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A Genealogy of Ecofeminism

I first encountered the word *ecofeminism* in 1987 when I was a master's student doing research for a term paper in a course in feminist sociology. Freshly arrived in the big city of Toronto, which I then perceived to be completely devoid of nature (I grew up in Victoria on Vancouver Island, where nature may not have been more plentiful but was certainly bigger), I was absolutely thrilled to discover that a word already existed to represent my deepest personal and political desire, the inclusion of an environmentalist perspective in feminist theory. I craved a language that would describe my growing sense that nature must be an important consideration in any feminist political vision; I remember devouring the first ecofeminist text I encountered—*Green Paradise Lost*, I think it was¹—at the expense of the readings on public policy on which I was supposed to be focusing.

But the exhilaration I felt as a new convert was over quite soon, and I have never again felt quite so strongly that I belonged in ecofeminism, despite my increasing commitment to feminist ecological politics and theory. Certainly the gap between desire and realization is inevitable; certainly my sense of ecofeminism never being quite right has motivated me to spend years of my life practicing intervention into the discourse (which makes the desire/realization gap fundamental to democratic life, as I will describe at length later on). There are also more specific reasons for my

ecofeminist malaise, almost all of them concerning the constructions of the relationship between women and nature that lie at the core of this particular feminist ecological project.

By no means do I suggest that ecofeminists, as a bloc, fall unthinking and unthoughtful prey to the neoconservative rhetoric of motherhood environmentalism, to the argument that women are better suited than men to cleaning up nature as an extension of their biology and their separate-but-equal household responsibilities. Indeed, it is because of ecofeminism's stated critique of such ideological linkages that I have remained involved and interested in its development. It has become increasingly clear to me over the years, however, that many ecofeminists do engage in a particular political logic, identity politics, that makes me singularly uncomfortable. Especially when combined with their inevitable forays into the place of nature in feminist and other politics, the tendency of many ecofeminists to place primary significance on identity opens up the real possibility of a kind of biological reductionism and essentialism that any feminism, in my view, ought to spend much of its time debunking.

Here's an example of what I understand as ecofeminism's logic of identity, which comes from a very recent (and generally very good) work by Carolyn Merchant:

The word ecology derives from the Greek word "oikos," meaning house. Ecology, then, is the science of the household—the Earth's household. The connection between the Earth and the house has historically been mediated by women.²

In a book otherwise devoted to exploring a fairly full range of women's relations to nature and ecological activism, this passage proceeds to reduce this diversity to a highly problematic (if now rather familiar) relationship: ecology becomes home economics, the planet becomes a household, and women's complex relations to both of the above become, simply, "mediating." Which women are doing the mediating, what natures are involved in the mediation, and who is referred to by "women" and "nature" are questions left unasked, and Merchant (like many other ecofeminists) does not seem to feel compelled to interrogate them; the solid identity "women" becomes important through a specific relationship to a particular metaphoric "nature." This relationship is repeated and naturalized as the key narrative through which feminist relations to environmentalism are understood. Even if the relations producing the gendered specificity of this mediating labor are eventually called into question (as they are in places in Merchant's

text), the fact remains that it is from this specificity that a primary and strongly normative relation between feminism and ecology is created.

In ecofeminism, the fact of being a woman is understood to lie at the base of one's experience of ecological degradation, of one's interests in ecological protection, preservation, and reconstruction, and of one's "special" ecological consciousness. Whether the important elements of that "being" are seen to reside in biological, social, ascribed, or imposed factors is immaterial to my argument; the crucial thing is that identity, similarity, and belonging to a specific group are the primary foci of political speech and the basis of political legitimacy, and that the achievement of the freedom to express that identity without oppression is a key political goal (as opposed to, say, a focus on individuality and a desire to put specific identity aside to achieve a common good, an equally problematic but nonetheless different political logic). While an obvious result of identity politics is an exclusionary logic—"you can't speak about this because you do not belong to the group"—there are other, deeper problems with the model. For example, identities are inevitably partial, and the relevant social categories on which identity politics are based can go only so far to describe a person; the reduction of any self to a list of categories replicates many of the problems that identity politics set out to address, including the socially experienced limits of the identity categories themselves. I will outline what I consider the logic and limits of identity politics later; what must be said at the outset is that ecofeminists, in basing their political specificity on an identitarian women's experience of nature or environmental degradation or on a specifically women's set of issues or principles or metaphors, assume a correspondence among ontology, epistemology, and politics—an identity politics—that reduces the relations between feminism and ecology to a highly problematic group experience for women and nature.

But I'm getting ahead of myself in the story. It's clearly the case that Merchant and others took this identitarian women/nature relationship from somewhere else, and it is the point of this chapter to tell a story about these origins. Ecofeminism claims originating sparks in a number of places—Ellen Swallow's home ecology, Lois Gibbs's struggles at Love Canal, feminist and maternalist pacifism and antimilitarism in North America and Europe, and the obvious gender gaps in environmental philosophy³—but it is my contention that ecofeminist theory has taken its specifically identitarian formulation of the relations between feminism and ecology from the radical and cultural feminist debates on nature of the 1970s and 1980s. While identity politics encompass much more than this debate (including

democracy, as I will discuss in chapter 2), it is in their ideas of nature that some of the stickiest issues for ecofeminist identity are located.

