodification for environmentalist ends or a revolt against all propriety “in Defense of Mother Earth”? Clearly, while Earth First! enjoys the publicity she gains from these actions, they are not quite sure how to play them. An Earth First listserv (n.d.) announcement from 31 January 2001 recounts:

A small crowd of concerned citizens, fronted by the legendary bare-breasted poet “La Tigresa,” successfully stalled timber operations that threaten the world’s two tallest trees at a logging site adjacent to Montgomery Woods State Park in Mendocino County. Reciting her “Earth Goddess” poetry topless, as the loggers respectfully listened, La Tigresa was supported by the local residents, mothers with babies, children and dogs, who were all there to express concerns over the environmental impacts of this logging plan. The timber company was delayed long enough for the California Department of Forestry (CDF) inspectors to come out and find violations of the forest practice rules.

What a wholesome striptease! “Mothers with babies, children and dogs” in attendance, loggers “respectfully” listening to the poetry recited by the topless activist. La Tigresa’s performances complicate not only the jobs of the loggers but the rhetoric of Earth First!, a rather masculinist environmental organization that vows “no compromise in defense of Mother Earth.” Notwithstanding the spiritual appeals to the goddess, Nieto’s performance sexualizes Mother Nature, endowing her not only with breasts but a big ol’ bullhorn to accompany them. Nieto’s performances are ripe for ridicule, given the long history of trivializing women by reducing them to their sexuality. And yet, there is something captivating about her performances. For example, when La Tigresa challenges the loggers to “peel back the layers of what you call progress” promising that “I am more beautiful naked than clothed – take off my clothes” she performs her flesh as the body of the earth (*Striptease*, Andrews 2000). Nieto interprets her toplessness as a suitable action for environmental politics, because the act of stripping appeals to an environmentalist desire for an ethical recognition of nature itself, liberating it from the layers of capitalist, bureaucratic, and legal vestments. Notwithstanding the fact that “nature itself” is itself a partial construction, the ideal of truth as “naked” represents a particular epistemology, and the body of a stripper performing for men could hardly be draped with any more cultural baggage, much of this essay will examine whether the exposed flesh within these performances gestures toward an embodied ethics in which matter matters. Even after acknowledging the status of these acts as performance, image, spectacle, and sign, it is possible to imagine that the exposed flesh may embody an ethical recognition that arises from a sense of humans as inescapably woven into a trans-corporeal, material realm.<sup>4</sup>

### Cyberbodies, parodic visibility, and disappearing trees

Despite the intention to embody the “naked truth” or to strip down to an elemental being, once these performances become images, circulating on the web, and, in La Tigresa’s case, within a documentary film, they become part of an economy of visibility. Peggy Phelan warns that “[v]isibility is a trap”: “it summons surveillance and the law; it provokes voyeurism, fetishism, the colonialist/imperial appetite for possession. Yet it retains a certain political appeal” (1993, 6). Even as the visibility of exposed flesh enables their political performances, particular representational strategies help La Tigresa and the alpha-bodies elude some of the traps of visibility by encouraging other-than-specular relations. The strange concatenation of “virtual” and “real” performed by the alpha-bodies in both geographic and digital sites, for example, make for a spectacle that resists consumption. Despite the fact that the naked protestors assembled, *en massé*, in the flesh, at a particular, designated site at a specific time, most people who encounter the reproductions of these events will experience them via the web. Environmental theorists query the seeming disjunction between digital media and place-based politics. Timothy Luke, considering how the new informatics reconstitutes both “Nature” and “Humanity” asks: “if human beings actually become fully invested in bitspace as their most decisive key environmental niche, then what must environmentalism as a political project become?” (2001, 5). Arturo Escobar asks “Is it possible for women, social movements and others to deploy cyberspatial technologies in ways that do not marginalize place?” (1999, 36). Escobar concludes that progressive groups “wishing to appropriate and utilize these technologies for social transformation must build bridges between place and cyberspace” (52). Although recent naked protests are not confined to environmental issues, strictly speaking, their dual presence in actual as well as virtual time/space may perform the materiality of human bodies and geographical places even within an increasingly digital age. The nudity, though difficult to discern, may inject a sense of “the real” into a medium comprised of layers and layers of mediation.

The figures, despite, or indeed, because of their nakedness, seem to offer nothing to see. These images, may, like nudism, involve “a new way of seeing – almost, in a way, a kind of not-seeing” (Barcan 2001, 314). For when bodies spell out words, the words are recognizable, but the bodies barely so. Although the bodies in some of the photos, especially those taken in England, look quite white, and other bodies, such as those spelling out “PAZ” in Argentina (Bare Witness n.d. b), radiate many shades of brown, in many of the photos sexual and racial difference are barely discernible, especially as the viewer is compelled to read the word those bodies spell, not to scrutinize them for shades or shapes of social categorization.<sup>5</sup> As they spell out words, exposing their flesh in such a way as to manifest their political desires, individuals momentarily relinquish themselves to the message.

