

## ECOFEMINISM OR DEATH: HUMANS, IDENTITY, AND THE ENVIRONMENT

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A feminist response has always been about making the invisible visible. It has always been a *response* to something deemed unjust and in need of change. A feminist response is, at its core, a political reaction built on dissent; it is one that illustrates the historical setting of a time. Women, through their imposed strict roles, have always symbolized an accepted essentialist vision of the world. But this very essentialist vision has prompted feminists to complicate and problematize the category of “woman.” It has, in fact, been this very insistence on essentialism that has pushed feminist thought and identity into the paradoxical; it is what has made feminist thought flourish. For the situation has always been far from purely “logical” or “coherent.” Masked by rigid and so-called “natural” labels, this paradox makes itself apparent when “natural difference” needs to be justified over and over again, or when this seeming universal and eternal category called “woman” constantly shifts: “now you are unequal because of this;” “now you are unequal because of that.” Indeed, how can a paradox not emerge when (universal) human rights are advocated on the one hand *and* “sexual difference” on the other? As a result, the basic feminist paradox can be articulated as follows: gender, and hence “sexual difference,” are both irrelevant and relevant, both reasonable and unreasonable, both inside and outside of language, both clear-cut and confusing. The situation is only further complicated when categories such as race, sexuality, and class are mixed with the category of “gender.”

Far from having a stunting effect, the presence of this paradox actually propels feminist thought into the very act of liberation, a *practice* that cannot be thought of as stagnant, but instead necessitates transgression in the Foucauldian sense, one that demands constant rethinking, constant restating, and constant retelling of stories (or the multiplication and complication of the entity called “history”). In other words, a feminist perspective can only complicate the actual telling

of stories by employing a tone that defies typical academic writing without undermining it. It can also create stories that cannot define a reader, but that instead play with limits of storytelling and understanding. Within this framework, so-called “history” can now be seen as the effect of discursive attribution rather than as an attribute of individual will (Scott 124). Concurrently, “feminist thought” can create a polemic, one that is both epistemological *and* a provocation to action. It is through these kinds of exercises that a feminist—and especially an ecofeminist perspective—bring forth the need to question an entity such as “feminine writing,” and hence, “feminine identity.”

But this text’s endeavor does not arrogantly assume the possibility of creating a fixed and definite “feminine writing” or “feminine identity” or even a “feminist argument.” The point, instead, is to witness the necessary slipperiness of these very concepts. And to help this slipperiness and to make it more “tangible,” we will turn our attention to the advent of ecofeminism as such and to what it makes possible within the paradoxical “nature” of feminist practice. For a feminist text exists due to our inherently denied paradoxical existence. And with the help of a field such as ecofeminism, a practice that reworks dualism and provides a means in which to think of feminism outside of the expression of a shared identity, our identity can then be placed outside of accepted categories, outside of the “you are not this” parameter.

However, if questions of writing and identity are at the center here, it is the concept of oppression (and the necessity to keep this very word) that acts as a driving force (the drive, that is, to end oppression). However banal the existence of oppression may be, the point here is to maintain the emotional standing of the word without reducing it to something meaningless. For in its most basic form, oppression refers to forces, which prevent a being, from growing to its (her/his) full potential physically and/or mentally. In addition, oppression implies a certain form of structure which operates at the level of knowledge; it implies a system of thought that is present within every fiber of society: its language, its actions, its morals, its laws, etc. The fight against oppression, therefore, is a fight against what most consider vital to the existence and co-existence of life itself. In the end, when knowledge and power are joined through discourse (Foucault 100), neither can be seen as stable and binary. And within this “multiplicity of discursive elements” (Foucault 100), any form of resistance to power is going to be plural. As a result, oppression is power when it has become non-negotiable and naturalized. Oppression, as a system, stays the same. What changes are the ways in which this system is maintained and how, in the end, it permeates our

relations with other beings. In order to address all the issues above, we will now turn to Carolyn Merchant's *The Death of Nature*, and the collection of essays edited by Irene Diamond and Gloria Feman Orenstein entitled *Reweaving the World*.