Radical and Cultural Feminisms on "The Nature Question"

In 1974, French feminist Françoise d'Eaubonne published the word *écoféminisme* for the first time to refer to the movement by women necessary to save the planet.⁴ Despite the fact that almost every ecofeminist author who traces the movement back that far refers to this origin, d'Eaubonne's writing circulated in a different and particular context, and it was not until considerably later that the term *ecofeminism* came to refer to a distinct stream within U.S. feminist politics. Although it is vital to note other influences—as Rosi Braidotti, Ewa Charkiewicz, Sabine Häusler, and Saskia Wieringa observe,⁵ these include ideas that were also present in the "natural womanhood" discourses of Nazi Germany—a far more important historical origin of ecofeminism is what has been called "the nature question" in the radical and cultural feminisms of the 1970s and 1980s U.S. political landscape; it is from there that the first authors who called themselves ecofeminists (or who otherwise specifically problematized ecological relations alongside gendered ones) took their language, logic, passions, and limitations.⁶

In 1974, Sherry Ortner wrote what were to become fighting words for a significant part of a generation of U.S. feminist theorists and activists:

What could there be in the generalized structure and conditions of existence, common to every culture, that would lead every culture to place a lower value upon women? . . . My thesis is that woman is being identified with—or, if you will, seems to be a symbol of—something that every culture devalues, something that every culture defines as being of a lower order of existence than itself. Now it seems that there is only one thing that would fit that description, and that is "nature" in the most generalized sense.⁷

Ortner's project was to show how this (male) culturally defined connection was the universal underlying a range of misogynies, how woman's status in the middle position on a scale from culture down to nature or her role as a mediator between the two led to cultural assumptions and institutional mechanisms circumscribing her activities in the world. Ortner's political agenda was abundantly clear: "Ultimately, both men and women can and must be equally involved in projects of creativity and transcendence. Only then will women be seen as aligned with culture, in culture's ongoing dialectic with nature."⁸

Compare Ortner to d'Eaubonne: two radically opposed viewpoints in a single year. Where Ortner sought to eradicate the woman/nature connection, d'Eaubonne celebrated it as a means of revaluing those aspects of life degraded and distorted through centuries of patriarchal cultural and economic domination:

Therefore, with a society at last in the feminine gender meaning non-power (and not power-to-the-women), it would be proved that no other human group could have brought about the ecological revolution; because none other was so directly concerned at all levels.

And the planet in the feminine gender would become green again for all.⁹

D'Eaubonne's celebration of nature and the feminine was not unique; neither was Ortner's rejection of them. The juxtaposition of their views, however, makes it clear that the 1970s saw a particular rift developing in feminist thought: whether to welcome or renounce connections to nature. The polarized terms of the debate (and the failure to question the split itself) stemmed from a particular current of analysis, one developed largely if not entirely under the rubric of U.S. radical feminism. While the "nature question" has not always been the central preoccupation of radical feminism, as Alice Echols documents,¹⁰ the line of continuity running from early radical feminist analyses of sex as class to cultural feminism and ecofeminism has been drawn through a terrain emphasizing difference. In turn, this focus on difference, largely based on analyses of reproduction, has exposed nature as a crucial trajectory of debate.

Following the lead of first-wave feminists and later theorists such as Simone de Beauvoir, 1970s radical feminist analyses focused on women's differences from men. This focus was born in part from a dissatisfaction with the ability of other progressive movements (notably the Students for a Democratic Society and other emerging socialist organizations) to incorporate women's concerns and in part from an increasing skepticism toward the equal rights orientation of groups such as the National Organization for Women. As exemplified in the following excerpt from the "Red-stockings Manifesto," the agenda of these early analyses was to show the distinctly political and politically distinct character of women's oppression as women:

Women are an oppressed class. Our oppression is total, affecting every facet of our lives. We are exploited as sex objects, breeders, domestic servants, and cheap labor. . . .

We identify the agents of our oppression as men. Male supremacy is the oldest, most basic form of domination. All other forms of exploitation and oppression (racism, capitalism, imperialism, etc.) are extensions of male supremacy.¹¹

To find the origin of this primary male oppression of females, many radical feminist theorists turned, like Ortner, to the one thing that seemed constant across a variety of culturally specific manifestations of patriarchy: women's role in reproduction. Perhaps the most influential work of this genre, which shows both the grounding of feminist theory in Marxist concepts such as sex as class and the political agenda of exposing the oppression of women as women and not just incidentally as female members of other oppressed groups, was Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex*, published in 1970. In it, she documented the "natural origins" of patriarchy: "The natural reproductive difference between the sexes led directly to the first division of labor at the origins of class, as well as furnishing the paradigm of caste (discrimination based on biological characteristics)."¹² At the same time, however, Firestone asserted that there is a fundamental difference between humanity and nature; she wrote passionately that the eradication of women's oppression required the transcendence of this biologically derived division of labor. Her solution lay in "seizure of the means of reproduction," a revolution of women against the tyranny of biology made possible by claiming developing reproductive technologies. Her revolution, like Marx's, was based on the idea of eradicating the material conditions producing difference:

Just as the end goal of socialist revolution was not only the elimination of class *privilege* but of the economic class *distinction* itself, so the end goal of feminist revolution must be, unlike that of the first feminist movement, not just the elimination of male *privilege* but of the sex *distinction* itself: genital differences between human beings would no longer matter culturally.¹³

The idea of biological difference as the source of women's oppression and the erasure of this oppression through the use of reproductive technologies generated considerable debate. Some radical feminists were justifiably skeptical about the liberatory possibility of artificial insemination and other reproductive technologies and concentrated on changing the form of reproductive organization, rather than the fact of reproduction itself. As Ti-Grace Atkinson put it, the question was not about biology, but about how "this biological classification . . . bec[a]me a political classification."¹⁴

Marge Piercy's influential 1976 novel, *Woman on the Edge of Time*, repre-

sented an interesting compromise between a biological and a sociological analysis. Her utopian world was organized according to a principle of genderlessness, and she suggested that the disconnection of women and reproduction was a necessary sacrifice made by women.¹⁵ This move represented an interesting shift from Firestone's position but retained crucial elements of her analysis, including a certain faith in the liberatory potential of reproductive technologies. As one of the characters from Piercy's utopian world of *Mattapoissett* explains:

It was part of women's long revolution. When we were breaking up the old hierarchies. Finally, there was that one thing we had to give up, too, the only power we ever had, in return for no more power for everyone. The original production: the power to give birth. Cause as long as we were biologically enchained, we'd never be equal. And males would never be humanized to be loving and tender.¹⁶

