

Ecofeminism: Historic and International Evolution

8/18/20028/18/2002Ecofeminism emerged in the 1970s and 1980s as myriad forms of feminist and environmental theories and activism intersected. The term was introduced by Françoise d'Eaubonne in her book *Le Féminisme ou la Mort* [Feminism or Death] published in 1974. Some theorists, such as Ynestra King, name it as a third wave of feminism, while others place it in the general category of deep ecology. Ecofeminism acts in both and neither of these broad movements, simultaneously serving as an environmental critique of feminism and a feminist critique of environmentalism. Ecofeminist trajectories are varied; there is no one accepted or orthodox “ecofeminism.” Rosemary Radford Ruether, Ivone Gebara, Vandana Shiva, Susan Griffin, Alice Walker, Starhawk, Sallie McFague, Luisa Teish, Sun Ai Lee-Park, Paula Gunn Allen, Monica Sjöö, Greta Gaard, Karen Warren and Andy Smith are among the voices speaking from ecofeminist positions.

Ecofeminism asserts that all forms of oppression are connected and that structures of oppression must be addressed in their totality. Oppression of the natural world and of women by patriarchal power structures must be examined together or neither can be confronted fully. These socially constructed oppressions formed out of the power dynamics of patriarchal systems. In one of the first ecofeminist books, *New Woman/New Earth*, Ruether, states:

Women must see that there can be no liberation for them and no solution to the ecological crisis within a society whose fundamental model of relationships continues to be one of domination. They must unite the demands of the women's movement with those of the

ecological movement to envision a radical reshaping of the basic socioeconomic relations and the underlying values of this [modern industrial] society (204).

Ruether makes clear a central tenet of ecofeminism: earth and the other-than-human experience the tyranny of patriarchy along with women. Classism, racism, sexism, heterosexism, naturism (a term coined by Warren) and speciesism are all intertwined.

Ecofeminism is multi-faceted and multi-located, challenging structures rather than individuals. By confronting systems of patriarchy, ecofeminism broadens the scope of the cultural critique and incorporates seemingly disparate but, according to ecofeminism, radically connected elements. Combining feminist and deep ecological perspectives -- in and of themselves extremely varied ways of thinking about reality -- is a complex, transgressive process that is often in flux. Ecofeminist positions reflect varied political stances that may be, and usually are, transformed through time and place. In other words, the political activisms and alliances stemming from ecofeminism modify in relationship to the perceived justice issues being confronted in differing cultural and historical settings. Because of this constant morphing, ecofeminism simultaneously challenges patriarchies from different angles. This is one of the myriad strengths of the fluid and radically diverse positions assumed by ecofeminism.

Ecofeminism claims that patriarchal structures justify their dominance through categorical or dualistic hierarchies: heaven/earth, mind/body, male/female, human/animal, spirit/matter, culture/nature, white/non-white. Established oppressive systems continue to manifest their abusive powers by reinforcing assumptions of these binaries, even making them sacred through religious and scientific constructs. Ecofeminism posits that as long as any of the dualisms exist as an integral

component of societal structuring and justification, they will all continue to serve as starting points to justify patriarchy. Therefore all dualisms and binary oppositional forms must be dismantled otherwise humanity remains “divided against” itself, a phrase that Griffin uses to describe the ideological impact of dualism.

As a justice advocate for the entire web of life, ecofeminism resists dividing culture into these imbedded separate or dualistic arenas. In her introduction to *Ecofeminism: Women, Culture, Nature*, editor Warren asserts:

What makes ecofeminism distinct is its insistence that nonhuman nature and naturism (i.e., the unjustified domination of nature) are feminist issues. Ecofeminist philosophy extends familiar feminist critiques of social isms of domination to nature (4).

Ecofeminism’s constructive worldview replaces hierarchical dualisms with radical diversity and relationship, modeled on both biodiversity and the feminist emphasis on the strength of difference.