According to Merchant, social change directly influences the treatment of nature and the ways in which we actually see the world. Beginning in the sixteenth century, our language and images underwent a drastic change. This change marked the beginning of "the great opposition": organic cosmology of the "old days" on one side, and the Scientific Revolution and rise of a market-oriented culture in Modern Europe on the other (Merchant xx). This rise, compelled by a vision of exploitation and a "linear mentality of forward progress," (Merchant xxi) disrupted nature's balance with industrialization and overpopulation, causing the many natural disasters we know today. In other words, despite the 25 years that separate us from the publication of Merchant's book, her point remains the same today: our current situation is no accident, no mere coincidence, but the constant bombardment of a certain type of system that, as she puts it, can literally turn the world upside-down. Merchant's goal is therefore to reevaluate "history" and, through this, revisit the "founding fathers" of modern science (Francis Bacon, William Harvey, René Descartes, Thomas Hobbes, and Isaac Newton) who are all responsible, in some way or another, in creating our vision of nature/the world. This reevaluation is a revisiting of history (a fundamentally feminist practice), which begins with the most simple and most basic association: that of "woman" and "nature."

Prior to the Scientific Revolution, people's view of an identity was based on the notion of organism. This "organismic theory" implied a more holistic approach to the human body and to the "outside" of this human body. The perception included "interdependence among the parts of the human body, subordination of individual to communal purposes in family, community, and state, and vital life permeating the cosmos to the lowliest stone" (Merchant 1). The interdependence, crucial here, implies the recognition of being part of a world; it recognizes the presence of others within the world, and it recognizes the impact of the self on the world. Within this framework, nature was both a caring, loving, and ordered "mother," but also wild, uncontrollable, and the creator of chaos (Merchant 2). Nature was thus something (perhaps "someone") to be both loved and feared. Nature, in other words, was alive.

But, as Merchant and others have pointed out, as mechanization grew, so did the urge to dominate and control this unpredictable

and bountiful nature. The image of the caring and powerful female nature began to be replaced, starting in the sixteenth century, first by the image of the greedy mother earth who hides and keeps her secrets and bounties (read metals) to herself, and then by the more popular (and still popular) image of the machine. While the organic cosmos was a world filled with vitality and energies all emanating from nature (or God or both), the mechanistic world was filled with dead and passive matter (Merchant 105). In addition, the manipulation of nature within this dead world was no longer one of individual efforts, but became associated with “general collaborative social interests that sanctioned the expansion of commercial capitalism” (Merchant 111). Far from being innocent, the attitude toward nature changed in order to socially and, more importantly, morally sanction the “need” to exploit it. The declaration of the death of nature only further sanctioned this supposed “need.”

This tension, between technological development and the organic images of nature (Merchant 2), only heightened through time. As Merchant illustrates, Greek philosophy and the Christian religion both entertained the idea of the dominion over the earth, but it wasn't until this Scientific Revolution that this domination metaphor spread beyond the religious sphere to permeate the social and the political (Merchant 3). The domination metaphor actually spread to its own loss of origin (its own loss of history), to become the only (read “natural”) way to see nature, the outside, and ourselves.

For the Scientific Revolution utilized previously established views of nature to its advantage. This image mainly operated around the parameters of cultivation and gardens. Using, as its basis, the age-old association of nature with women, both entities were then viewed as comforting, nurturing, but also providers and hence care-takers for the well-being of males (Merchant 9). This was not merely a benevolent and generous characteristic of nature, it was *her* unarguable duty. Nature and women were then provided with their roles, which were primarily passive, hence manageable and rapable (Merchant 39). The passivity of matter could therefore be incorporated within the “new mechanical philosophy in the form of “dead” atoms, constituents of a new machine-like world” (Merchant 20). Within this world, change could only be achieved through external forces (Merchant 20), thus reinforcing the connection between this model and commercial/exploitative structures (for both nature and women).

This changing view of nature was accompanied and caused by a turn to capitalistic control for the purpose of profit (Merchant 43). Prior to this shift, farming worked on an agrarian ecosystem that

closely connected the peasant community to the land (Merchant 43). These “traditional patterns of cooperation” (Merchant 44), however, hid problems that would soon become assets in the ascension of the capitalistic system. Merchant explains, “through force and the need for military security, a hierarchical structure of landlord domination had imposed itself on the communal structure of agrarian society, extracting surplus value in the form of labor, services, rent and taxes” (Merchant 44). In the end, the one who controls technology therefore controls the land.

In addition to this exploitative model, the Scientific Revolution also brought the development of inorganic, nonrenewable metallic materials that, predictably, caused (and cause) vast ecological disasters (Merchant 61). The most obvious victim, forests, had already been threatened and partially destroyed due to population expansion, and hence expansion of living and growing space. But by the sixteenth century, the problem had become painfully obvious through actual shortages of wood and hence the need for coal as substitute fuel (Merchant 63). Adding to the growing need for this polluting substance (coal), the sixteenth century also saw its mining operations quadruple as the trade of metals expanded (Merchant 63).