At the other end of the spectrum in the nature debates lay Mary Daly's "a-mazing" text, *Gyn/Ecology*. As far as Daly was concerned, reproductive technologies of all sorts were nothing short of misogynist violence and all arguments for women to renounce nature and biology nothing short of "male methods of mystification."¹⁷ Taking her cue partly from d'Eaubonne's call for a feminist eco-revolution, Daly sought to cut through the "mind/spirit/body pollution inflicted through patriarchal myth and language on all levels," including their direct threat "to terminate all sentient life on this planet."¹⁸ For her, the relationship among women and nature and biology was simple: where women embody the essence of life in all forms, patriarchal culture threatens to kill it through a legion of violent methods from clitoridectomy to language (she classifies these as erasure, reversal, polarization, and dividing and conquering). "The tree of life," she wrote, "has been replaced by the necrophilic symbol of a dead body hanging on dead wood" [i.e., Christ];¹⁹ what women (or, rather, Hags) must do to dis-cover their inherent love for earth is break through the masks of patriarchal dis-ease and reclaim an inherently female integral identity.

Despite its many critics, Daly's text signaled a larger trend in 1970s feminism. Many feminists were beginning to explore the idea that women's difference from men might itself be a source of strength and that reproduction and nature might hold the key to women's power, not just women's oppression. In both European (particularly French) and North American feminisms, increasing dissatisfaction with what Yolande Cohen has since called a politics of assimilation,²⁰ a feminist agenda based on the achievement of equality in the traditionally male domains of politics and

economics, led to a process in which alternatives to this so-called patriarchal culture were explored and celebrated. Women, an oppressed majority, were to look to their own experiences of nurturance, of caring, of connection as a way of beginning an affirmative culture outside the destructive proscriptions of "male-stream" society.²¹

The idea of this cultural feminism was to create an affirmative space for the creation of woman-centered literature, art, politics, and other pursuits in which women's differences from men would result in radically new modes of expression. The reasoning for this was twofold. First, this woman's culture was seen as a safe place for women to find and express their difference outside patriarchal definitions of quality or competence and to formulate from this exploration a distinct women's episteme. Second, this alternative culture was seen as the basis of a more authentic feminist politics, a site from which new women's definitions of political and social possibility would emerge to oppose hegemonic patriarchal conceptions of knowledge and politics. Women would find, or perhaps create, their true identity in spaces carefully separated from the distorting influences of patriarchy. New relations to nature were an integral part of this culture; women's "special" knowledges of reproduction and their experiences of mediating between nature and culture were part of their difference from men and thus needed to be discovered and freed.

In the midst of all of these "nature" debates, radical women of color and lesbians (among others) were becoming increasingly vocal about some of the shortcomings of radical feminist theory. In addition to overt instances of feminist racism and homophobia (black women being accused of false consciousness for allying with black men on some issues, lesbians being called enemies of feminism for simply being vocal), a feminist analysis that focused primarily on the dynamics of sex and gender—formulated as women's oppression as women by men—provided little space for an analysis of the dynamics of racism and heterosexism. Audre Lorde was especially critical of Mary Daly: "Why are her goddess-images only white, western-european, judeo-christian?"²²

In the context of increasing fragmentation over issues of race, class, and sexuality, the version of radical feminism that focused on the creation of a women's "natural" culture eventually won preeminence. According to Echols, cultural feminism promised to unite a movement torn apart by differences among women: the creation of a "gynocracy," a world organized according to feminine principles, was a project that all women could participate in and consider their own. It also promised concrete gains despite the backlash against feminism: "Even if women's political, economic, and

social gains were reversed, cultural feminism held out the possibility that women could build a culture, a space, uncontaminated by patriarchy.²³ In fact, as Josephine Donovan notes, lesbianism moved from a position of critique to become—with a little bit of conceptual massage and expansion from Adrienne Rich—one of the supposedly natural elements of women's culture and identity; as heterosexuality was one of the primary sites in which women were oppressed, becoming a woman-centered woman was a way of creating the conditions for freeing essential identity.²⁴

Not surprisingly, cultural feminism turned to nature, both to underscore women's undeniable connections to each other irrespective of race, class, and sexual orientation and to define a difference around which to articulate a revolutionary femininity. Works such as Firestone's and Ortner's, despite their radically antinature conclusions, had already laid the groundwork for making this connection; Daly had turned it on its head to provide a template. Nature, in cultural feminism, referred to the experience of reproduction, the continuity of generations, the creation of life, the inherent bodily connection to the planet. Where men experienced separation from biology, disdaining the body and the material world (and oppressing women) en route to a necrophilic transcendence of nature, women, by virtue of their reproductive labor, lived their lives through nature, through a grounding in the body and the cycles of life.

Enter the Goddess

As Merchant notes, the feminist discourses on spirituality and theology that emerged in the early days of cultural feminism were also important to the development of specifically ecofeminist theory. First, the publication of a number of books exploring ancient matriarchies read of the split between male culture and female nature as *the* narrative of women's oppression, with the logical conclusion being to revalue the latter as a founding act of cultural creation. Merlin Stone's *When God Was A Woman*, one of the most detailed and contested explorations in this vein, investigated the development of goddess-centered cultures as a history of the interrelationships among their respect for reproduction, the high status of women in their social organizations, and the predominance of female divinities. While her project was overtly one of denaturalizing (Judeo-)Christian²⁵ conceptions of the relationships among God, man, woman, and nature, she ended up showing how in fact these conceptions were the result of perverting the connections made between women and nature in ancient goddess-centered religions.²⁶ The conclusion reached by many readers of

Stone's book was that these connections, twisted and destroyed by five thousand years or so of patriarchy, were in fact the utopian state from which humanity has deviated and to which it must return.