The naked bodies become word, but they also become place. The audacious, uncomfortable actions, sand gritty on skin, snow cold and wet, circulate as scenes, as framed landscapes. Although the protesting women for example, in Helena Montana in January of 2003 “assembled on a cold mountain meadow and lay down

on snow and prickly pear cactus to spell the word PEACE with their naked bodies” (Bare Witness n.d. c), we read the word but cannot discern the prick of the cactus. Oddly, we view these radical protests from classic perspectives.

Classic perspective orients the field of vision to the viewer’s veiled or vanished body, as if the scene itself emanates from the viewer’s own gaze. The scene is subservient to that eye, at the same time that eye is erased from implication in the visual field. Within the terms of perspective, there is no reciprocity – the seen does not look back. (Schneider 1997, 67)

Unlike feminist performance artists who perform their corporeality with a vengeance, by returning or subverting the gaze (Schneider 1997), these images do not look back at us. The lack of a counter-gaze, a mark of self-objectification, may perform the sense of political disenfranchisement that protestors feel. It may also, however, encourage the viewer to imagine an other-than-specular relation to these protesting bodies. What the viewer most wants to see in these photos – a sense of the actual visceral experience of one’s naked body on the sand or snow – cannot be seen. It can only be “imagined” in a peculiarly visceral, tactile way. Such a moment of corporeal identification, even if only fleetingly felt, may be an electronic instance of trans-corporeal ethics. It is important to consider how these images circulate within the peculiar social space of the internet, where, as Diane Saco explains, there is an “experiential interplay and occasional disjuncture between the *bodily hereness* before the screen and the *digital thereness* on the screen” (2002, 27). In the case of the alpha-bodies, the “digital thereness” of the naked protests underlines the fact that the “there” was – is – equally visceral. Thus, these images subvert the politics of visibility, pointing us toward an embodied hereness that is, paradoxically, both in the chair of the viewer and simultaneously somewhere else, creating a social space in which a virtual intercorporeality may emerge. Peggy Phelan suggests that “perhaps through the ethical acceptance of our failure to be rendered within the terms of the visible, we may find another way to understand the basis of our link to the other within and without our selves” (1993, 69). I would like to extend Phelan’s suggestion here so that the ‘other’ include nonhuman nature. As the alpha-bodies spell out words in and on places – beaches, fields, or even streets – their flesh coterminous with the ground, they dramatize a corporeality that is not contained by a human frame but extends across the earth.

La Tigresa’s success at capturing media attention speaks to the “political appeal” of visibility. As Michelle Locke puts it so well, “If a tree falls in a forest and no one calls the media, as the environmental activist saying goes, nothing happened. If a bra falls in the forest, Nieto has discovered, the media will call you” (21 November 2001) Nieto’s performances, however, provoke questions about the perils of capitalizing on female flesh. Unlike the performance art of Ana Mendieta, whose earth-body sculptures, questioned, or literally exploded, the associations between woman-and-nature, La Tigresa pounces upon those very connections, reveling in her nakedness as an earth goddess. While her bare breasts may offend some, her invocation of the tenacious and pernicious figure of “Mother Earth” certainly makes many a postmodern feminist shudder. (Indeed, many environmentalists and feminists, including myself, have criticized the continued use of the Mother Nature figure.)



Yet Nieto's performances are replete with irony, humor, and an over-the-top aesthetic. Her campy hyper-visibility as "Mother Nature" at once both parodies and embraces this problematic figure. Departing from much postmodern and poststructuralist feminist theory, which has relentlessly pursued a "flight from nature" (see Alaimo 2000) Nieto follows the path advocated by Luce Irigaray: "One must assume the feminine role deliberately. Which means to convert a form of subordination into an affirmation, and thus to begin to thwart it" (1985a, 77).

Nieto also assumes the feminine role of John Berger's pithy formulation:

*Men act and women appear.* Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object – and most particularly an object of vision: a sight. (1985a, 47)

Since most of the film *Striptease to Save the Trees* is shot from behind or beside La Tigresa the film places the spectator in a particularly female position, though once removed. We do not watch her so much as we watch her being watched. Like other feminist performance artists, however, Nieto explodes the passivity of this scenario by being the author and director of her performance. The film also denies men an unimpeded voyeuristic pleasure. The loggers are well aware that they are being filmed – they cannot just sit back and enjoy the performance. Their watching is being watched. They are self-conscious and uncomfortable. The viewer may wonder whether s/he is watching a striptease, a pagan ritual, performance art, a poetry reading, or a calculated political action. But the camera's perspective, behind and beside La Tigresa, encourages political alliance rather than a detached or objectifying gaze. The shots of the loggers, on the other hand, are confrontational – head on, penetratingly close. Thus, while Nieto may seem to perform a conventional scenario of female objectification and male viewing, both her unmistakable agency and the specular strategies of the film turn these relations inside out.