Nature, having thusly been redefined from the nurturing/benevolent mother/God(dess), to a site of chaos, disorder, and danger, suffered another blow: for the safety and longevity of humanity, Mother Earth had to be tamed; the female image had to be turned negative. After all, *she* was responsible for famines, plagues, tempests, etc. (Merchant 127). In the end, the beginning of the Scientific Revolution and hence “pre-industrial capitalism” (Merchant 150), marked a shift in women’s roles, roles that were now more strictly defined in terms of their sex (reproductive machines) rather than their class (Merchant 150).

But nature was not the only entity to be changed to a machine; the view of the body also interestingly morphed into this image. The body was now seen as something one could *fix*; it was something that was fixable (as long as the technologies kept multiplying). Predictably, the image did not stop there: women’s bodies were “naturally” inferior to that of the male’s, the ovaries were passive, the semen active, etc. Women were therefore “inferior” machines. As a result, nature slowly turned into a sight to be experimented on, forced into submission, and forced into “understanding.” As mentioned above, these changes were done with the help of various key (new) scientists like Francis Bacon (1561-1626), whose ideas morally sanctioned the probing, exploiting, and controlling of “the outside” for the sake of

knowledge (read “human benefit”). More importantly, this exploitation was sanctioned in the *name of life itself* (for humans).

In the end, this mechanical process went directly against a vision of wholeness by furthering the fragmentation of the world into independent parts (Merchant 182). But the connections were lost in more than just symbolic ways. Research became fragmented from its environment. For the mechanical world redefined reality into a predictable and rational system of laws (Merchant 193). It was (and still is) a reality that gravitated around two major interconnected constituents of human experience: order and power (216). Descartes, Hobbes, and Mersenne (seventeenth-century thinkers), as Merchant extensively describes, were solely concerned with finding certainties within nature (203). The way to “intelligibility” was through mathematics and its logic (the “then” deemed only valid form of knowledge). In fact, this kind of thinking will *force* rationality onto the object of confusion; it leaves no space for paradox, and plainly denies its presence. It calls as “truth” that which has been proven, clearly and distinctly, *scientifically*.

As mentioned earlier, Merchant’s work posits this exercise in history as key to understanding the current ecological problems as “not new in kind but in degree” (67). In the words of Ynestra Kind, “it is my contention that the systemic denigration of working-class people and people of color, women, and animals is connected to the basic dualism that lies at the root of Western civilization” (*Reweaving the World* 107). Ecofeminism therefore grew out of a history that relentlessly justified the abuse, domination, and hence oppression of nature, women, and all other “lower orders of society.” Ecofeminism also grew out of a hidden history of societies bound to the earth and based on nature religions of the Goddess. The discovery of this lost history has brought some feminists within the realm of ecology to see the connections that Merchant so skillfully exposed. As with feminism, environmentalism becomes a way to make *visible* the effects that power can have on the earth. Some are more obvious than others (a forest is cut), and some are less so (like global warming). It is based on Merchant’s findings that we begin our discussion on ecofeminism.

Originating from Françoise d’Eaubonne’s work (*Le féminisme ou la mort* or *Feminism or Death*), ecofeminism followed the rise in ecological concerns during the 1970’s. These ecological concerns clearly exposed the distancing of humans from nature, the shortsightedness of technological endeavors, and the “obsessions of dominance and control” (Merchant 10). Feminists added two crucial words to the

discussion: patriarchy and capitalism. In the end, feminists—and in accordance ecofeminists—provided a new way of interpreting science, scientific findings, and hence the world as a whole.

One can also trace the influence of ecofeminism within the more radical section of the environmental movement called “deep ecology.” As Michael Zimmerman explains, deep ecology “maintains that the environment crisis is the inevitable outcome of the history of Western culture” (*Reweaving the World* 139). And within this movement lie variations in interpretation that are all visible within much of ecofeminist theory. Ecology begins with the idea of conservation, which stems from our obligation to future generations. Following this idea, ecology then introduces the concept of “moral extensionism,” which asserts that the environmental problems arise from our “unethical treatment of nonhuman beings” (*Reweaving the World* 139). Through this approach, non human beings are worthy of moral consideration and legal standing (*Reweaving the World* 139). The next stage of ecological consciousness is ecological sensibility, or deep ecology, which asserts that “the industrial pollution, species extinction, biospheric degradation, and nuclear annihilation facing the Earth are all symptoms of anthropocentrism” (*Reweaving the World* 139-140). Deep ecology denies the “human versus everything else” dichotomy and thinks “nondualistically” (*Reweaving the World* 140), rejecting ideas such as atomism, hierarchalism, rigid autonomy and abstract rationalism (*Reweaving the World* 141). Here again, ecology is not in opposition to science; rather it opposes its “enslavement to economic and nationalistic interests” (*Reweaving the World* 141). Further, as with ecofeminism, deep ecology presents the need to change laws immediately *as well as* presenting the urgent need to “revolutionize” humanity’s understanding of itself and the world around it.