The logic of Stone's narrative is quite revealing. Although not original with her, there is a line of reasoning running through her accounts of ancient deities and civilizations that clearly states that women's lives were better when reproduction was respected by men. This does not mean just human reproduction, but also the reproduction of all life—the cycles of birth, death, and regeneration; the seasons; the lifespan. Her story of the destruction of ancient pastoral matriarchies by northern patriarchal invaders is itself a story of a "fall from grace," with all of its notions of innocence, utopia, and the effect of destructive knowledges on humanity's gardens of childhood; this time, however, the evil is patriarchy, the devaluation of women and women's relations to God.

The search for historical origins for the patriarchal degradation of women led to a considerable emphasis on tracing women's status—especially their relations to a degraded nature—in Western religion and philosophy. Rosemary Radford Ruether's 1975 book, *New Woman/New Earth*, was one of the first to outline explicitly the destructive significance of patriarchal religion for both women and nature; for Ruether, women in patriarchal societies are the primary symbolic repositories for all that such cultures see as wrong with the world, all that should be ignored or cut out of human life, especially nature.²⁷ With an interesting nod to the absence of a gender analysis in ecological thought, she writes,

Since women in Western culture have been traditionally identified with nature, and nature, in turn, has been seen as an object of domination by man (males), it would seem almost a truism that the mentality that regarded the natural environment as an object of domination drew upon imagery and attitudes based on male domination of women. . . . Sexism and ecological destructiveness are related in the symbolic patterns of the patriarchal consciousness . . . [and] they take intensive socioeconomic form in modern industrial society.²⁸

While Ruether does not suggest that women should find an oppositional or revolutionary consciousness in this symbolic placement next to nature—she is actually quite adamant that women should be extremely suspicious of anything that smacks of planetary housework or Mother Earth romanticism—she is very clear that patriarchy is historically and essentially antiecological and that ecological health requires the elimination of patriarchy. Calling for a genderless and quite materialist utopia (and pre-

dating object relations in her discussion of the relationship between parenting and caring for the earth), she still, ironically, creates a narrative by which the primary logic of women's oppression in Western societies operates through their conceptual linkage with nature and vice versa.

It is, from here, only a small step into an identity politics of gender and nature. One of the most influential and moving accounts to draw together elements of this woman/nature "herstory" and a specific reevaluation of women's identitarian connections to nature is Susan Griffin's *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her*.²⁹ The book, an epic prose poem juxtaposing the development of religious, philosophical, and scientific discourses about nature with similar ideas on women, was written in two voices that Griffin describes as "the voice of authority—a male and patriarchal voice—attempt[ing] over and over again to dominate the female voice of the body, of forests, of wind, of mountains, of horses, of cows, of the earth."³⁰

A very important shift occurred with Griffin's book. Whereas Ortner and earlier theorists saw women as mediators between nature and culture, as beings who, by virtue of their reproductive capacities and duties, were assigned natural status, and whereas Ruether saw naturalness as an ideology historically imposed on women and environmental degradation as justified by patriarchy, Griffin wrote as if nature were female and women would be natural if left to their own earth-loving devices. In this, Griffin's argument was quite similar to Daly's, but the centrality of nature to the analysis of women's oppression pushes her book into a different category, I think. To Griffin, woman represented nature not simply because of cultural assignment but because of an ongoing feminine embodied knowledge of nature that is a source of patriarchal jealousy and domination and that has remained "true" despite centuries of fundamentally misguided and destructive phallic attempts to capture, categorize, and subdue it. There is a spirit of woman and it is nature; where Daly would have women listen to other (Amazon) women to hear the truth of their identity, Griffin would have women listen to "the light in us," to a nature that has always been more ready to speak to and as women. "The earth is my sister; I love her daily grace, her silent daring, and how loved I am"; to find liberation from patriarchy and ecological devastation, Griffin advises, women must listen to their sister.³¹

It is easy to see the attraction of this text in the context of cultural feminism's development. If male culture is the problem, then arguing for the necessity of constructing or revealing a way of being somehow outside male culture suggests a reaffirmation of its opposite, the oppressed female

nature. Indeed, this notion of seeing nature as the terrain of female consciousness, with the corollary position of seeing femininity as natural, was taken up by a number of feminists trying to build a female culture. Women, they asserted, need to look to their nature, which is part of (and therefore equivalent to) nature in general, in order to achieve women's and the planet's liberation.

But there is also a second dimension of the women/nature question running through the works of Griffin and others. As an example, here is Kathleen Barry's call for feminists to transcend their differences:

We must look to our matriarchal past for guidance in defining a culture that is a logical extension of nature. With the essence of motherhood and a sense of the preservation of life imprinted in our genes, matrilineal descent will naturally become the organization of the society we envision.³²

Especially in Barry, but also in Griffin and Daly, there is an interesting tension between the need to look for a matriarchal past, thus implying that women's identity is something to be achieved or at least uncovered, and the claim that motherhood and ecological knowledge are imprinted in the genes and presumably are readily (even naturally) accessible to everyday consciousness. Thus, while women are supposed to look to nature for knowledge, they may find that such knowledge of nature isn't too deeply buried; nature is, at the very least, a sister with whose language women are intimately acquainted. Women's nature thus becomes equivalent to nature in general and is the thing that feminist activity should retrieve into political consciousness.

This cultural feminist construction of nature, emerging from and intertwined with explorations into reproduction and women's spirituality, shaped both the political context and the analytical approach of ecofeminism. The view that nature was an epistemically transparent and positive part of women's culture was clearly on the political agenda of a variety of feminist thinkers, eco- and otherwise. The political significance of difference, especially a natural version of difference grounded in an episteme beyond patriarchal culture, was also clear. Specifically, there was an assumption that an oppositional movement must be located in an alternative culture, a new consciousness—or rather, in a revitalized old consciousness suppressed by hierarchical and patriarchal power relations. There was a strong notion that certain groups—i.e., men—have constructed human value in terms opposite to a primal, organic state in their quest toward transcendence, disembodiment, and the possession of "power over." And

there was a belief that conceptual structures—hierarchy, value, separation, independence—are the root of the problem and need to be remedied through a claiming of alternative experience. At the heart of that alternative was nature.