Throughout the 1970s, few ecofeminists in academic settings designated themselves as such, though several engaged in similar theoretical endeavors linking feminist and environmental ideas. Early publications that analyze the woman/nature connection in light of the environmental crisis include Ruether’s *New Woman/New Earth* (1975), Mary Daly’s *Gyn/Ecology* (1978), Griffin’s *Woman and Nature* (1978) and Carolyn Merchant’s *The Death of Nature* (1980).

Some of the earliest articulations of ecofeminism analyzed the patriarchal underpinnings in religious and philosophical systems of the European and Mediterranean world. These cultural and geographical foci surfaced from the primarily European and Euro-American voices that constituted

the initial ecofeminist conversations. Such scholars as Anne Primavesi, Carol Christ, Merchant, Daly and Charlene Spretnak examined cultural and religious systems from such areas as ancient Mesopotamia and Greece, as well as religious systems such as Judaism and Christianity. They proposed that patriarchal cultural structures revolved around layers of symbol systems that justified domination. For example, they interpret the creation stories in the book of Genesis, foundational for Judaism, Christianity and Islam, as demonizing both woman (Eve) and animal (the snake).

These and other early ecofeminists analyzed pre-patriarchal cultures in the Mediterranean and old European worlds as well. Feminist historian Gerda Lerner and archaeomythologist Marija Gimbutas provided some of the groundwork for this analysis. Gimbutas' theories of Old Europe are based in her complex and widely critiqued archaeomythological reconstructions. Her theories suggest that life valuing, sometimes matriarchal and rarely militaristic societies existed before Indo-Aryan invaders slowly destroyed these cultures. Lerner's historical reconstructions focus on the shift from small Neolithic villages to city-based states with the accompanying rise of patriarchal cultural systems. Both theorists posit pre-patriarchal Mediterranean world religious cultures in which fertility goddesses and other nature symbolism figured prominently.

Gradually, patriarchal, militaristic sky gods replaced earth goddesses and gods. Most of the ancient symbols of power were subverted and remythologized as evil or chaotic. The mother goddess, whose body often birthed or constituted the earth, became the target of the powerful sky gods, as evidenced by such creation stories as the Babylonian *Enuma Elish*. The pattern of male deities killing female or animal deities in an effort to establish a patriarchal order and to control forces assumed to be chaotic repeats itself consistently. The snake, once a symbol of life, was trampled under the foot of the male deity and connected to evil. Hell was in the earth and Heaven

was removed to the sky. Paradise lost its materiality and became a masculine, hierarchical projection.

Such theories raise many questions for scholars interested in the reconstruction of early human civilizations. For example, few archeologists accept Gimbutas' theories and suggest that they are projections of matriarchal and goddess myths. Still, some ecofeminists reference these historical reconstructions as alternatives to the commonly accepted patriarchal constructions that project historical progress. In other words, the idea of civilizations advancing from pre-agricultural to agricultural to industrial to post-industrial/technological might also be construed as a mythological projection. Applying feminist historical methodology, some academic ecofeminists reevaluate the patriarchal myth of progress, particularly its detrimental effects on the human-nature relationship. Carolyn Merchant articulates a version of this critique in *The Death of Nature*.

From the work of Griffin, Daly, Ruether, Merchant and others in the 1970s, grew a dramatic expansion of ecofeminism in academic circles during the 1980s and 1990s. Activist movements, sometimes connected with but generally outside of the academy, also increased in the 1980s. Several conferences focusing on ecofeminism were organized: "Women and Life on Earth: Eco-feminism in the Eighties" (1980), "Ecofeminist Perspectives: Culture, Nature, Theory" (1987), a group at the National Women's Studies Association (1989). These efforts, along with other attempts to create sustainable organizations such as the Feminist Peace Institute and WomanEarth, led to the publication of several foundational anthologies. *Reclaim the Earth: Women Speak Out for Life on Earth*, edited by Stephanie Leland and Leonie Caldecott (1983); *Healing the Wounds: The Promise of Ecofeminism*, edited by Judith Plant (1989); and *Reweaving the World: The Emergence of Ecofeminism*, edited by Irene Diamond and Gloria Orenstein (1990). All three volumes were edited by Euro-American ecofeminists but the editors included authors from various cultures. Petra Kelly,