But where is nature in this specular economy? La Tigresa's performance of her flesh as a metonym for nature complicates Berger's (1972) formulation even further. We could revise it to say: Men act and *nature* appears. Such a formulation is apt, certainly, within a culture that commits acts of environmental destruction even while venerating paintings, photos, and televised images of Nature (sometimes referred to as "nature porn"). But nature, for the most part, does not watch itself being looked at. Nor does it perform parodies of its own representation. Thus, perhaps it is only through a kind of negativity that its representation can be challenged. As Donna Haraway puts it, "for our unlike partners, well, the action is 'different,' perhaps 'negative' from our linguistic point of view" (1992, 313). Interestingly, the trees within *Striptease for the Trees* are not given a starring role; instead, nature exists as the background for the human drama of activists vs. loggers. Most of the film is shot on the road, or in the midst of a swath of destruction. The forest is merely on the edges of the scene. Oddly, then, nature stands as the background to the human drama, hardly noticeable within the film. Yet, rather than read this as an inadvertent example of the kind of pernicious "backgrounding,"<sup>6</sup> in Val Plumwood's (1993) terms, that women and nature have been subjected to for centuries,

it may be a strategy to avoid the perils of visibility of which Phelan warns. For environmentally-minded viewers, especially, the film may gesture toward a nature that could somehow escape the surveillance and consumption provoked by visibility. The most prominent shot of a tree, in fact, is a close up of a large, ragged stump – already fallen prey to its own visible prominence. It is as if the film-makers, James Ficklin and K. Rudin, refused to objectify or manipulate the trees by plopping them squarely within the *mise en scène*. Instead, they gracefully frame the all-too-human action, existing beside the camera's perspective as an ally. Peggy Phelan has argued that invisibility has the potential for resistance and that performance art “becomes itself through disappearance” (1993, 146). The threat of the literal disappearance of these trees haunts the film and amplifies its political resonance, while their disappearance as image, as representation, may direct viewers to an environmental ethos in which the natural world exceeds and chafes against its representations. As Elizabeth Bray and Claire Colebrook argue, “Representation would always remain, in some sense, a negation of matter – a break with a prior materiality” (1998, 44). By avoiding the transmogrification of living trees to celluloid image, by refusing to give us beautiful, predictable images of the old-growth forests, the film seems to warn of the dangers of easy aesthetic consumption that is not unlike the capitalist consumption that it protests. Instead, it gestures toward a sense of the living, material trees as non-human nature that cannot be contained within human paradigms or representations. In *The Good-Natured Feminist: Ecofeminism and the Quest for Democracy*, Catriona Sandilands explains that “Nature cannot be entirely spoken as a positive presence by anyone; any claim to speak of or for nonhuman nature is, to some extent, a misrepresentation” (1999a, 180). This does not mean that we should give up on representing nature – environmental politics, for one, demands it – but that we foreground the limits of our knowledge: “if the part of nature that is beyond language is to exert an influence on politics, there must be a political recognition of the limits of language to represent nature, which to me means the development of an ethical relation to the Real” (180). On the edge of visibility, on the verge of disappearance, dwells a recognition of that which cannot be contained by the discursive, the specular.<sup>7</sup>

### **Trans-corporeality and the politics of vulnerability**

Gail Weiss has outlined an ethics of intercorporeality in which bodies provoke ethical behavior by “calling us to respond ethically to one another.” She explains that intercorporeality emphasizes “our continual interactions with other human and nonhuman bodies” (1999, 5). When La Tigresa calls to the loggers in the “voice” of the earth, “[e]very particle of your being has been brought forth from the fiber of my body” (*Striptease*), she attempts to provoke an ethical – though visceral – recognition of one's individual human body as comprised of the selfsame “stuff” of the bodies of other humans as well as that of non-human nature. While many social theorists restrict the notion of intercorporeality to humans, an insistence on humans as bodily beings may perforate the borders that demarcate the human as such. For me, the term “trans-corporeality,” rather than intercorporeality, suggests that

the humans are not only interconnected with each other but with the material flows of substances and places. Moira Gatens' reading of Spinoza, for example, argues that the body's "identity can never be viewed as a final or finished product as in the case of the Cartesian automaton, since it is a body that is in constant interchange with its environment. The human body is radically open to its surroundings and can be composed, recomposed, and decomposed by other bodies" (1996, 110). Naked protest embodies this idea, as it underlines the lack of boundaries between flesh and place. Chloe Sage, who participated in a naked protest against logging in the municipal watershed in British Columbia, stated "It's come down to the bare necessity, the bare essentials – skin and water" (quoted in Associated Press 5 September 2000). Paired as "essentials," skin and water bespeak their kinship. Interestingly, metonymic, rather than metaphoric, relations express a sense of intercorporeality, a sense of the human body "in constant interchange with its environment." Rather than connecting two unlike, unrelated entities, metonyms express the slide from like to like, the movement between ultimately inseparable entities. Many of the naked protestors express this sense of their flesh as metonymically related to that which they are trying to protect. Lisa Franzetta, the PETA spokeswoman, for example, said of a naked protest in Hong Kong, "We're perfectly happy to bare our skin to save the skins of animals exploited for the sake of fashion" (quoted in Gold Coast Bulletin 2 March 2002). This sort of transcorporeality – in which the skin of the human extends to the skin of the animal – radically challenges individualist notions of the self, as well as the transcendent notion of the human. Trans-corporeality, moreover, as an ethical call, hails from a sense of fleshy vulnerability.