Ecofeminism and the Quest for Roots

Other than the often cited work of d'Eaubonne, it is difficult to pinpoint exactly the moment where ecofeminism first emerged as a current of thought distinct from cultural feminism. Indeed, Griffin's *Woman and Nature*, Daly's *Gyn/Ecology*, and Ruether's *New Woman/New Earth* are often cited as the first genuinely ecofeminist texts. Certainly, Ynestra King's 1981 manifesto "The Eco-Feminist Imperative" was also a key text that marked ecofeminism as both a distinct theoretical framework for feminist ecology and a distinct activist possibility for feminist writings on nature. King, though differing from Griffin and Daly in her emphasis on political activism, largely agreed with their diagnostic focus on patriarchal culture and their ground of resistance in women's identity:

We believe that a culture against nature is a culture against women. We know we must get out from under the feet of men as they go about their projects of violence. In pursuing these projects men deny and dominate both women and nature. It is time to reconstitute our culture in the name of that nature, and of peace and freedom, and it is women who can show the way. We have to be the voice of the invisible, of nature who cannot speak for herself in the political arenas of our society.³³

At the base of many early ecofeminist accounts of the origins of the interstructured identities and oppressions of women and nature (and apparent in a number of subsequent ones as well) is a notion of hierarchical dualism, an elaborate narrative of the development of difference into a hegemonic, patriarchal, antinature strategy. As Val Plumwood observes in a review essay on ecofeminist themes, in this approach "the problem for both women and Nature is their place as part of a set of dualisms which have their origins in classical philosophy and which can be traced through a complex history to the present."³⁴ The focus of these founding works is the historical polarization of humanity from nature, men from women, mind from body, and reason from emotion in the philosophical and religious development of ideals of transcendent humanity. As Ruether writes in a passage fairly typical of this analytic stream,

All the basic dualities—the alienation of the mind from the body; the alienation of the self from the objective world; the subjective retreat of the individual, alienated from the social community; the domination or rejection of nature by spirit—these all have roots in the apocalyptic-Platonic religious heritage of classical Christianity. But the alienation of the masculine from the feminine is the primary sexual symbolism that sums up all these alienations.³⁵

Clearly, a number of cultural feminist assumptions inform this approach, notably the idea that the original difference informing the development of all others is sex. In addition, echoing Beauvoir is the notion that the supposedly lower halves of each dualism are not Other in their own right but are instead constructed as Other, as the negative reflection of true, transcendent humans. As Plumwood describes this process, in the philosophical logic of the operation of hierarchical dualism, these lower halves are also constructed as polarized from the upper halves. In addition, their existences are valued solely in terms of their instrumental value, as reflected in contemporary notions of so-called resources, a construction in which nature only has merit in terms of its use or exchange value to humans, and in definitions of women in terms of their relationships to men (as wives, mothers, virgins, whores, chattel).

What is interesting in these ecofeminist accounts of dualism is their transference of cultural feminist narratives of the historical oppression of women to ideas on nature. The form of the originating, sexual dualism in which “women’s nature” is oppressed by “men’s culture” is subtly transformed into a statement about all nature. Where Ortner wrote about cultural constructions of women as occupying particular locations in relation to children, the particular nature out of which male humans develop transcendence, many early ecofeminist authors (including Ruether) suggest that nature is oppressed because of its signification as female. It is not so much that certain divisions of labor condition male separation from natural processes but that men, philosophers in particular, form their opposition to nature in terms cast by their assertion of difference from women.

Hence, the emergence of nature as female (seen in terms such as Mother Earth, virgin forests, the rape of the wild) is understood to originate in the repudiation of woman; the construction of male separation from nature is justified in terms of nature’s apparently feminine attributes. While there is a certain lack of clarity in these accounts about why the nature/woman connection was made in the first place (a number of authors cite Ortner’s narrative on reproduction despite subtly altering her causal analysis), their histo-

ries of the domination of nature clearly suggest that the oppression of women has given form to all other hierarchical dualisms.³⁶

"Naturism," whatever its origins, appears in these writings as a distinct form of oppression. In a 1981 special issue of *Heresies*, one of the first collections to specifically draw together a variety of writings on feminist and ecological themes, Joan Griscom asserts that naturism, as one of the four interlocking "pillars" of oppression (sexism, racism, class exploitation, and ecological destruction), "includes *speciesism*, the belief that humans are superior to other animals"³⁷ and other destructive beliefs that devalue the animal-like body in favor of the superior human mind. Although Griscom sees naturism as an expression of patriarchy, she also argues that it has a logic that needs to be explicitly challenged by feminist thinking. Its origins may be in sexual dualism, but ecological oppression has a separate dynamic and must be actively integrated into antioppressive politics.

Specifically, Griscom is critical of "social feminists," who have not paid sufficient attention to nature in their analyses of oppression, feminists who, "while they may discuss the ecological crisis, [do not] incorporate it into their full social analysis."³⁸ Interestingly, however, she is also critical of what she calls "nature feminists," those cultural feminists celebrating women's biology, whom she accuses of inadequate social analysis. Although the social analysis she then proposes as an integration of the two previous feminist streams resembles Ruether's theological and historical narrative of hierarchical dualism with a bit of social psychology thrown in, it is important to note that Griscom suggests the need for a new theory that incorporates different forms of oppression, beyond the insights of other feminisms.

At this point in the story it is possible to suggest that ecofeminism emerged as a feminist theoretical current grounded in but somewhat different from cultural feminism. In part, the terms of the separation were predicated on a rejection of cultural feminism's supposed claim that women are closer to nature than men in some natural, presocial, biologically immutable way. While I would argue that there was never a single position on this issue within cultural feminism, emerging ecofeminist thought (also not singular, of course) was formed with the explicit agenda of reconciling tensions among feminists on the nature question. This process took the form of a new synthesis of previous feminist positions (with the exception of liberal feminism, which was rejected as theoretically inadequate and, at its core, as antiwoman and antinature³⁹).

