

Name

Professor

Class

Due Date

### Identity, Motherhood, and Ecofeminism in *Trophic Cascade*

Camille T. Dungy's *Trophic Cascade* works to equate motherhood and ecofeminism as well as show Dungy's transformation with her own sense of identity. In "Trophic Cascade ecology", Stephen Carpenter explains what a Trophic Cascade is while discussing its strengths and sources of power. This parallels with Dungy's comparison of herself to powerful aspects of nature, as well as delving into the inspiration for both the title of the book and the specific poem "Trophic Cascade." The poems "Ultrasound" and "Trophic Cascade" speak towards a different viewpoint of before and during motherhood; this experience strengthened Dungy's identity in that it changed her life and perspective completely. Dungy ultimately found a new identity through becoming a mother, which can be seen through her distinct language in the work in its entirety. Ecofeminism supports motherhood by helping women to understand that they are powerful forces in nature and is strengthened through a deeper understanding of the self, which Dungy explores in her work. Motherhood and ecofeminism work to empower aspects of a woman's life, such as a stronger sense of self, but specifically Dungy's. Dungy argues that motherhood essentially enforces a deeper connection with one's self as well as an understanding of feminism.

The poem "There are these moments of permission", is perhaps the shortest poem in her text, but speaks further of Dungy's personal life, outside of motherhood completely. This lends itself to the work "More than just a Single Identity," an interview with Dungy in which she

explains her personal process of writing and overall inspirations, as well as further explaining how there is more to her than one simple identity. “The Nature of Identity”, a scholarly journal, discusses how liberating ecofeminism can be, which also speaks to the empowerment of motherhood. Dungy formed her new sense of identity through her experiences in motherhood, which empowered her as a woman and encouraged her to delve into the benefits of ecofeminism. “Motherhood reconceived” highlights the concept that motherhood and ecofeminism can go hand in hand; this perspective suggests that Dungy’s experience with motherhood affected her view on feminism, which enabled her to find her identity. Dungy utilizes extensive imagery and metaphor to detail the journey of motherhood’s influence on her forming a new identity as well as explicitly comparing herself to powerful aspects of nature. *Trophic Cascade* as a whole creates a correspondence between the empowerment of motherhood and ecofeminism by comparing powerful natural forces with the natural process of motherhood, while simultaneously exploring the role of motherhood in the creation of Dungy’s own sense of identity and liberation.

Camille Dungy’s poem “Trophic Cascade” explores the period of her life in which she reflects on the effects of motherhood. The first few lines provide such detailed imagery that it is impossible to not envision the scene. She launches this poem by reflecting on how the reintroduction of gray wolves to Yellowstone changed the entire ecosystem. The addition of this predator encouraged other species to return and thrive. She describes the scene from the tops of the trees “in their up reach/songbirds nested”, to down below “while undergrowth and willows, growing now right down to the river, brought beavers” (Dungy). This section portrays a beautiful scene in which the addition of one predator enforces the rest of the ecosystem to flourish. This poem holds a positive, hopeful tone in which Dungy reflects on her own life through the eyes of a trophic cascade of the gray wolf into an ecosystem. It appears to be a withdrawn perspective

until the last few lines, when Dungy blatantly states “Don’t/ you tell me this is not the same as my story”. This is an incredibly significant line because it connects a trophic cascade to Dungy’s personal experiences with motherhood. She states that “All this/ life born from one hungry animal”, in which she compares herself to the gray wolf, where it ultimately becomes clear that she is at the top of the food web in her own life.