Baring their bodies to the elements, the protestors bravely unveil their own vulnerability as a political, ethical stance. The first definition of "vulnerable" given in *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* is "capable of being physically wounded." A wound, first off, is "an injury to the body (as from violence, accident, or surgery) that involves laceration or breaking of a membrane (as the skin) and usually damage to underlying tissues." Thus the predominant meaning of vulnerability involves a recognition of human flesh as violable. An ethics dwells within this recognition, which sets aside the fortification of the "I" in favor of the embrace of the multiple, the intertwined, the sensate. Humans are vulnerable because they are not in fact "human" in some transcendent, contained sense, but are flesh, substance, matter; we are permeable and in fact, require the continual input of other forms of matter – air, water, food. The many protests against genetically modified food underscore the sense that the human body is vulnerable in its permeability; it is embedded within and inseparable from the "environment" that it ingests. Valerie Morse, an organizer for an anti-GM protest was reported as saying that "the naked protest was a metaphor for New Zealand, which . . . could be 'stripped bare' by genetic engineering" (Bare Witness n.d. a). Although we could read these naked bodies as "symbolizing" the state of the nation, it is more apt to read them metonymically, as literally part of the material/geographic/political place of New Zealand.

The lack of a confrontational glance or even just a returned gaze, in the photos of the alpha-bodies underscores the vulnerability of positioned flesh. The prone, bare

bodies express vulnerability. Repudiating their connection to the warriors that would kill in their name, these bodies express their sympathies with the “casualties” of war by playing dead. In fact, for both La Tigresa and a multitude of naked protestors nudity denotes vulnerability, thus vulnerability becomes the key to unraveling the ethics and politics of these participants. Even though the phenomenon of naked protesting to oppose the War in Iraq preceded the horrific images from Abu Ghraib, those images now bitterly underscore the extent to which the naked flesh may speak susceptibility. The website, “Baring Witness,” proclaims, “our exposure of the vulnerable human flesh we all share has created a powerful statement against the naked aggression of our country’s policies” (Bayside Productions n.d.). Similarly, Wendy Tremayne, a participant in naked protests, argues that the reason why so many women partake in naked protesting is because the naked female body bespeaks more of a sense of “vulnerability” that “maybe connects to people’s compassion” (quoted in Kalish 2003). Suzanne Hart, another participant, is even entitling her book about the experience, “Unreasonable Women Bearing Witness: Naked Vulnerability in the Face of Naked Aggression” (Kalish 2003). These performances of vulnerability counter and critique the US “style of national masculinity” that, as Bonnie Mann argues has been enlisted to justify the war in Iraq: “the superpower identity can only be maintained and expressed through repetition, through a staging and restaging of its own omnipotence” (2006, 155). Mann contends that even women soldiers – such as the infamous Lyddie England – are given the phallus and “invited to participate in the militarized masculine aesthetic along with the men, to become the one who penetrates the racial other” (159).

Even as queer theory and discussions of S/M and other practices have complicated our understandings of sexuality, power, and gender, a gendered polarity in which woman (or the feminized man) is the one who is penetrated remains. This political sense of vulnerability performed by the naked protesters, then, may operate as a feminist counter-position to the US masculinist identity of penetrating power. Tremayne argues that so many women partake in naked protesting because the naked female body bespeaks “vulnerability” which “maybe connects to people’s compassion” (quoted in Kalish 2003). Anita Roddick’s website, features a protest organized by the staff of her daughter, Sam’s, “erotic boutique” in London and includes a rather long, philosophical statement about the rationale of the protest.

The theme was ‘liberate yourself from political bondage’ and featured strippers and other sex workers wearing only gas masks and body paints and stencils, delivering a powerful guerilla street performance against war in Iraq... The nudity was not simply for shock value. Throughout history, women have used nudity as a poignant symbol of their outrage. The implication of vulnerability is the right symbolism for a world vulnerable to unchecked aggression by the stronger against the weaker. (Roddick June 2003)

Despite this persuasive statement about nudity as a symbol of vulnerability, the photos feature naked body-painted women who boldly march through the streets of London sporting intimidating gas masks. Fortunately for feminist politics, the proclamation of vulnerability does not preclude a tough, insurgent stance. Many of the accounts of naked protest, in fact, underline the protestors’ courage and tenacity in the face of corporeal vulnerability. Reporting on a protest in January 2003 in the

UK, the Bare Witness site explains, “They felt compelled to use the shock of their nude bodies to send a message to the government – this is not the way to put an end to war. They could have stayed at home in the warm and shook their heads at the news – but they came out to be vulnerable for peace” (Bare Witness n.d. d). Or, even more dramatically, “It was a day for wrapping up rather than stripping naked and lying in a field. But 30 residents from Ashdown Forest in East Sussex took off their clothes and lay down to spell out the word ‘peace’ to show their opposition to attacking Iraq. They obligingly held their poses for what felt like several hours while photographers dilly-dallied with light meters and lenses” (Jeffries 14 January 2003).