As mentioned earlier, the main contribution that ecofeminism brings to deep ecology is the realization that so called “humanity” is divided though issues of gender, race, class, sexuality, geography, etc. In other words, it is not only Western culture that is at fault; it is also patriarchy (and with it, capitalism). As a result, ecofeminism necessitates a critique of abstraction (so present within deep ecological thought), and hence a turn to concrete and personal relationships to other people and the Earth (*Reweaving the World* 146). Without this, deep ecology falls into the very trap of patriarchy by hiding difference or pretending that so-called “true” equality really exists. Or, as Vandana Shiva eloquently puts it, “it cannot understand equality in diversity” (*Reweaving the World* 192).

Furthermore, ecofeminism acts as a new way to interpret the

so-called outside. Read, for instance, the following premise by Brian Swimme: “what I would like to do here is to take a couple of central and extraordinary facts provided by scientists and interpret them according to the vision of some brilliant ecofeminists” (*Reweaving the World* 17). According to him, inspired interpretations can only “come alive within an ecofeminist consciousness” (*Reweaving the World* 21), something that is impossible within the traditional reductionist interpretation of current scientists (*Reweaving the World* 20). Consider also his following conclusion:

we need to *imagine* this cosmogonic myth as *alive* in our educational processes [we will learn that we] and all beings and every thing in existence come from a common birth [...] Kin. Not an external relationship; not a legal bond set up by the state. Rather a deep and undeniable communion, from within [...] (*Reweaving the World* 21-22 italics mine).

But we must note here that not all ecofeminists advocate a kind of melancholic return to the past. Many do not discredit technology, but wish for a more positive way of using technology, a different approach to its usage, and, more importantly, a drastic shift in the way we see ourselves and the world around us. The point is to rethink the way we look at the outside and attempt to answer some of the following questions:

why does patriarchal society want to forget its biological connections with nature? And why does it seek to gain control over life in the form of women, other peoples, and nature? And what can we do about dismantling this process of domination? What kind of society could live in harmony with its environment? (*Reweaving the World* 156-157)

The task is one of a rewriting of history, an exposure of different models of existence, and, sometimes, a return to previous forgotten myths (see Mara Lynn Keller for instance). As mentioned earlier, many ecofeminists have provided us with this, Merchant being one of them, as well as Riane Eisler.

In her essay “The Gaia Tradition and the Partnership Future: an Ecofeminist Manifesto,” Eisler explains and describes the presence of prehistoric societies that were not warlike or exploitative in terms of gender or nature (*Reweaving the World* 23). Here again, I pause in order to make their point clear: the goal is not to return to these societies (that is indeed impossible). Rather, it is simply a matter of opening our imagination to the possibility of other models, and to the possibility of change. Quite simply, these “myths” put forth the presence of societies that functioned without the usage of intolerant dualisms (woman/man; nature/culture; passive/active etc.). In this way, Eisler can avoid the common assumption that these kinds of



societies were “primitive” and “hence” “backward” (both technologically and morally).

Looking back at the Gaia tradition therefore serves one major purpose: dissipating the stereotypes about the supposed “nature” of human beings.<sup>1</sup> Eisler begins this task by refuting the image of “man’s nature” as a “self-centered, greedy, brutal, ‘born-killer’” (*Reweaving the World* 24). She returns to the Paleolithic period (about 25,000 years ago) and explains the presence of domestication of plants, which some anthropologists believe was invented by women. And, looking back at the data on the first agrarian and Neolithic societies, she discovers that these societies were not warlike or dominated by males (*Reweaving the World* 25). This mere fact disproves the conventional idea that correlates the beginning of the domestication of plants (and hence technology) with the development of male dominance, warfare, and slavery (*Reweaving the World* 25). This new interpretation has led to what is now called the “Gaia hypothesis” (*Reweaving the World* 26).