in her foreword to *Healing the Wounds*, proclaims a “global ecological sisterhood” and calls on the women of the Chipko Movement (India), the Greenham Common (England), the Krim Region (former Soviet Union) and the Western Shoshone Indian Nation to “link arms” as global sisters (ix). The practice of publishing anthologies with diverse voices rather than books representing just one voice exhibits the overall tendency among ecofeminists to value inclusivity and difference. Still these anthologies, while influential, were criticized for essentializing the woman/nature connection and for over-romanticizing or over-simplifying women in non-Western cultures.

Vandana Shiva, a physicist and environmental researcher/activist in India, published *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India* (1988), which reflects the increasingly global nature of ecofeminism during the 1980s. Shiva connects the “death of the feminine principle” with “maldevelopment,” a term she uses to describe the introduction of Western, intensive agriculture to the “Third World.” In her essay “Development, Ecology and Women” Shiva articulates the relationship clearly:

Maldevelopment militates against this equality in diversity, and superimposes the ideologically constructed category of western technological man as a uniform measure of the worth of classes, cultures, and genders... Diversity, and unity and harmony in diversity, become epistemologically unattainable in the context of maldevelopment, which then becomes synonymous with women’s underdevelopment (increasing sexist domination), and nature’s depletion (deepening ecological crises)... (*Healing the Wounds*, 83).

Shiva also published, with Maria Mies, a German, Marxist sociologist, *Ecofeminism: Reconnecting a Divided World* (1993). In this book the authors connect the capitalist-patriarchal economic system with the oppression of women in both the northern and southern hemispheres. However Shiva, not unlike some other ecofeminists, has been criticized for essentializing women and nature in her work.

Another area of focus concerned the relationship of scientific worldviews to religion and culture. Ecofeminism suggests that the antagonism sometimes existing between religious and scientific worldviews has been detrimental, used by both approaches to advance their own hierarchical structures. The reductionist models of both Western theologies and many Western scientific ideologies project a material world that is not sacred, but mechanistic. This apparent disconnect between the material and the sacred, alleged by ecofeminists to be fostered by both religion and science, has been particularly detrimental when acted upon by European-American dominant cultures. The Christian ecofeminist theologian Sallie McFague, in her book *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (1993), summarizes the situation:

Moreover, and most significant for an ecological theology, this picture projected disembodiment: disembodied knowing (the Cartesian mind/body dualism) and disembodied doing (internal human peace or forgiveness of sins became the principal action between God and the world) (29).

In *The Death of Nature* Merchant links this hierarchical, mechanistic approach to nature to the oppression of women. She argues that, whereas organic thinking and interdependence shaped

European life through the Middle Ages, the “fathers” of the scientific revolution determined to dominate nature. Merchant quotes Francis Bacon extensively. He proposes to “hound nature in her wanderings” in order to “drive her afterward to the same place again.” To disclose the “secrets of nature” Bacon suggests that “entering and penetrating into these holes and corners” of nature will lead to the uncovering of truth (168). During the same general time period, numerous European women (and men, though significantly fewer) were accused of witchcraft. The *Malleus Maleficarum* or *Hammer of Witches* (1486), a manual on identifying and interrogating witches, instructed inquisitors to “penetrate” and torture witches in order to discover their secrets. Merchant argues that the feminine language used for “nature” and the parallel violent approaches of control assigned against unruly nature and unruly women are obvious.

Both Merchant and McFague emphasize the new (and also old), organic model of the cosmos developing in some areas of science and religion. The “common creation story” and the growing field of ecology, as well as some new cosmologies emerging from physics, provide fertile ground for ecofeminist entry into dialogue with the natural sciences.