The imagery of the comparison between Dungy and a hungry animal implies that she was hungering for something deeper than prey. It suggests that Dungy uses the analogy of a trophic cascade to further explain how her own experiences with motherhood helped to shape her new identity. She goes further to describe her life through aspects of the environment: “this whole, / new landscape, / the course of the river changed, / I know this.” She parallels her life to that of a coursing river, which then introduces ecofeminism to her work in a truly empowering way. Rivers flow in a determined and powerful course, and in comparing this to her life, she suggests that she was moving in a definite path towards her future until the river changed course with effects of a trophic cascade. The line “I know this” is empowering in that it is both an acceptance and embracing of how the effects of motherhood have changed her life. Dungy does not imply that motherhood has affected her negatively, rather, she embraces the opportunity and “I reintroduced myself to myself, this time a mother.” Although her course may have changed, she remains a flowing river towards a specific, hopeful destination. The repetition of “reintroduced” invokes a circle of thought; she opened the poem with “the reintroduction of gray wolves” and ends it with “I reintroduced myself to myself”; this reinforces the idea that she perceives herself as the predator to her own food web, and that she placed herself into a new and unknown ecosystem after the introduction of motherhood. She finalizes the confident tone of the piece with the ending line: “After which, nothing was ever the same.” It reaffirms the point that the

addition of a predator into an ecosystem causes a chain reaction through which the entire system must evolve. Dungy's experience with motherhood changed her perspective on life and she began the process of creating her identity that best fits her new perspective on life after having a child.

Camille Dungy wrote *Trophic Cascade* to tell her individual story of motherhood through the lense of ecofeminism, while simultaneously exploring the limits of her new identity, which can be seen through her specific language describing her fluid emotions during the process. Although her story is highly relatable, she does not assume that all women/mother's perspectives are like her own; it is through her unique viewpoint that she is able to accurately depict her own experiences of motherhood and identity without creating a narrative for anyone else. Dungy works to speak against the negatives of ecofeminism, the idea that women should not look to parallel themselves to nature, and motherhood by exploring that motherhood does not have to be the main event of a woman's life. For example, Dungy found that she was able to balance her new sense of identity with motherhood, while still permitting reflection on her old identity. Motherhood allowed Dungy to understand herself on a deeper level and accept that although "this whole, new landscape" may be new to her, it does not mean that she cannot experience an empowered motherhood through the understanding that she has the resources and the ability to create an experience and identity completely by her own design. This thought in itself is empowering, as it suggests that women, like nature, may undergo change, but it is through their ability to adapt to change that they are powerful and beings. "Trophic Cascade" uses ecofeminism to more deeply explain Dungy's experience with being a mother by incorporating the concept of a trophic cascade: the addition of a stimuli to Dungy's personal ecosystem forces her to reflect on her own perspective and shape a new identity that could better adapt to the

situation, but the experience as a whole showed her more about herself as an empowered and capable individual. Motherhood and ecofeminism go hand in hand, which is seen through Dungy's detailed imagery depicting her personal experience. This is seen through her poem "Trophic Cascade", in which Dungy describes in detail how the addition of a stimuli forces changes upon the ecosystem, no matter how small the original change.

The enablement of the self, brought on by feminism, is further secured through the experience of motherhood, in that Dungy was able to look more deeply into her own identity and discover that her freedom was within reach the entire time. It is through a new perspective that Dungy takes hold of her life, embraces ecofeminism and motherhood, and secures a new identity through which she now finds herself. She embraces the idea of a trophic cascade throughout the entirety of the work, which inspires Dungy to compare how motherhood was the additional stimuli in her life that allowed her to reflect on her past perspective in comparison to her new mentality after having a child.

A trophic cascade is a powerful interaction that can control entire ecosystems. They occur when predators in a food web suppress the abundance or alter the behavior of their prey which releases the next trophic level from predation. Ultimately, it can be said that direct or indirect change into an ecosystem causes a chain reaction. This coincides with Dungy in that her transformation into motherhood influenced a chain reaction for her sense of identity and perception on ecofeminism. Carpenter explains a cascade as a "phenomenon triggered by the addition or removal of top predators and involving reciprocal changes in the relative populations of predator and prey through a food chain". This results in changes to the ecosystem structure, which is essentially a chain reaction based off of one action. This is an interesting perspective,

because Dungy's experience with motherhood affected her identity; the addition of a child completely changed her personal ecosystem, or way of life.