This new scientific theory, Riane Eisler explains, presents the earth as a living system, designed to maintain and nurture life (*Reweaving the World* 26). The origins of this theory are of no surprise: the belief system of Goddess-worshipping prehistoric societies (*Reweaving the World* 26), nature as a big mother figure, nurturing and giving. But this theory also brings to light the importance of the relation between females and males; it is a relation that can decide the fate of a whole society as potentially peaceful or not, in harmony or not. It shows that gender is not a minor element within oppression, but that it shapes other oppressions; it shapes an oppressive mind-frame. This does not mean that gender trumps race or class or sexuality (to name a few); it merely reasserts the importance of a discourse on gender when speaking of oppression. As a result, the point for Riane Eisler is to orient her text towards what she calls a “partnership model” (*Reweaving the World* 31).

But while speaking of diversity, ecofeminist theory emphasizes the concept of interconnectedness and the realization that “we are, as is everything that is, an instance of becoming-in-relation. Nothing is independent of anything else” (*Reweaving the World* 257). Susan Griffin’s *Woman and Nature*, for instance, illustrates the possibility for interconnectedness. This text, full of word-play, contains animals,

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<sup>1</sup> It is not, however, about proving the existence of supposed “matriarchies,” which would only be evidence of the binary nature of our thinking.

trees (etc.) who speak to the reader through a non-linear narrative. While playing with language and its expectations (*Reweaving the World* 61), Griffin brings nature (including animals) within a philosophical and scientific discourse; she integrates them within the whole of experience as beings worthy of consideration and respect, whose lives affect the lives of humans. This is reminiscent of the shamanic worldview reintroduced by many ecofeminists such as Sally Abbotfor, which posits the human relationship to animals as central to life on earth (*Reweaving the World* 36).

The point here is to step away from alienation, and to reconnect experience as a whole with “the whole.” As Merchant explains in her essay “Ecofeminism and Feminist Theory,” “both women and nature are exploited by men as part of the progressive liberation of humans from the constraints imposed by nature. The consequence is the alienation of women and men from each other and both from nature” (*Reweaving the World* 103). This interconnectedness must therefore begin with a respect for all beings on the planet (including trees and plants and so on) and the realization that they are all *alive*. In this sense, we are trying to derail the vision that upholds the death of nature, which, as said above, does not necessarily imply a return to the “old days.” According to Starhawk, “when you understand the universe as a living being, [...] then science becomes our way of looking more deeply into this living being *that we're all in*” (*Reweaving the World* 73 emphasis mine). The earth becomes a kind of “living community” (*Reweaving the World* 74). In the end, this is crucial since “a disregard for the natural ecology of a region goes hand in hand with a disregard for the natural rights of people to determine their own fate and to live in the way they choose” (*Reweaving the World* 95).

The interconnectedness therefore acts within the realm of consciousness as well. Susan Griffin explains, “we think of intellectual knowledge as separate from sensual knowledge, and the spirit as belonging to a different realm entirely” (*Reweaving the World* 87). The result is henceforth predictable: “our experience of the world is fragmented” (*Reweaving the World* 87). Along with Starhawk, Griffin further explains, “it takes a bending of language at this point to speak of consciousness as embedded in the way we breathe, the way we stand, all the intricate numbers of relationships we have, where we live on the planet, the trees next to us” (*Reweaving the World* 93). This bending is especially necessary in order to avoid associating wholeness with an erasure of difference. As Chris J. Cuomo points out:

a crucial challenge for those engaged in ecofeminist projects is taking seriously connections, patterns, similarities, and interwoven features of different forms of domination and exploitation without either

obscuring difference and particularity through reduction, or resting in preoccupation with various forms of domination *only* in so far as they are related to each other” (30).

An ecofeminist perspective must therefore emphasize difference while, *at the same moment*, seeing our interconnectedness. As a result, it is through this concoction of stories, voices, and language, that ecofeminism becomes an almost soothing expression of confusion and paradox. It inhabits this paradox and enables the freeing of expression. Far from exhibiting a fear of the unknown, it recognizes its presence with a certain amount of joy and excitement. In the end, interconnectedness creates *new* relations among humans and between humans and nature based on a respect for all living beings as part of one place. These new relationships compel a drastic restructuring of capitalistic patriarchy (*Reweaving the World* 100) that bases its view of nature on the machine model (one that can be controlled and repaired from the outside), (*Reweaving the World* 101). Again, it is a complete restructuring that is at stake here, not a regression; what needs to occur is not the end of an association of woman and nature, but the end of a *negative* association between the two, and the end of this sole association. The point is quite simple: humans and nature are connected; humans and nature are not separate.