Some naked protests extend their ethics to the non-human, by performing the vulnerability of animal flesh, or, in La Tigresa’s case, performing on behalf of the trees. In Spain, animal rights activists take the place of bulls on the streets. Two days before the first bull run, “compassionate and fun-loving people from around the world” come to Pamplona, Spain, to run, naked, in the “Human Race.” This event aims to show that there is a “win-win alternative to having a stampede of terrified animals who end up being tormented and slaughtered in the bull ring” (“PETA n.d.). The Greenpeace website, reporting on the global warming protest in which 600 people stood naked on a glacier in Switzerland, stresses the mutual vulnerabilities of human bodies and the earth:

Without clothes, the human body is vulnerable, exposed, its life or death at the whim of the elements. Global warming is stripping away our glaciers and leaving our entire planet vulnerable to extreme weather, floods, sea-level rise, global decreases in carrying capacity and agricultural production, fresh water shortages, disease and mass human dislocations. (Greenpeace 8 August 2007)

The volunteers who participated in this “living sculpture” assembled by installation artist Spencer Tunick, stand naked along the bottom of the photo, assembled upon exposed brown rocks, as the melting glacier rises above them, vast, yet vulnerable (Figure 3).

When La Tigresa strips for the loggers, she intends her body to manifest the vulnerability of the earth: “They stop their trucks because I’m bare-breasted. The poem keeps their attention. I want them to see in me an image of something beautiful, sacred, and vulnerable, just like the Earth.” At the Earth Films website, La Tigresa’s “womanifesto” proclaims:

I go barebreasted into the forest to embody Mother Earth, pleading to be protected and preserved.

The chainsaws, bulldozers and logging trucks stop in their tracks when they see me.

I am the earth Mother begging them to do no more harm to my naked, sacred body.  
(La Tigresa n.d.)

Emphasizing the harm done to her “naked, sacred body” the film, *Striptease for the Trees*, positions La Tigresa squarely within the devastation; the camera follows her as she trudges through a mess of post-clearcut branches and debris. The ragged stump, mentioned earlier, is sharp and jagged, evoking a visceral sense of pain and vulnerability in the viewer.

John Barry has noted that environmental movements have promoted the sense of “[h]uman dependency on nature and related ideas of vulnerability, neediness,





Figure 3. Greenpeace, Spencer Tunick, and 600 others protest global warming. (©Greenpeace/Wuertemberg.).

frailty, limits, precaution” (2002, 133). Whereas Barry argues for “ecological stewardship and virtue,” I would contend that both stewardship and virtue reinforce Christian, humanist notions of the individual as a disembodied creature who transcends nature. It is crucial for both feminism and environmentalism that the rarefied contents of “the human” – mind, reason, agency, sentience – be dispersed onto a wider, and messier, field of matter. Interestingly, the political discourse emerging from these naked protests is not that of “rights” – the purview of the individual Human political subject, but that of “vulnerability,” a shared, trans-corporeal state that acknowledges the permeability of both people and places.

### Performing pro-sex environmentalism

Rather than placing herself within a fleshy manifesto, La Tigresa uses her naked breasts to arrest the logger’s attention, hoping to delay their tree cutting and entice them to listen to her poetry. As she puts it, “They stop their trucks because I’m bare-breasted. The poem keeps their attention.” In the video *Striptease to Save the Trees*, La Tigresa, accompanied by a woman playing the harp, confronts the loggers, offering them sexual invitations from Mother Earth, such as “I am more beautiful naked than clothed! Take off my clothes!” Her words simultaneously beckon and deflect, invite and redirect, arouse and bewilder. For example, the rather predictable proclamation “I am the Earth, the cradle of creation,” is followed by the provocative (and heretical), “In the creases of my inner thighs lies your salvation” (*Striptease*, Andrews 2000). The Mother Nature that La Tigresa embodies is reminiscent of that of Emma Goldman, who used the figure of the generously sexual earth as the model for an anarchist culture of pleasure and abundance.<sup>8</sup> Goldman, who often playfully spoke as Mother Earth in her journal of the same name, describes the bounteousness of this anarchist figure: “Mother Earth, with the sources of vast wealth hidden within the folds of her ample bosom, extended her inviting and hospitable arms to all those who came to her from arbitrary and despotic lands – Mother Earth ready to give herself alike to all her children” (Goldman and Baginski 1906). The bare-breasted La Tigresa, similarly, offers herself to the loggers, attempting to redirect their desires. Her performance triangulates trans-corporeal desire between herself, the earth, and the loggers, as she attempts to use her own body to persuade them of the pleasures of nature. She provocatively calls to the loggers to make physical, erotic contact with the earth that they drive over: “Abandon your clothes by the riverside./Stretch your naked body . . . /Press your full legs against my yielding ground/And dip your head into my cool green waters and sip . . .” Despite her seductive invitations, the loggers in the film seem embarrassed and confused rather than aroused. Maybe it’s the megaphone she’s sporting. Maybe it’s the fact that she’s often chasing them down, shouting her poetry, blocking their bulldozers. Or maybe it is the camera, focusing on their reactions rather than her breasts. In any case, it is difficult not to be reminded of Luce Irigaray’s speculation regarding what would happen if the (female) earth, the ground and background for male subjectivity, bespoke its own agency: “If the earth turned and more especially turned upon herself, the erection of the subject might thereby be disconcerted and risk losing its elevation and penetration.