As Camille Dungy travels through America with her newborn, she explains how vividly aware she is of how they are seen- "not just as mother and child, but also as black women". In Raj Chakrapani's "More than just a Single Identity", an interview between himself and Dungy, exposes a more personal side of Dungy as he delves into her past and how that influences her today. Dungy explains how "history shadows her journey" which implies that she reflects on the past often in her work as well as actual history. This reflection on her own past self is seen through "There are moments of permission", in which Dungy exposes her past self through the spaces between the rain; her history allows for reflection after embracing motherhood. She said she's learned to "dig deeper to find a fuller story behind the work I'm interested in reading and writing" (Chakrapani). This agrees with her work on *Trophic Cascade* in that she did extensive research on specific qualities of nature in order to accurately incorporate them into her writing. Not only did the concept of a trophic cascade embed itself into the imagery, but it also inspired the title of a poem and the title of the work in its entirety. The entirety of the piece is laced with the idea of an additional stimulus interrupting the system and creating a new ecosystem in which the predators, Dungy and her child, must adapt.

Dungy expresses that she loves language and "words with alternate meanings compel [her]". This suggests that she does put a lot of effort, time, and thought behind every word in her work. Each line is a deliberate choice, placed there with the greatest care after extensive research. Her meticulous nature is part of her identity, though she definitely claims to have more than a single identity. She states that "I was thinking about how to be myself, but expanded". This coincides with the concept that her transition to motherhood influenced her to take on more

than one role and liberate herself through the inspiration of a different perspective. She explains that expansion for her own benefit is not necessarily the same experience of other women. This supports the idea that her journey of motherhood and finding identity was an individual event in which not every mother will experience the same way. Dungy essentially acquired a deeper understanding of herself through motherhood. She claims that “the past informs my present, which is foundation for the future”; this correlates with the meticulous aspect of her identity in which she learns from the past in order to thrive in the future. This survival tactic is seen in “Trophic Cascade” when Dungy explores how the addition of a stimulus into her ecosystem forced her to adapt and survive in a new environment. She ultimately learned from herself and way of life in the past to pave the way for a productive motherhood in the future. Dungy discusses how difficult it is to raise a child because of how helpless they are. This draws back to the concept of a trophic cascade with an addition of something into an ecosystem. The addition of a child into Dungy’s life forced her priorities and perspective to change; she was now in charge of a helpless “prey” that solely depended on Dungy’s abilities’ to take care of her. Dungy’s sense of identity could have begun forming in her past; she talks of how she had a strong support system within her family, and how that encouragement helped her to work hard all the time. This parallels with her point that her past informs the present, in that she took the empowerment from her family and carried it on to her own life. Ultimately, Dungy achieved a deeper understanding of herself through the experiences of motherhood and the challenges it presented.

The challenges of motherhood were just starting to bud in Dungy’s mind with the poem “Ultrasound”. This poem works with a calm, loving tone. Dungy speaks with an unending patience in the repetition of the line “I will wait”, which lends itself to the idea that although a

child may have changed the flow of her path, it was not an unwelcomed change. Dungy uses elaborate imagery in each stanza that appear to go through the seasons during which Dungy was pregnant. It begins with cicadas in August, moves to berries, then talks about tide pools, and finishes with moths. It suggests a time cycle in which she got to know her child better through the quality time of pregnancy. Her deliberate words bring forth ideas of a soothing mother's voice, telling their child to be patient. The line "I will wait" appears at least twice in every stanza, which suggests that Dungy is not in a rush to be finished with the pregnancy, rather, embraces the opportunity to bond with her child through this time. Her embracement of this opportunity shows a stemming of her sense of identity as she accepts her new and shared life.