The first volume of essays to focus on the topic of ecofeminism and spirituality was *Ecofeminism and the Sacred*, edited by Carol Adams. Voices from various religious and ethnic perspectives were included, for example: Hindu (Lina Gupta), Jewish (Judith Plaskow), Buddhist (Stephanie Kaza), Native American (Andy Smith), Womanist (Delores Williams), Christian (McFague). The volume combined voices from activist positions as well as from academic ones, with many contributors speaking from both simultaneously. Byllye Avery of the National Black Women’s Health Project and Zoe Weil of ANIMALEARN, a division of the American Anti-vivisection Society, are two such contributors.

During the same three decades (1970-2000), ecofeminist activists engaged in myriad protests, boycotts and campaigns to bring attention to the interconnection of justice issues related to women and the environment as a whole. Feminism is politically activist at its core and feminist methodologies applied to scholarly work make political engagement requisite. Various scholars entered the activist arena via their intellectual contributions and various activists entered the academic arena via their commitment to justice-oriented endeavors. Many first generation ecofeminists encountered each other through antimilitarist and anti-nuclear protests during the height of the Cold War. In 1980 *A Handbook for Women on the Nuclear Mentality*, written by Susan Koen and Nina Swaim, used the word ecofeminism as a foundational concept for action. The Women's Pentagon Actions (1980-1981) and the Greenham Women's Peace Camp (established in 1981) are two examples of ecofeminist, antimilitarization and anti-nuclear organizations.

The influence of the United Nations Decade for Women (1975-1985), with its many gatherings and coalition-building opportunities, on the development of ecofeminism has not been adequately researched. Various international political conferences sponsored by the U.N. and international NGOs did impact ecofeminist activism. For example, the U.N. Conference on Women in Nairobi in 1985 brought together ecofeminist leaders and provided them with further opportunities to connect with international colleagues. Other major international conferences that linked environmentalism and women's issues were the "U.N.'s Environmental Programme's (UNEP) Global Assembly on Women and the Environment" and the "World Women's Congress for a Healthy Planet," both held in Miami in 1991. While these international ecofeminist (though not named explicitly as such) gatherings connected academic voices with activist voices, there are some ecofeminists whose focus has been activist and justice-oriented who deliberately separate themselves from the academic arena in general, and in particular from the Euro-American academy.

The issue of racism within ecofeminist, and feminist, dialogues has also been prominent. Though paying significant attention to diversity, white ecofeminists have often essentialized racial difference. For example, in the academic anthologies listed above, Shiva's voice figures prominently and seems to stand for all women who are not European or Euro-American. Few women of color have been able to remain in positions of leadership in activist or academic organizations for long periods of time. The political power of white women in these organizations undermines, often unintentionally, that of women of color. Even though such organizations as WomanEarth attempted to make racism an integral part of the ecofeminist conversation, racial tensions contributed to the eventual disbanding of numerous ecofeminist dialogue groups. Even the designations "white" and "of color" seem to maintain a binary within ecofeminism as it tries to subvert all such labels.

Another outcome of issues connected to racism is the critique of the label "ecofeminist" by various activists from indigenous peoples. For example, Winona LaDuke (Anishinaabeg), director of the Honor the Earth Fund and the White Earth Land Recovery Project, identifies herself as an activist for indigenous people rather than an ecofeminist activist. In an interview with Judith Plant (published in *Healing the Wounds*) Marie Wilson, member of the Gitksan-Wet'suwet'en Tribal Council (British Columbia) explains her perspective on this issue:

At the risk of sounding scornful or derogatory I have to say that the Indian attitude toward the natural world is different from the environmentalists. I have had the awful feeling that when we are finished dealing with the courts and our land claims, we will then have to battle the environmentalists and they will not understand why (217).