For what would there be to rise up from and exercise his power over? And in?" (1985b, 133). In La Tigresa's performance, the naked female flesh and the silent earth speak – loudly, aggressively, with an unmistakable agenda.

As with most environmental activism in this increasingly anti-environmental era, La Tigresa's performance betrays an understandable sense of desperation. But it is playful and parodic as well. As heteronormative as her erotic triangle is, her performance may owe a debt to queer activism, which has profoundly altered protest politics by making pleasure political and the political pleasurable.<sup>9</sup> Gay pride marches, for instance, are seriously fun. The discourse of environmentalism, however, is rarely about pleasure. As Catriona Sandilands explains, drawing upon Andrew Ross, it "is not only that abundant pleasure is virtually absent in (most) ecological discourse, but that it is often understood as downright opposed to ecological principles; frugality and simplicity appear to act as antithetical principles to enjoyment or generosity" (1999b, 77). Rather than preaching "self-limitation and self-denial" (78), La Tigresa entices with the promise of abundant pleasure. Although her scenes of seduction fall within a heterosexual model, and do not offer alternatives to the "eco-sexual normativity" that Sandilands critiques, she performs this role with parodic vengeance. This is hardly the usual scenario of the "lay of the land," since this "land" chases down its supposed lay-er, shouting "seductions" through a bullhorn. As Jeannie Forte explains

women performance artists expose their bodies to reclaim them, to assert their own pleasure and sexuality, thus denying the fetishistic pursuit to the point of creating a genuine threat to male hegemonic structures of women. Instead of the male look operating as the controlling factor (as it does with cinema), the woman performance artist exercises control. (1990, 262)

While La Tigresa is the star of the film, and, significantly, is the only speaking voice in the film – with the exception of one amused logger whose comments (unfortunately) are inaudible – it would be overreaching to say she is in control since, alas, the loggers resume their activities. The performance ends; the "logs" are trucked away. Furthermore, even though La Tigresa seems to take pleasure in her sexual performance, the ostensible political strategy here does depend upon male heterosexual desire that is provoked and then, redirected. Not surprisingly, given the long and pernicious history of the figure of Mother Earth, the feminist and the environmentalist aims here stand in an uneasy, if not contrary, relation.<sup>10</sup>

La Tigresa's performance may also miss the forest for the trees, in the sense that it is the lack of adequate government regulations and oversight and the unchecked rapacity of the logging industry that is to blame for the destruction of the old-growth forests – not the logger's lack of desire for "Mother Earth." The situation Nieto creates stands, ironically, as a microcosm of wider shortcomings in much environmental discourse, which constructs nature as a vacation playground (for the more wealthy) and erases it as a regular realm of work (for the less wealthy).<sup>11</sup> Indeed, by barging into the logger's workplace and entertaining them La Tigresa converts a place of labor into a place of leisure, as the loggers are converted to tourists. Katherine Frank, in *G-Strings and Sympathy*, argues that "men's visits to strip clubs" are "touristic practices" because of the "significance of the gaze" as



well as “the role of fantasy and mythologies of escape in constructing the clubs as different from work and home” (2002, 28). Hailing the loggers as tourists, as sightseers, diminishes their labors. Furthermore, appealing to the loggers as individuals, as autonomous moral agents, overly simplifies the asymmetrical web of economic, material, and power relations that encompasses us all. La Tigresa’s appeal, however, is certainly not limited to the loggers. A wider audience, who accesses her work through video, the web, or a CD, may appreciate her audacity, irony, humor, and, indeed, her pro-sex environmentalism, and may even be provoked to imagine an environmentalism where material needs, human labor, abundant pleasure, and ecological robustness could exist in symbiosis. Such utopian imaginings are often conjured by performance art. As Phelan puts it, “Performance seeks a kind of psychic and political efficacy, which is to say, performance makes a claim about the Real-impossible” (1993, 165).

### **Conclusion: trans-corporeal ethics**

The naked protests and the performances of La Tigresa, like other forms of radical activism, lend themselves to easy ridicule and dismissal. Tim Ferguson, for example, comments “It’s ridiculous to suggest that we’ll change our opinion on Iraq after seeing 1000 nude women forming letters on a hillside, like some soft porn Sesame Street sketch” (quoted in World Wide Nudism/Naturism n.d.). “Buddha Bear,” on thebackpacker.com website, responds to the news of La Tigresa’s bare-breasted performances with the quip, “Oh brother! What will be next, put your axe down, and you’ll get a bj?” Despite – or because of – the jokes, however, Nieto has managed to call attention to the fight against old-growth logging. Jane Kay reports that “Jay Leno worked her into a Bill Clinton joke. Rush Limbaugh jeered her on his national radio show” (Jane Kay, “Topless Protestor”). La Tigresa appears in some unlikely places. An article in an online magazine, *Anvil*, devotes several pages to praising La Tigresa as a master of rhetorical persuasion (Miller). Even the Mendocino Redwood Company, oddly enough, includes an article entitled “La Tigresa, Nude Savior of the Forest” (Jarvie). Dona Nieto has no small intentions for her activism. She claims: “I’ve changed some of these guys’ lives. But I’d like to change the laws, and I’d like to change history” (“Asides”). Similarly, an editorial writer in the *Manila Bulletin*, admits that naked protest against the war on Iraq may not stop Bush and Blair; yet, he hopes for an “interplanetary trend” in which the war is stopped by “millions of men and women all over the world,” including “clerics, evangelists, and nuns (of all faiths, Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, Zen, Taoist, etc.) [who] engage in naked protest” (“Naked Protest Against War”).