Dungy writes the short piece "There are these moments of permission" in a brief seven lines; in these lines, however, Dungy shares a great deal about her identity through an extremely personal moment. The title serves as the first line of the work: "There are these moments of permission/ between raindrops". In this line, Dungy explores the small spaces between raindrops and suggests that she exists there. This is clarified later with the line "I hang in the undrenched intervals", where Dungy confirms that she exists in those small spaces. The line spacing in this piece is incredibly important because the lines fall as gently as raindrops in relaxed and almost random pathway. It forces the audience to read the piece slowly, which is further strengthened through the excess of commas. The effect of this is that the audience is able to focus on the space between the lines, which coincides with Dungy's purpose of this specific style. Dungy claims to exist in those very spaces, "undrenched" or unaffected by the downpour. This suggests that the weather does not affect her, or that she is her own person outside of nature.

The last three lines: "while Callie is sleeping/ my old self necessary/ and imperceptible as air" portray an intimate moment in which Dungy almost suggests that as her daughter sleeps, she



is able to be her own self again, back to the identity before motherhood. In saying that her “old self” is “imperceptible as air”, it invokes thought of how difficult it is to distinguish the space between rain, and how it would be almost impossible to capture. This captures Dungy’s purpose of this piece: although her old self/ identity still exists between the spaces of the rain, it is only in that moment that her old self is visible. It is difficult even then, however, to capture a glimpse of her old self because “we call it *all* rain”; this means that her old self goes by almost completely undetected to an untrained eye. This piece captures a private moment of Dungy’s, where she is able to reflect on what once was while being very present in her new identity. There is a harsh transition between her old and new identity in this reflection, as her daughter is mentioned directly before Dungy speaks of her old identity. Her awareness of how motherhood influenced her new identity is a key concept in this particular poem, because she juxtaposes her daughter (her new identity) to her “old self” in a way that suggests her old self never truly left but can only be seen through the space between the raindrops. This works with Dailey’s piece by highlighting the reality that women can juggle both motherhood and feminism without losing themselves along the way. Dungy found she was able to be a mother while still referencing her old identity from time to time. The title’s use of “permission” suggests that it is only in these short intervals of time in which she permits her true self to come to light. This, however, proves that she is an individual outside of motherhood, and that she had a life prior to her child, which she maintains in those brief periods of time.

Dungy incorporates ecofeminism into this piece by comparing her patience to that of the flowing seasons. She discusses how cicadas wait through the winter, “their August song/ harbored in the last thunder clap/ of the season”. In this line, she talks about an incredibly delicate part of nature: bugs. This parallels to the delicacy of a baby, and how reliant they are on

the conditions in which they are placed. This provides another source of empowerment for Dungy, as she is now responsible for the delicate baby inside her. The line “I will wait for the clearing” implies that the birth of this baby will provide an eye-opening experience to her, almost as though the baby comforts her as well. When Dungy spoke of a flowing river changing course, it indirectly stated that the baby changed her life in an unexpected way. Speaking of the unborn child in this piece, however, Dungy says that the baby coincides with a clearing. This means that Dungy could view the child as a new path for her life that she looks forward to seeing. The third stanza portrays an anxiousness: “The student for her marks.” This connotation is with a child seeing how they performed on a task; it suggests that Dungy is anxious about how she will perform as a mother, to see if she is up for the task. This apprehension coincides with the transition of before and during motherhood, in which Dungy is unsure of the path and how she will manage the new experience. This in itself is a change in her sense of identity; when she was at the top of her own ecosystem, she was confident in every step. Now, however, a new ecosystem provides a land with which she is not familiar, and she is no longer at the top of the food web. This gives Dungy the opportunity to explore a setting where she is forced to become empowered through different means.

Jessica Dailey claims in “Nature of Identity” that “the presence of ecofeminism in women’s poetry can empower women” (1). This holds true in Dungy’s work because she incorporates so many powerful aspects of nature: a flowing river, changing seasons, wolves, etc. She juxtaposes these with more delicate parts of nature: bugs, drizzling rain, etc. This comparison comprises Dungy’s feelings towards motherhood; a combination of both powerful and delicate emotions that cannot be easily explained. Dailey says that the bond women share with nature has become progressively more liberating instead of the negative connotations that

generally came with the association in the past. This can be seen through excerpts from “Trophic Cascade”, where Dungy states “I reintroduced myself to myself, / this time a mother.” This implies that although the coursing river of Dungy’s life has taken a hard left, she reintroduces herself to a stronger and more capable version of herself: someone that now must take care of her child.