Starhawk puts it in basic terms,

we all know we have to breathe; we all know we have to drink water; we all know we have to eat food; and, we all know it's got to come from somewhere. So why isn't the preservation of the environment our first priority? It makes such logical sense that it's irritating to have to say it. (*Reweaving the World* 78)

We commonly assume that the system at work is a system that works. As a result, ecofeminism posits that a system that “works” does not make for a “good” system, or the only system that could “work.” The system in place, as mentioned earlier, is indeed one that posits clean, clear-cut visions of the world devoid of chaos.

Indeed, and quite ironically, the world is simplified not only through language—through the erasure of certain cultures and histories—but literally through the destruction of hundreds of species each year. In fact, it is this simplification that causes disorder, for “diverse, complex ecosystems are more stable than simple ones” (*Reweaving the World* 108). As mentioned above, the “Gaia hypothesis” proposes that the planet is one single living organism and that cooperation, through difference, has always been a stronger force in evolution than competition (*Reweaving the World* 112). Whatever the scientific merits of this theory, it remains an important thought. And through this very

simple act, it prevents ecofeminism from being a dualistic world-view. Indeed, ecofeminism attempts to mimic nature by creating balance within difference, balance within chaos, and therefore seeing chaos as balance. Here again, the irony should not go unnoticed: it is this simplification of nature, cultures, and beings that continues to create new problems (ecological disasters, wars...).

Vandana Shiva provides us with an example of this kind of methodology when speaking of colonialism. In her essay "Development as a New Project of Western Patriarchy," she explains that "a replication of economic development based on commercialization of resource use of commodity production in the newly independent countries created internal colonies" (*Reweaving the World* 189). So called "development" and hence colonialization result in the destruction of diversity in nature, other cultures etc. It removes people from the land, water, and forests by destroying an individual's direct link and control over "her or his" part of land. In fact, so-called "development" brought to the Third World has proven time and time again to be detrimental to women who have typically bore the costs but have been excluded from the benefits (*Reweaving the World* 190). Women are affected more deeply by famines because they hold the role of the feeder, the caretaker of children, the aged, and the infirm, while, in many cases, men are forced to migrate and work for industries.

In the end, "maldevelopment is thus synonymous with women's underdevelopment (increasing sexist domination) and with nature's underdevelopment (deepening ecological crisis)" (*Reweaving the World* 193). The reasons, as said above, are very simple: first, there is a disregard for the diversity of things, and second, Western patriarchal bourgeois world's self-interest is deemed universal. It in turn imposes it on others (*Reweaving the World* 193) and calls it "economic growth," progress, and civilization. This so-called progress, civilization, and economic growth all guide us into poverty: monetary poverty for most, cultural poverty for all. As Shiva puts it, "the paradox and crises of development arise from the mistaken identification of culturally perceived poverty as real material poverty and the mistaken identification of growth of commodity production as solving basic needs" (*Reweaving the World* 199). This is, again, because development brings impoverished water, land, and genetic wealth (*Reweaving the World* 199); it brings simplification and hence chaos.

So here we are, in the twenty first century, with this history to base our theories and an environment that is still degrading rapidly. What do we learn from this? The problems have origins (emphasis on the plural), they are deeply imbedded in our everyday practice,

and they are slowly (or not so slowly) actually killing us. We therefore begin from this point: the problem is urgent; change is needed NOW. The very person who coined the term “ecofeminism,” Françoise d’Eaubonne (*Le féminisme ou la mort (Feminism or Death)*), understood this fact completely. What does it mean to read a text, published in 1974, that alarmingly informs the reader of the problems of overpopulation and air pollution (the growing presence of CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere in Paris for example)? Sighing with exasperation, the reader remembers that CO<sub>2</sub> concentrations in the air have only grown since 1974 and have now, in 2006, reached unprecedented height. And with further alarm, the reader looks out the window and perhaps notices the changes in climate, the growing distressing documentaries on the melting of ice caps, species on their way to extinction, failed efforts to stop the destruction of the rain forest, the multiplication of sandstorms and hence desertification, erosion of the top soil, etc. So with these few realizations in mind, we understand that whatever the semantics chosen to speak of the problem, the fact remains that there really is a problem and that it will, in due time, affect everyone on the planet.

What else have we learned? Well, that the destruction of the earth is just another sign of the destructive powers in the hands of human beings that base their vision of the world on supposed clear cut binaries (read Truths) which, in turn, transform themselves into hierarchies. And from these hierarchies comes a specific assigned treatment. This, as we have said, is called “oppression.” So what do we do? Ecofeminism tells us that unless we understand the full scope of the possibilities of oppressive acts, then we cannot effectively end oppressive practices, discourse, etc. The point, as Karen Warren herself once made (in *Feminism and Ecology*), is that feminism without ecology cannot be true feminism; it becomes a blind feminism that fights oppression on the one end, but perhaps perpetuates it on the other. With this in mind, how can one motivate others to embrace some of ecofeminism’s major principles?