What sort of public sphere would this be where a “striptease for the trees” and global occurrences of naked protests would change history? In an article on the suffragette Mary Leigh, Wendy Parkins argues that where

the specificities of female embodiment have been grounds for exclusion or diminished participation, deliberately drawing attention to their bodies has been an important strategy for women engaged in dissident citizenship. Such dissidents have understood

their embodiment not as a limitation but as a means by which the parameters of the political domain could be contested. (2000, 73)

The naked protests considered here seek to contest “the parameters of the political domain,” by exhibiting and thus seeking an ethical recognition of the vulnerable, interdependent, interwoven, human, and non-human flesh. Both La Tigresa and the alpha-bodies, significantly, carve out a *space* for their politics as much as they assert a voice. In doing so, they emphasize what is often occluded by discursive models – actual places, material bodies, and other matters. This emphasis on political space is not only crucial for an environmentalism that must insist upon the value of particular places, but – when recast as trans-corporeal space – also for a range of issues, including environmental justice, environmental health, and queer politics, that demand a recognition of the coextensiveness of material needs, pleasures, and dangers.

Emily Martin has sounded a significant warning about the potential dangers of “fluid bodies” – a cautionary note that is especially relevant to conceptions of trans-corporeality:

To the extent that fluid links among individuals can feed the life of a “pure” super-individual entity such as the corporation or the planet, our enthusiasm for such links might well be curtailed. We might even begin to feel nostalgic for the blockages of such collective body/persons that were provided by liberal democratic notions of the clearly demarcated individual and modernist notions of the separation between the natural and the human. (1998, 79)

Notwithstanding Martin’s warnings, I would contend that the sense of hyperseparation that is promulgated within the US is more of a danger, as it distances the individual from any sense of global responsibility and accountability. After 9–11, US citizens and residents may imagine their own bodies to be vulnerable parts of a national body in a way that they never did before. The discourse of national fear and panic, however, has been met with a politics of domestic containment rather than intercorporeality, as Americans were urged to seal ourselves within duct-taped enclosures in the name of freedom. Safely ensconced in a series of enclosures – from the US borders, to the gated communities or suburbs, to the duct-taped home, to the proper family – the citizen is interpellated as a rigidly bounded individual, and, according to Mann, as a masculinist, sovereign entity, the penetrator who is not penetrated. The Baring Witness movement, on the other hand, via its website, encourages a globally-aware activism, at least for English speakers, which, paradoxically perhaps – insists upon embodied persons connected to actual places. The utopian moment in these actions in which “the borders of the controlled, rational, cultivated individual break down” (Martin 1998, 78) loosens the associations that bind the body to unreason, beastliness, and incivility. This is certainly not to claim that “the body” is utopian and peaceful rather than violent, but instead, to expand the possibilities for an ethics and politics that does not take the bounded Cartesian individual as its starting point. Gail Weiss has argued that one of the “ways that bodies have historically been demoralized... is precisely through their exclusion from the ‘exalted’ domain of morality despite the fact that it is in and through our bodies that we feel the effects of our moral judgments and practices” (1999, 141). Performing material bodies as ethical terrains – and,



as I would argue, as interconnected with the wider physical landscape – offers possibilities for post-human ethics.

Judith Stacey's conclusion, "theory may be more useful as a product of political action than its source" (2001, 102), leads to the question, what sort of feminist theory emerges from these practices of naked protest? I would argue that for both La Tigresa and the various alpha-bodies, the nakedness exceeds its strategic usefulness as spectacle. While politically effective, certainly, in calling attention to its cause, the naked protests do something more. They embody an urgent sense of conviction, as well as an alternative ethos that acknowledges not only that discourse has material effects but that the material realm is always already imbricated with, and sometimes against, the discursive, however veiled corporeality may be. Disrobing, they momentarily cast off the boundaries of the human, which allows us to imagine corporeality not as a ground of static substance but as a place of possible connections, interconnections, actions, and ethical becomings. They perform vulnerability as an intercorporeal, or, more appropriately, as a trans-corporeal condition in which the material interchanges between human bodies, geographical places, and vast networks of power, provoke ethical and political actions. Paying attention to particular corporeal actions, activities, practices, and events can help feminist theory reconsider "the body" as more than a site of cultural inscription. Furthermore, the very ubiquity of visible images and discourses in postmodern culture and the recognition that the official discourses are controlled by a small number of media outlets may impel a counter politics and a counter ethics that seeks to emerge, impossibly, perhaps, from somewhere else – but a somewhere else that is always already *here* or *there*, always palpably embedded within particular material places. Feminist theory and cultural studies can take these seemingly eccentric practices seriously and work toward a more complex and consonant rendition of the flesh we inhabit and the places we are.

