

Meghann Robern

Professors Grace Yia-Hei Kao and Michele Buscher

LES 3016 Feminist Ethics

12 May 2014

Paper #4b: Option B Ecofeminism

The prompt for this paper is to “critically assess” the ecofeminist claim that “the fate of women and nature rise or fall together.” While I agree with the claim itself as part of a larger web of relationality between humans, plants, animals, etc, as Merchant outlines in her partnership ethic<sup>1</sup>, I do not agree that the essentialist link between women and nature made by ecofeminism in order to “rescue” both women and nature is sustainable. Woman and nature rise or fall together in the same way that humans and other animals will rise or fall with nature. While men, and primarily white, Western men, appear to be benefitting the most in the short term by the domination of women and of nature, Merchant says that it is an “illusion that people are free to exploit nature and to move in society at the expense of others,”<sup>2</sup> and if men are not taught that they, too, have a link with nature and the world around them, that illusion will lead to the fall of all higher forms of life on our planet.

It is necessary to point out that while I disagree that the women-nature link is sustainable for the long-term future, in the past it has served many individual communities well in order to create change locally. In the beginning of her chapter “Ecofeminism,”<sup>3</sup> Merchant gives may ex-

---

<sup>1</sup> Carolyn Merchant, *Radical Ecology: The Search for a Livable World (Revolutionary Thought and Radical Movements)* (Taylor and Francis, 2012) Kindle loc 1787-1796.

<sup>2</sup> Merchant loc 520-523.

<sup>3</sup> Merchant loc 3912.

amples from all over the world—Kenya, India, Sweden, Canada, the U.S.— of women in communities who have used their experiences from social locations to raise awareness about ecological issues. In each case, however, the women are in the position to make their arguments because of that social location, and not because of their biology as women. For example: if a community were based around a matriarchy, and it were the men who were the homemakers, taking on the nurturing of children after the women have birthed them, then it would communities of men tree-hugging in India to preserve fuel<sup>4</sup>, and men making herbicide-infused jam to feed to parliament.<sup>5</sup> In a community that is neither a full patriarchy nor a matriarchy, in which both men and women, and those who are genderqueer, are the nurturers of children and homemakers, the resistance to domination of nature would have no link to gender or biology at all. From my own personal experience, it would definitely be (and has been) my husband hugging the trees and making the jam in our household, along with experiencing the “traditionally” female problems of fueling the home, accessing clean water for bathing and drinking, and acquiring healthy, unprocessed, organic food to feed to the myself (the one who works outside the home) and the children. While I biologically gestated them until they could survive outside my womb, it has always been their father from whom they received the most nurturing behavior, and it is in his role as a nurturing father that he has increased his ecological activism.

So how important is gestation to that essentialist link between women and nature? Perhaps the strongest argument in favor of it is the fact that while a viable embryo currently requires

---

<sup>4</sup> Merchant loc 3912.

<sup>5</sup> Merchant loc 3912.

two biological contributions, one from a male and one from a female<sup>6</sup>, the gestation can only be done by a womb. The connection is purely biological, and does not universally lead to attachment to the eventual fetus, nor the ability to nurture if it survives the birthing process. And while the deconstruction of the definitions of “male” and “female” is happening in Western American culture—like Thomas Beatie’s famous pregnancies as a transgender man—even Beatie had to postpone full gender reassignment in order to keep his female womb to gestate his children. At the same time, his wife’s infertility did not make her male, or cause those around her to consider her queer in the same way as her husband.<sup>7</sup> Beatie is another living (as opposed to theoretical) example of how women-nature essentialism fails, even at the biological level, as some cultures are resisting patriarchal assigned gender roles without an automatic link to ecofeminism.

This is not argue against ecofeminism as a whole, but only to point out that the central tenant of women inherently linked to nature is quite possibly a product of the “male culture”<sup>8</sup> ecofeminism is attempting to reject. The exclusion of males from the inherent link with nature is also just another iteration of gender bias, like Karen Warren’s description of “male-gender bias about women and nature”<sup>9</sup> quoted by Merchant. Warren’s ethics are based on “care, love, and trust,”<sup>10</sup> but those characteristics are not essential to either women or nature; nature includes all

---

<sup>6</sup> Eventually, technology will allow us to combine two human eggs into a viable offspring without a contribution of sperm. Whether or not this happens before artificial wombs are created will significantly impact the ecofeminist and radical ecology spheres of ethics.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Beatie, *Labor of Love: The Story of One Man’s Extraordinary Pregnancy* (Seal Press, 2008) Kindle edition.

<sup>8</sup> Merchant, loc 3934.

<sup>9</sup> Merchant, loc 3958.

<sup>10</sup> Merchant, loc 3967.

kinds of destructive elements, both in weather and earthquakes, in addition to the ways animals (including humans) interact inter-species and between species. None of these aspects are universally gendered male or female except when an already-formed culture, with its own particular gender lens, makes the gender link.<sup>11</sup>

The biggest problem with the exclusion of males from the deep, essential link between humans and the rest of nature is the difference between asking someone to sacrifice and asking them to save themselves, as described by Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone in their book *Active Hope: How to Face the Mess we're in without Going Crazy*:

Unhappily, the extensive moralizing within the ecological movement has given the public the false impression that they are being asked to make a sacrifice — to show more responsibility, more concern and a nicer moral standard. But all of that would flow naturally and easily if the self were widened and deepened so that protection of nature was felt and perceived as protection of our very selves.<sup>12</sup>

Yes, it is important for those who are marginalized by an ecologically destructive culture to band together and make a stand, and in many places around the globe, those marginalized populations have been women. For it to work in the long term, however, it will require convincing those in power, who are receiving the immediate wealth and prestige from that position, that it is in their own self-interest to recognize the link between themselves and the destruction happening to the earth. As long as ecofeminism denies the essential link between males and nature, the culture

---

<sup>11</sup> An example is the Western tradition of naming large, potentially destructive storms with only female names, which lasted from the 19th century until 1978 CE. ([http://www.nhc.noaa.gov/aboutnames\\_history.shtml](http://www.nhc.noaa.gov/aboutnames_history.shtml))

<sup>12</sup> Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone, *Active Hope: How to Face the Mess We're in without Going Crazy* (New World Library, 2012) Kindle loc 1612-1616.

shift required to equalize who has power and how it is used when it comes to production or re-production<sup>13</sup> will not happen.

---

<sup>13</sup> Merchant loc 3919.

Works Cited

Beatie, Thomas. *Labor of Love: The Story of One Man's Extraordinary Pregnancy*. Seal Press,

2008. Kindle edition.

Macy, Joanna and Chris Johnstone. *Active Hope: How to Face the Mess We're in without Going*

*Crazy*. New World Library, 2012. Kindle edition.

Merchant, Carolyn. *Radical Ecology: The Search for a Livable World (Revolutionary Thought*

*and Radical Movements)*. Taylor and Francis, 2012. Kindle edition.