Well, here lies the problem. The point is that the association of feminism with ecology can be exhilarating for some, and completely repellent for others. This, I’m afraid, cannot be helped. But it is in the analysis of these (sometimes) opposing reactions that the interest lays. Indeed, why would some reject ecology? Why would we not want to protect our environment? Are we inherently self-destructive? As mentioned above, since the mid 1990’s, ecofeminism has been subject to quite a bit of backlash (which has, predictably, been quite beneficial to ecofeminism or its practice). Ranging from the political impracticality of spirituality, the (mis)interpretation of ecofeminism as

a coherent “movement,” to the criticism of its own confused, convoluted *and* essentialist theories, ecofeminism has somewhat lost its momentum. Many feminists refuse to broach the subject, some refuse to call themselves “ecofeminist,” and some have stopped associating with it at all. So here again, what do we do? Adopt a different name? Create a different name? Propose some kind of coherent all-encompassing “path”? What is the point in throwing ecofeminism’s history in the garbage? Do we want to say: “well, that didn’t work, let me create something else”? Well, not necessarily.

The point is not to convince the reader to be both spiritual and reasonable, or to worship goddesses and fight for democracy. The point is to realize that, far from being binaries, the few elements present in the previous sentence could perhaps be combined and used within a political strategy. For whatever the path may be, ecofeminism is merely one way to recognize systems of oppression and attempt to dismantle them; it is merely one way to motivate us into global change. Nonetheless, what every attempt to end oppression **MUST** take into consideration is the need for interdisciplinary approaches that can keep the big picture in mind while focusing on individual situations. But it does not mean that everyone is obliged to call themselves “ecofeminists,” or “ecological feminists.” However, it does seem imperative to espouse some of the basic principles originating from the practice of ecofeminism without reserve. Being an ecofeminist is, at its basis, a belief that calls for the end of oppression and a rethinking of the ways in which we see ourselves and others within the world. This, I feel, anyone would adhere to. What is a bit more difficult for some to swallow is that, quite simply, the ecofeminist practice pushes one outside of oneself, it highlights the presence of anthropocentrism, and includes, without reservation, the notion of “nature” (including animals), within a typical human discourse. This is its most basic and powerful point.

As a result, ecofeminism demands a rethinking of “nature” itself. As said by Chris J. Cuomo, “feminists who first drew attention to connections among the mistreatment of women, animals, and nature, took these entities at face value, and to a large degree relied on common discursive understandings instead of questioning the accuracy and universality of categories like ‘woman’ and ‘nature’” (24). Many are aware of the vast literature criticizing the short-sightedness of many feminists when speaking of “women.” The same needs to be done when speaking of “nature.” Within an ecofeminist perspective, nature does not stand outside of our lives, but stands at the heart of society, it is the computer, the telephone; it is technology. As said time and time again, the idea of preserving nature does not constitute returning to

some embellished past (a pre-capitalistic, or pre-patriarchal, or even pre-agricultural era). Nature is fundamentally linked with our lives, it is our lives, it is where we are, what keeps us alive and healthy; it is everything within the planet. In the end, our interconnections can be articulated in the following: we are nature. We are merely part of the balance, which we have the power to offset in irredeemable ways. With this basis, we can continue to bring nature back to the forefront of typical human discourse. In fact, this can enable us to place “the body” at the center of ecological and feminist principles.

So I ask the following question: if an end to oppression and oppressive *thinking* are at stake, then does the perpetuation of, let’s say the oppression of animals (by eating them) not constitute a clear sign that oppression has not ended? The controversy has been stated before, but I would like to bring it to the forefront again: when given the chance/means/access, how can one be a feminist or even a peace activist without being a vegan? How can that awareness not be present? The way we live, for many of us, has turned past levels of survival to actual privilege. We actually can choose the way we live (to some extent of course). But, at the very least, we can choose the way we EAT. And, if responsibility follows privilege, that very responsibility lies in our potential concessions: we choose to *not* eat meat for instance. We choose to *not* eat pizza. It is that simple. For truly, what is the excuse for not doing so? That we “don’t care about animals”? That only “snobs” are vegan? That veganism is an elitist diet? That buying organic is an elitist move? That there are “more important things to care about”? Is it that difficult for us to inform ourselves on the simple choices we make every day? Is it that difficult for us to act upon that information? Is it that difficult to place importance on our seemingly banal habits? As Chris J. Cuomo explains, “any consideration of ‘community problems’ that does not include the lives of women and non-human beings is grossly inadequate, as is any analysis that is not highly attentive to the racial formations within environmental issues” (37).