Some of this tension grows from the appropriation of indigenous religious rituals by white people, including some ecofeminists. Andy Smith harshly criticizes such borrowing in her essay “For All Those Who Were Indian in a Former Life” (*Ecofeminism and the Sacred*).

Ecowomanists, African-American ecofeminists, express related concerns. They identify with racism as the first and most dominant oppression in their experience, while sexism is secondary. As Shamara Shantu Riley points out in *Ecofeminism and the Sacred*:

There are several differences between ecofeminism and Afrocentric ecowomanism. While Afrocentric ecowomanism also articulates the links between male supremacy and environmental degradation, it lays far more stress on other distinctive features, such as race and class, that leave an impression markedly different from ecofeminists’ theories (197).

With the growing recognition of the extensive environmental racism in the United States and on a global scale, ecowomanists and others determine that their political alliances need to shift from a feminist agenda to one more directly engaging issues of race and class. This complexifying of interconnected oppressions, a central tenet of ecofeminism, continues to arise within the varieties of ecofeminism itself.

Globalization of all aspects of environmentalism has begun to shift the momentum in ecofeminism as well. *Women Healing Earth: Third World Women on Ecology, Feminism, and Religion* (ed. Ruether, 1996) provides insight into Latin American, Asian and African ecofeminism.

In the introduction Ruether notes that while ecofeminism is not a “movement” in these large geographical areas, the global dialogue inspired by connections between the oppression of women and nature needs to be recognized. The contributors are all local/global activists and their work speaks to the globalization of ecofeminisms. The Con-Spirando Collective in Chile collaborated with Ruether in developing the volume. Con-Spirando, translated as “breathing with” or “spiritual conspiracy,” tries to “weave a network of women throughout Latin America who are interested in feminist theology, spirituality and ecofeminism” while also holding women’s rituals (51). This collective publishes a magazine by the same name and operates a women’s center in Santiago in addition to focusing specifically on ecofeminist activism and analyzes. Victoria Tauli-Corpuz, from the tribal community of the Igorots in the Philippines, reflects on the spiritual links between women and nature in Igorot culture. But the “introduction of high-yielding varieties of rice seeds (HYV)” has disrupted women’s spiritual leadership roles (105). Finally, Sarah Mvududu, with the Women and Law in Southern Africa Research Project in Zimbabwe, claims that “gender is also fundamental in understanding human interaction with the environment and with respect to natural resources” (144). She explains this by analyzing Shona beliefs and woodland management. Spirit mediums, often women, are deeply involved with sustainable woodland development in Zimbabwe and their connection to sacred places where trees are protected is requisite for reforestation.

Ecofeminism has not been without critics, from ecofeminists themselves as well as from others. Some of the most ardent critics question the woman/nature link that is sometimes placed at the core of ecofeminism, as evidenced in the title of such essays as Sherry Ortner’s “Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?” (1974). Because of the strong woman-nature connection assumed and developed in some ecofeminist positions, various feminists distance themselves from ecofeminism and suggest that it is essentialist in nature. Essentialism claims that cross-culturally and cross-

historically those of a particular race, gender or other category share the same traits. Many expressions of feminism and ecofeminism argue against all such essentialist constructions, while others expressions seem to maintain essentialism. Kate Nash, in her 1994 essay “The Feminist Production of Knowledge: Is Deconstruction a Practice for Women?” published in *Feminist Review*, clarifies the “tension” between the “deconstructive politics of feminism and the assertions, or constructions of unified identity that feminists are frequently called on to make on behalf of the category ‘women’ which gives the project its political specificity” (75-76).