Ynestra King located three distinct feminist responses to the nature question.⁴⁰ The first two approaches, both stemming from radical feminist

analyses of biological difference and patriarchal oppression, took up opposite positions on the nature question (which she was later to call radical rationalist and radical culture feminist positions).⁴¹ The choice between them was whether to embrace or repudiate the link with nature that had caused women's oppression, whether to organize separately from men to rediscover the true essence of womanness or to deny that there was a separate logic to women organizing as women. The third approach was socialist feminism, which King saw as "weak on radical cultural critique and strong on helping us understand how people's material situations condition their consciousnesses and their possibilities for social transformation."⁴² She saw in socialist feminism an implicit alliance with rationalist views on severing the woman/nature connection and a general unease with the possibility of ecological feminism.

King's project was to transcend the "either/or" assumptions inherent in the debate between rationalist-materialist humanism and metaphysical-feminist naturalism,⁴³ to create a dialectical feminism that incorporates the best insights of both traditions, and to eventually resolve the nature/culture dualism. Although she saw an innate equation of women with nature as problematic (indeed, she saw the dissolution of ideologies of natural social orders as a precondition for women's questioning of their roles), she argued that feminists need to choose to work from a valuation of nature as part of a liberatory project for women:

Acting on our own consciousness of our own needs, we act in the interests of all. We stand on the biological dividing line. We are the less rationalized side of humanity in an overly rationalized world, yet we can think as rationally as men and perhaps transform the idea of reason itself. As women, we are a naturalized culture in a culture defined against nature. If nature/culture antagonism is the primary contradiction of our time, it is also what weds feminism and ecology and makes women the historic subject.⁴⁴

What emerges in King's work is an explicit political recognition that although woman may not equal nature, history has created a particular space for women that allows a connection between them to emerge that is repressed in male culture. Women's character or position in the social world may not be innate or natural, but their distance from the center of patriarchal culture conditions a critical distance from the ideologies, social practices, and interests lying at the root of ecological destruction. The way out, for King, was to develop an alternative rationality based on that distance, to self-consciously play with Otherness and engage in a form of transformation located in the historical experiences of the oppressed.

The notion of an ecofeminist marginal consciousness offered a certain resolution of the nature/culture debate: identification with nature was constructed as a rational choice, a political maneuver rather than an acceptance of patriarchal ideologies of nature. The focus of King's and others' analyses, however, was still located in a primary narrative of dualism, albeit an increasingly sophisticated one that took into account a wider range of historical phenomena. Carolyn Merchant's *The Death of Nature* and Brian Easlea's *Science and Sexual Oppression*, for example, focused on the rise of mechanistic science and technology during the Scientific Revolution.⁴⁵ Both suggested that it was the material conditions making widespread environmental manipulation possible that, in combination with dualistic discourses of individual mastery and scientific control, created the particular formations of domination and exploitation that characterize contemporary relations of sexism and ecological degradation. An organic worldview was replaced by a mechanical one; mystical and fearsome nature (to Merchant, characterized by a view of complementarity and interdependence, to Easlea, by the same irrationalities as modern science) was transformed into resources.⁴⁶

Despite their more sophisticated and historical readings of the nature question in feminism, there are problems with all of these accounts. First, each in its own way oversimplifies the development of Western thought, many painting a monolithic picture of dualism or, in the case of Merchant and Easlea, an overly unified (not to mention, in Merchant's case, somewhat romantic) view of pre-Enlightenment perspectives on women and nature. Each creates, from a range of complex and often contradictory philosophical debates (covering a period of some centuries) a more or less linear narrative assuming the dominance of gender polarity in discourses about women and nature. As Prudence Allen's work illustrates, the period between pre-Aristotelian constructions and the ultimate triumph of polarity as a guiding construction of gender was by no means characterized by linear philosophical or theological development.⁴⁷ Nor has polarity ever been completely dominant in Western conceptions of gender; even in Christianity, there remains a tension between women's connection with Eve's sin and their equality with men in Christ.⁴⁸ Thus, although perceived differences between men and women may have gained ideological strength from associations with a nature/culture dualism, the fact remains that women have never become "only" nature, as these authors might suggest. It seems, then, problematic to assert that women and nature occupy the same conceptual space in a hegemonic notion of hierarchical dualism. Not only is dualism itself a historically contested concept, but the historical

association of women and nature was never a question of complete identification. Similarly, it cannot be argued that a once harmonious identification was warped and inverted at a specific historical moment.

Second, these histories tend to take ideas of women and nature out of the particular social and ecological contexts in which they were created, as if such ideas could persist in a fairly linear way despite dramatic social, environmental, and political changes. This analysis, for all of King's desire to incorporate sophisticated social inquiry, always emphasizes particular sets of ideas, especially dualism. Specific social relations of domination or exploitation tend to be reduced to manifestations of the operation of dualistic ideologies. A primary focus on hierarchical dualism creates a grand narrative of how one framework of ideas has caused destruction; such narratives overlook, or at least deemphasize, the specific productive and reproductive relations in which conceptions of women and nature are always located, the specific discourses of gender and nature that adhere in different sociocultural locations and that may or may not play directly into hierarchical dualism.⁴⁹

Third, and perhaps most importantly in their historical context, these accounts do not problematize the basis upon which the connections between women and nature were made in the first place. Instead, they tend to assume that there is some division between men and women (and, by extension, nature) that, if not essential, is at least historically unchallenged. From this starting assumption, these accounts seek to prove that the degradation of women and nature occurred as a result of the connection between the two and, tautologically, that there is now a connection between women and nature that men do not possess. What these accounts do offer is a narrative illustrating how the connections between women and nature have been devalued in Western thought. While this remains an interesting project, it inevitably elevates one oppression as most fundamental to the creation of hierarchical dualism, most often sex. This story does not question women's connection to nature, why women's bodies are seen as particular in their naturalness, or why it is that processes associated with birth are constructed as essentially more natural than those associated with eating, sleeping, or defecating; it assumes the connection and shows that its form has been oppressive to both women and nature under patriarchy.