When speaking of animals in the food industry for instance, or while informing ourselves on the state of the planet, the information is not only reprehensible, it is sickening: our health, our environment, and of course, the ways in which we justify some of the practices are all symbolic of this mind-frame that ecofeminism attempts to eradicate. Can this kind of information propel one into change? Can it propel one into “ecofeminism”? Speaking from personal experience, the answer to that question is undeniably “yes.” The situation is clearly alarming, unbelievable even, and it is sustained every day by a series of thoughtless actions. The situation places everything

in perspective, certainly bringing some of us down from our ivory towers. As mentioned earlier, feminism needs to be motivated; it needs tangibility. In this way only must it return to its roots. And in the end, it is this kind of information that demands a place within academic thought (especially within feminism). As some of us have undoubtedly witnessed in ourselves or others, researching, thinking, writing etc. does not always correlate with our everyday basic action. Within this context, ecofeminism can, for some, create a connection between academia (or theory) and practice. It can bring the disconnection within discourse. It does not mean that every ecofeminist is necessarily an activist, but that some level of activism is present within any ecofeminist thought. Ecofeminism brings that feeling, that urgency back to the forefront (without, of course, denying the need for theory).

For why is activism so problematic within the eyes of many theorists? Because any act is going to be, one way or another, problematic. But can we really afford to wait for a supposed perfect approach that will solve all the potential problems before we decide to act? Yes, ecofeminism is essentialist at time, but really, I ask, what isn't? Is it not part of language's unavoidable downfall? If we base political action on issues rather than identities, we *still* cannot avoid essentialism. So do we embrace it? Do we, perhaps, embrace essentialism in order to complicate it? Do we tolerate it in order to create political strategies? If I, as a white woman, bring ecology at the center of my politics, is that really problematic? If the sight of an animal being tortured and killed in a slaughter house brings me to tears, am I negating the history of feminist practice by adhering to typical "feminine traits"? Am I even performing an anthropocentric act?

To be fair, we do run into problems when trying to create political strategies, when attempting to give a voice to "everybody." This indeed was well documented by Noël Sturgeon in her book *Ecofeminist Nature: Race, Gender, Feminist Theory and Political Action*. Within her account of the rising of ecofeminism in the 1980's, Sturgeon illustrates the problem of forcing a discourse on difference within the realm of practice. Using Native American history to instill a discourse on difference is indeed problematic. Using binaries ("white and non-white") within a discourse on race is also problematic. In their efforts to include "everybody" within the realm of discourse (in conferences for instance), the organizers allotted time to each individual depending on their race. They turned the whole process into a scientific calculation and, by this very move, further reinstated the boundaries they were so desperate to complicate. This, I must be clear, is not due to malice on their part, or even stupidity, but rather to the very



problems that occur when speaking and *practicing* difference. So again, the question imposes itself: what do we base political strategies on? Diversity? How is that possible? Is perhaps the question of a basis the wrong question?

### **Conclusion:**

Feminism exposes the presence of oppression both within the visible and invisible realms, and ideally creates an idea of freedom or “liberation” that is neither antisocial nor antinatural (*Reweaving the World* 120). It creates a kind of feminism that does not succumb to the “totalizing impulses of masculinist politics” (*Reweaving the World* 123), “a politics of resistance that runs counter to the will to totalize” (*Reweaving the World* 126); it creates a kind of feminism that does not pin others as objects on which we can base our identity (the “I am not this”); it creates a kind of world view that does not deny the experience of each individual being, but instead turns to the interconnectedness of all life as a “*lived* awareness that we experience in relation to *particular* beings as well as the larger whole” (*Reweaving the World* 137). But how must we practice this in our everyday practice? How do we unite theory and its will to deconstruct everything before acting? These questions are huge and tiring to say the least. This, again, is where ecofeminism can help. This approach reminds us that we are part of the same planet, and we have arbitrarily bestowed value on each being of this very planet. And *basically*, this move has had horrendous affects. The importance of an ecofeminist approach is that it brings about a “unifying” aspect that is neither arguable nor problematic. It states, quite *simply*, that in the face of ecological disaster, we eventually ALL suffer.

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