In Dungy’s connection with ecofeminism throughout the text, she both empowers and holds a deeper understanding of herself. This is seen through “All this/ life born through one hungry animal” because Dungy portrays herself again as a predator in her own ecosystem, which provides insight to her change in perspective on life. In general, ecofeminism parallels the negative treatment of women, nature, and animals (Dailey 5). This mindset juxtaposes Dungy’s use of ecofeminism in her work; she empowers herself through the perspective of the both the most powerful and most delicate aspects of nature, as opposed to paralleling them from the negatives. This coincides with Dailey’s point that the connotation with ecofeminism has become more progressive over time, which ultimately allows the connection between women and nature to be seen as a positive instead. Dailey suggests that “ecofeminism holds so much more” than simply encapsulating the entire movement with only the negative treatment of women and nature. The presence of ecofeminism allows both women and nature to experience liberation through their most influential and inspiring characteristics. Ecofeminism is seen in Dungy’s “Trophic Cascade” when she references a coursing river; there are powerful connotations with rivers and comparing her life to one suggests her confidence and strength on the path ahead of her. Women and nature are both affected by direct and indirect forces, and in that way, overlap with the concept of a trophic cascade. Dungy explores a new side of herself and her identity

through the descriptive imagery of nature. In this technique, Dungy unfolds her identity through the powerful lense of indirect ecofeminism.

Lauri Umansky writes “Motherhood Reconceived: Feminism and the Legacies of the Sixties” as an emphasis on the link between feminism and motherhood. She argues that “one on hand, feminists have focused on motherhood as a social mandate, an oppressive institution, a compromise of a woman’s independence...” (2). This perspective suggests that feminism in general does not look favorably upon motherhood; however, it is through the initiation of motherhood that Dungy truly finds her identity and is able to better understand herself with the addition of ecofeminism in her work. Although motherhood does compromise a woman’s independence, it also liberates Dungy in that she is able to find a more fitting identity for her new ecosystem. Similar to a trophic cascade, when Dungy encountered the addition of a child, she was forced to adapt to the situation accordingly. It can be argued that motherhood helped Dungy to adapt to more productive sense of identity in which Dungy can more deeply understand herself. On the other hand, feminists can also perceive motherhood, “minus the patriarchy”, as a way for women to bond with one another and to nature (3). This bond connects women in a way that the negative aspects of ecofeminism simply do not capture; motherhood allows women to connect on one of the most basic of biological journeys. This corresponds with Dungy’s work in that she freed herself through the experience of motherhood; the addition of a child gave her the opportunity to reconstruct her identity and explore this new path with said child. Her reconstructed identity, however, does not deter her from reflecting on the past. This self-reflection is seen in “There are these moments of permission” when Dungy allows her old self to peek through the spaces between the rain and remind her of where she came from. She celebrates this connection with her old identity in that she can see her own progress and how, over time, she

has grown as both a woman and mother. She states that her “old self [is] necessary” because it allows her to balance out the old and new perspectives and better understand where she’s headed because she knows where she’s been.

Umansky states that motherhood “redeems sexuality...celebrates the female body; that women, as creators of life, stand closer to nature, further from the machines that have come to define male culture” (4). This realization is seen through the line in “Trophic Cascade”: “After which, nothing was ever the same”. It suggests a passing of some line or boundary that was unreachable prior to motherhood. Dungy celebrates herself in becoming a mother, adapting to new circumstances with no clear vision of the path ahead, and of forming a new identity. She embraces that “nothing was ever the same”, and this is said with a seemingly positive tone. She explores the period of transition, or trophic cascade, in which the process of motherhood began to take place. She, a creator of life, is closest to nature through motherhood; Dungy further exercises this reality through the detailed description of nature’s functions from the tops of the trees to the running river below. This is how Dungy perceives her own identity transformation; a top to bottom revolution where she takes charge of both herself and her daughter in a way that proves her empowerment stemming from motherhood. Motherhood and feminism affect one another both directly and indirectly; they go hand in hand for Dungy’s realization of a new identity as they both work to enable her to look deeper into herself and discover a new side of herself.