Various attempts at typologizing feminisms and ecofeminisms have been made and are helpful for clarifying the diverse perspectives, though it should be noted that even these designations are understood differently by different ecofeminists. Cultural and radical forms tend to idealize the feminine (therefore being labeled as essentialist more often) whereas activist (and theoretical) ecofeminists usually see their position as an analysis of a particular historical and cultural phenomenon. Some activist ecofeminists do engage in shifting political alliances that employ essentialist arguments functionally, but disengage from these alliances and reform others as requisite for effectively subverting patriarchal structures. One of the most helpful treatments of this continuing, sometimes heated, interaction among diverse manifestations of ecofeminism is Noel Sturgeon’s work *Ecofeminist Natures: Race, Gender, Feminist Theory and Political Action* (1997). In addition to these groupings within ecofeminism are ecowomanism, mentioned above, with a focus on race as the primary lens through which to view oppressions, and animal rights-oriented ecofeminism. There are also those who consider themselves spiritual ecofeminists, such as Starhawk, embracing the religious, Earth-goddess based components of the position.

Deep ecology and ecofeminism also engage in ideological debates. Many ecofeminists count themselves as deep ecologists and many deep ecologists count themselves as ecofeminists, while

others might designate themselves as one but not the other. The background to the differences between some deep ecologists and some ecofeminists grew from the feminist critique of the androcentric (male-centered) tendency of deep ecology in its earliest, and often militaristic or violent, expressions such as those expounded upon in Edward Abbey's *The Monkey Wrench Gang*. This approach has been dubbed eco-macho. Specific philosophical discussions took place under the auspices of the journal *Environmental Ethics*. Karen Warren and Michael Zimmerman published essays in this journal in 1987, both of which made explicit connections between feminism and deep ecology. In 1989, Warwick Fox's essay "The Deep Ecology-Ecofeminism Debate and Its Parallels" was published in the journal and followed by a response by Deborah Slicer in 1995 entitled "Is there an ecofeminism-deep ecology 'debate'?" Though the intricacies of the discussion cannot be expanded here, recognition of this on-going tension (i.e. whether or not male-female dualism is the primary lens through which to analyze and critique destructive power relations) is requisite. One interpretation of ecofeminism that shifts this analysis is Val Plumwood's *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*. Plumwood's central relational model for abusive western power structures is master-slave rather than male-female.

Another area of ecofeminism that needs to be addressed is the connection with animal rights activism, as noted previously. Adams has made explicit links between androcentric, patriarchal treatment of other-than-human animals, particularly focusing on the meat producing industries of the United States, and the exploitation of women. Her study, *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, provides the foundation for this field of inquiry. Greta Gaard's anthology *Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, Nature* includes several essays that analyze the mutual oppressions of women and non-human animals in patriarchal societies. A prominent activist presence in this field is the organization Feminists for Animal Rights whose co-founder, Marti Kheel, is also recognized as a leading ecofeminist voice.

However, these perspectives are countered by another prominent author, Mary Stange. She has referred to herself as an ecofeminist, though one who is critical of much that is usually assumed as central to ecofeminism. Her books, *Woman the Hunter* and *Gun Women*, posit that women are natural hunters, therefore in a predatory relationship with animals. Stange suggests that the linkages between woman and other animals sometimes made by ecofeminists could justify continued essentialism and, therefore, continued domination of both women and other animals. Thus she claims that the woman-animal connection should be reevaluated.

As ecofeminism continues to shift and grow, different positions will surely form and surface, while other positions and alliances will fade away or be replaced by more urgent connections. Diverse understandings regarding the nature of the web of relationships between various spiritual/religious traditions and ecofeminism could persist. Ecofeminism and deep ecology may continue wrangling. Issues of racism, population growth and the valuing of some humans over others, or of all humans over other-than-human animals, will stir the thoughts and actions of ecofeminists on a global scale. Charlene Spretnak provides one perspective that summarizes ecofeminist ideological positions effectively:

An ontology based on dynamic and admittedly partial knowledge as well as awe toward the complexity of embodied and embedded existence would contribute substantially to the profound social transformation that is needed (Warren, ed., 435).

And Wangari Maathai, while speaking at the World Women's Congress for a Healthy Planet in 1991, succinctly stated the activist positions of ecofeminism:

Things will not just happen...Women must do something (Gaard, ed., 3).

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Further Reading

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