In stories of historical dualism, the origin of woman's supposed connectedness to nature remained fundamentally unquestioned despite the fact that the narratives claimed to be about origins. This weakness, even if un-theorized, gnawed at the conceptual center of ecofeminist writing.

Given that most ecofeminists were extremely wary of making biologically reductionist claims about inherent sexual differences—this was, after all, their primary move beyond cultural feminism—a huge question remained: how was it possible to understand the reasons for women's and men's different relationships to nature? King's conscious choice, in its suggestion of an almost arbitrary constructivism, turned out to be fundamentally unsatisfying in light of so much historical dualism. Surely there was a good sociological explanation for women's degraded but fundamentally positive connections to nature?

Ecofeminism and Object Relations

For most ecofeminist writers of the 1980s, the pressing need to come up with a convincing and biologically nonreductionist origin story eventually faded away; the once plaguing question of which came first, the oppression of women or the domination of nature, just ceased to be asked.⁵⁰ Some writers, like Hazel Henderson, had no qualms at all about claiming that "biologically, most women in the world do still vividly experience their embeddedness in Nature, and can harbor few illusions concerning their freedom and separatedness from the cycles of birth and death."⁵¹ More often, writers such as Karen Warren were far more concerned with describing the specific socially constructed dynamics of the present connection between the oppression of women and the domination of nature with the express purpose of either integrating ecological concerns into feminist politics (and feminist concerns into ecological politics) or deriving a critique and future-oriented ethic.⁵² For this project, an analytic focus on what Warren called value-hierarchical thinking was ammunition enough (even if one might now accuse it of a certain idealism). Where Henderson's stance can now be included in the category of cultural ecofeminism and Warren's in the category of social ecofeminism (about which I will have more to say in chapter 3), there was one influential stream of ecofeminism that did attempt to find an appropriately sociological origin for the woman/nature connection: object relations. To the ecofeminist theory then developing, this version of psychoanalysis seemed to offer a way of explaining and problematizing the connection in a way that historical narratives of dualism had not.⁵³

In 1978, Nancy Chodorow's book *The Reproduction of Mothering* explored, using object relations psychology, the psychosocial development of differences between male and female children as a way of explaining sexual divisions of labor beyond the apparently natural functions of the sexes.⁵⁴

Chodorow's agenda was to explain gender in a way that did not posit femininity as an absence of masculinity and did not reduce the development of gendered personalities to the presence or absence of penises. She insisted on locating libidinal experiences, particularly Oedipal experiences, in a set of object relations occurring within specific mother-centered family forms. In particular, she questioned the biological imperative implicit in Freud's account of penis envy and stressed instead the power relations involved in associations of penises with male power:

Girls, for many overdetermined reasons, do develop penis envy . . . because the penis symbolizes independence from the (internalized) powerful mother; as a defense against fantasies of acting on sexual desires for their father and anxiety at the possible consequences of this; because they have received either conscious or unconscious communication from their parents that penises (or being male) are better, or sensed maternal conflict about the mother's own genitals; and because the penis symbolizes the social privileges of their father and men.⁵⁵

Instead of concentrating on castration complexes, Chodorow argued that the importance of the Oedipal period is not, as was the case in Freudian analyses focusing on penis envy and the development of the superego, "primarily in the development of gender identity and socially appropriate heterosexual genitality, but in the constitution of different forms of 'relational potential' in people of different genders."⁵⁶ She argued that mothers tend to experience their daughters as like, their sons as unlike. Girls, she claimed, are able to experience continuity from earlier pre-Oedipal identifications, but boys, particularly at the Oedipal stage, need to develop a stronger sense of difference from their mothers in denial of their pre-Oedipal modes of fusion. "Girls," in her view, "emerge from this period with a basis for 'empathy' built into their primary definition of self in a way that boys do not . . . [and] with a stronger basis for experiencing another's needs or feelings as one's own."⁵⁷ This process accounts for women's greater sense of connectedness to, and men's greater sense of separation from and denial of, the external object world and relations with other people, particularly women:

Difference is psychologically salient for men in a way that it is not for women. . . . This salience . . . has become intertwined with and has helped to produce more general cultural notions, particularly that individualism, separateness, and distance from others are desirable and requisite to autonomy and human fulfilment. Throughout these processes, it is women, as

mothers, who become the objects apart from which separateness, difference, and autonomy are defined.⁵⁸

Although Chodorow's primary concern was to change the social relations in which the gendered division of parenting labor leads to "the reproduction of mothering" and to girls' not experiencing full autonomy, ecofeminists were able to read into her analysis a psychosocial origin for women's connectedness and for men's separation and domination. As Ariel Salleh suggested in an essay along these lines, "Man's separation from Nature originates in recognition of [his] peripheral role in species creativity."⁵⁹ She notes that the biologies of male and female reproductive activities are such that women experience the value and continuity of life, in contrast to men, who experience separation from new life beginning at the moment of ejaculation and continuing through birth and suckling.⁶⁰ But the cultural taboos that exacerbate this biological separation and which do not provide the conditions to compensate for men's lack of direct procreative connection are located in the type of process outlined by Chodorow. Wrote Salleh,

A boy child under the father's watchful eye must renounce his sensuous libidinal pleasure in his mother as he grows, and install her person with abstract love and respect in its place. The emotional cut establishes a dualism of natural and cultural orders; a disconnection that is crucially formative to the masculine ego under patriarchy. . . . This act of libidinal repression, the first break with Nature, psychologically prepares a mind for the detached, self-alienated thought mode of which the cogito, utilitarian calculus and scientific method are familiar forms.⁶¹

Thus, she argues, "the source of man's disorder is his recognition that he cannot bring forth new life. He cannot 'reproduce'; he can only 'produce.' So he does so with a vengeance."⁶²

To object relations ecofeminists, the masculine separation from both human mother and Mother Earth, embodiments of dependency and the primal state that threaten masculine selfhood, results in men's vengeance, their desire to subdue both women and nature in a quest for individual potency and transcendence and the production of things. Dualism itself can be explained through object relations: the problem is not women's biology per se, but the ways in which sex becomes gender through psychosocial processes of differentiation. Domination over nature is part of the male separation that occurs within universal patriarchal family forms.