Umansky also writes that, historically, motherhood was perceived as the “eventual occupation of choice for all adult women” (20). This proves false in Dungy’s case because in “There are these moments of permission”, the use of “moments of permission” suggests that Dungy, in brief spans of time, is able to capture her old identity before motherhood. This implies

that she does still in fact have a perspective of life before motherhood, and that being a mother does not completely define who she is. Although motherhood helped her to transition to where she currently resides as far as her identity, it does not control her life to the point that there is nothing but motherhood that holds value to Dungy. This is significant because although an older version of feminism defined motherhood as the only option for women, Dungy shows a more progressive side of it in which she is able to explore motherhood without being consumed by it.

“Motherhood and Feminism: Seal Studies” speaks towards the difficulties of managing motherhood and the rest of one’s life, as Amber Kinser claims. She interestingly suggests that her own search included preparing for an “empowered motherhood”, which agrees with Dungy as far as the understanding that motherhood should not consume the woman, rather, aide her journey to liberation and a sense of identity (viii). Dungy was clearly liberated through motherhood in “Trophic Cascade”, where she says “Nothing was ever the same” with an almost celebratory tone. Motherhood taught Dungy how to better understand herself and fulfill desires of empowerment that she wasn’t aware of prior to motherhood. Kinser states that “feminism taught me I had the right and the internal resources to construct a mother role and identity that were of my own design” (viii). This point is paramount in understanding the entirety of Dungy’s “Trophic Cascade” because her themes revolve completely around motherhood and identity. Similar to Kisner, Dungy used motherhood to influence her ability to create a new, free identity with which she could thrive in the new environment the child created. Dungy’s new sense of identity would likely not have been possible without the addition of a child, because motherhood allowed her to understand herself on a deeper level than simply a woman. Motherhood introduced a dependent life for which Dungy became responsible; this freed her to form a more nurturing aspect of her identity, in that she had to be responsible for a child. Kisner stated that

feminism taught her that motherhood and her own identity were in her control and Dungy found this to be accurate through the perception of ecofeminism. Dungy used nature's powerful aspects to construct and define her journey through motherhood. This technique uniquely united motherhood and feminism in that Dungy clearly took control of her own life in an inspiring and individual way. In addition, Kinsey agrees that women are not solely defined by motherhood; this is supported with "There are these moments of permission", where the audience can see that Dungy is an individual outside of being a mother. Dungy juggled her sense of identity and her newfound experiences with motherhood with poise and described it from a relatable, ecofeminist platform.

## WORKS CITED

- Borer, E. T., et al. "WHAT DETERMINES THE STRENGTH OF A TROPHIC CASCADE?" Ecology, Wiley-Blackwell, 1 Feb. 2005, esajournals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1890/03-0816.
- Chakrapani, Raj. "More Than Just a Single Identity: A Conversation with Camille T. Dungy." The Rumpus.net, 19 Oct. 2017, therumpus.net/2017/11/the-rumpus-interview-with-camilla-t-dungy/.
- Dailey, Jessica. The Nature of Identity. Easton Michigan University, 3 Apr. 2017, commons.emich.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1516&context=honors.
- Carpenter, Stephen. "Trophic Cascade." Encyclopedia Britannica, Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 28 Sept. 2010, [www.britannica.com/science/trophic-cascade](http://www.britannica.com/science/trophic-cascade).
- Umansky, Lauri. "Motherhood Reconceived: Feminism and the Legacies of the Sixties." Google Books. 1996.
- Kinser, Amber. "Motherhood and Feminism". Google Books. 2010.