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### Notes on contributor

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### Notes

1. For more on this emerging body of feminist theory see *Material Feminisms* (Alaimo and Hekman 2008).

2. In her definitions of the term, Weiss does not restrict intercorporeality to the human. Moreover, she argues that the “bodily imperative” extends to “bodies that are not human such as animal bodies, bodies of literature, and technological bodies” (1999, 163). The bulk of her analyses and arguments, however, are concerned with human intercorporeality, which makes sense, given that the formation of “body image” is her focus.
3. Annie Sprinkle’s playful, political, and outrageous sexual performances provide an important context for La Tigresa, even though Sprinkle is not an environmental activist. See Kath Albury, “Full-body-mega-kundalinigasm: ‘sacred’ sex and sexual politics” (2003) for more on the politics of “sacred sex” for Sprinkle and others.
4. Similarly, perhaps, Ruth Barcan argues that female nudism opens up a “different kind of space . . . a space involving quite distinctive intercorporeal relations which help to produce new body images” (2001, 314).
5. Hortense Spillers offers a provocative and clarifying distinction between “body” and “flesh” in her classic essay, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book.” Spillers posits that “before the ‘body’ there is the ‘flesh’, that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse, or the reflexes of iconography” (1987, 67). It is tempting to draw upon this formulation to theorize the rather utopian moments of naked protesting which may very well long for a body that can elude forms of social conceptualization in the service of creating a unified political message. Moreover, in their prone, exposed, and vulnerable positions, meant, oftentimes, to evoke the sufferings that they protest, the naked protestors may be momentarily performing as “flesh,” in ways akin to Spillers’ conception – “the sheer physical powerlessness” of the body as “thing” (5). Undoubtedly, Spillers offers one of the most cogent and substantial theories of bodies and flesh. And yet, I hesitate to import her formulations into this analysis because her theory emerges from the horror and suffering of enslaved people who were rendered “flesh.” Obviously there is an excruciating incommensurability between the history of slavery and current naked protests. Furthermore, Spillers argues that the distinction between “body” and “flesh” corresponds to “captive and liberated subject-positions” (67). Naked protestors are certainly not captive; moreover, the sort of nudity they engage in performs a radical form of “liberation.”
6. Plumwood explains: “One of the most common forms of denial of women and nature is what I will term backgrounding, their treatment as providing the background to a dominant, foreground sphere of recognized achievement or causation. This backgrounding of women and nature is deeply embedded in the rationality of the economic system and in the structures of contemporary society (2003, 21).
7. As a counterpoint to my reading which extends Phelan’s arguments, see Meileng Cheng’s discussion of the performance group the Sacred naked Nature Girls. Cheng argues that “presence (defined as representational visibility and audibility) still offers more possibility than absence,” contending that “we must reclaim the *corporeal attributes of presence*” (2002, 246).
8. See “Emma Goldman’s *Mother Earth* and the Nature of the Left,” in Alaimo (2000).
9. For a revealing account of the interconnections between “queer primitivism” and pro-sex feminism, as well as an incisive critique of the failure of these movements to “question their desire to occupy primitivity, which in a commoditization of indigeneity and naturalization of conquest grants them authority over past and future worlds of sexual essence can authentic culture” (276), see Scott Morgeson (2005).
10. Another recent clash between feminism and environmentalism would be the feminist critique of the ads designed to stop Mexican men from eating turtle eggs (sold as an aphrodisiac), which posed a Playboy model under the words “Mi Hombre No Necesita Huevos de Tortuga” (“My man doesn’t need turtle eggs”). (“Huevos” in Spanish conveniently means both “eggs” and “balls.”) (Dallas Morning News 29 August 2005 13A). Perhaps one of the most fascinating figures to combine a pro-sex feminist politics

with an environmental cause is Dr Susan Block, whose web site offers sex therapy, pornography, sex toys, erotic theater, and the “Ethical Hedonism Manifesto: The Bonobo Way To Better Sex & Peace on Earth.” Amidst all the pornographic images are an ethical appeal, in the form of links to organizations that seek to save the bonobos from extinction (<http://www.drSusanBlock.com/>, accessed 4 January 2008).

11. Environmental justice movements recast environmental politics to include places of human labor. For more on the issue of environmentalism and labor see Richard White, who asks “How is it that environmentalism seems opposed to work? And how is it that work has come to play such a small role in American environmentalism?” (1997, 171). See also Catriona Sandilands’ “Between the Local and the Global,” in which she argues, “Forest workers, despite their frequently long –term and intimate interactions with the forest ecosystem, do not count as knowing nature because the only real knowledge of nature is a consumptive one” (2003, 157).

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