There is an interesting twist on the problem of gender difference here.

It is not simply that men have constructed biological differences between men and women as part of a strategy of domination, but that those very differences, at some level—here, Oedipal—create in men a greater propensity to see the world in terms of difference itself, to use difference as constructed into an elaborate series of hierarchical dualisms as a form of compensation for their inability to feel connected to women and/or nature. Not only is dualism a patriarchal *rationale* for domination, but it is a form of *rationality* born from a male experience of the world.

This theory also provides an account of the intertwined dominations of women and nature (which are, here, represented as the same thing: human origins) and a basis for an ecological politics for women. Unlike King's conscious choice model, ecofeminist object relations suggests that women are naturally more able to connect to nature because they have never been forced to separate from it and because their labor creates greater sensitivity to the needs of others. The implication is that women are not necessarily more natural than men but the conditions of their existence allow them to know nature in different ways than men: while men experience the world in terms of dualism and division (the source of the problem), women experience it in terms of continuity (the source of the solution). In a sense, this mode of thinking seemed to resolve the woman/nature connection problem, because embracing nature did not necessarily mean wallowing around in male-defined dualisms: this was "a different voice," a way of being in the world that already transcended dualism.

In addition, the central ecofeminist discourse of an ethic of care (which I will discuss in chapter 6) finds one of its theoretical origins in ecofeminist object relations, especially in the early work of Carol Gilligan.⁶³ Jim Cheney, for example, asserts that care and relationality should be central to ecofeminist ethics, which he describes as a highly contextual attempt to see clearly what a human being is and what the nonhuman world might be, morally speaking, for human beings—i.e., what kinds of care, regard, and responsiveness are appropriate in the particular conditions in which we find ourselves.⁶⁴

While object relations has thus provoked some interesting trajectories, it remains a problematic account in many respects. First, while it does question the process of connection between women and nature, unlike many other ecofeminist accounts, it also assumes the construction of birth and mothering as essentially more natural than other biological events and processes. Why is it, for example, that the experience of separation from the M/Other is also seen as "the" experience of separation from nature? There seems to be no essential connection between the individual male's

transcendence of his human M/Other and Mother Nature unless the connection between women and nature is already part of the historical, material, and cultural context in which individuation is created and expressed. Leaving aside a more general critique of the object relations upon which ecofeminist accounts of differentiation are based, there is nothing to suggest that the repudiation of the human mother necessarily includes the repudiation of nature. Psychosocial processes of individuation may lead the male child to separate from, and even seek dominance over, his own mother. It is, however, only in the context of other social relations that construct the mother/child bond as quintessentially more natural that this desire to dominate nature becomes connected to differentiation from the human mother.

Here, a tautology emerges: the primordial male desire to separate from the M/Other includes the repudiation of nature only in a context where that repudiation has already occurred. Questions this story does not ask concern the construction of the supposed naturalness of birth and child-rearing, the discursive character of the development of self in relation to nature, and, perhaps most importantly, the flexibility of boundaries between nature and culture as they appear in and affect different social formations. The types of psychoanalytic accounts appropriated by ecofeminists have also been accused, more generally, of ahistoricism and Western centrism, largely because their versions of child development are based on a very particular model of the family and childrearing practices, one that ignores the effects of race and class in constructing the individual.

Isaac Balbus displays some sensitivity to this question and provides one of the most fully developed causal narratives of the oppression of nature in the ecofeminist object relations stream. While he still falls into the trap of assuming rather than problematizing the woman/nature connection, he constructs a model of history in which different modes of childrearing cultivate different ecological sensibilities in particular sociocultural contexts. He argues that certain practices such as earlier rites of passage into adulthood or more nurturing early childrearing modes, that are located primarily in what he unfortunately calls primitive cultures, do not give rise to the same sequence or intensity of separation between the male child and his mother as do Western practices. These different experiences of male children, he argues, result in different relationships between adult males and nature.

Balbus sees violence against women and violence against nature as partially separable: while women still represent the nature against which adult males rebel, the timing and intensity of the separation determine at whom

the aggression will be directed. He sees the instrumentalization of nature as a relatively recent and developmentally particular phenomenon peculiar to societies in which childrearing is less nurturant (a twist on the profoundly racist assumption that "primitive" peoples are closer to nature). What he suggests we need, then, is a revolution in childrearing practices to complete a Hegelian synthesis between primitive and instrumental relations of childrearing that would foster new relations between men and nature. (It is to be assumed, it seems, that women are already connected to nature but that this sense is not passed on to male children.)⁶⁵

While his argument is certainly creative, Balbus, in addition to perpetuating some extremely problematic assumptions about non-Western cultures, typifies the shortcomings of a theory that rests solely on object relations to explain complex sociohistorical processes. As Frank Adler notes, "Balbus replicates all the logical problems of orthodox Marxism; instead of fetishizing the mode of production, he fetishizes the mode of child-rearing—everything else is epiphenomenal."⁶⁶ This approach ignores the effects of technology, of cultural specificity, and of power in the construction of relationships between women and men or between humans (variously situated) and nature. As Patricia Jagentowicz Mills argues, Balbus's argument also reifies nature and mystifies the processes by which a reconciliation with nature is to occur. "The 'meaningful experience' of the interaction between humans and nature in Balbus' work," she writes, "amounts to an elevation of nature 'itself' and a vagueness about how the 'natural' world is to be transformed through historical intervention."⁶⁷

The Story So Far for an Ecofeminist Identity

In many respects, the use of object relations theory represented ecofeminists' last "grand" attempt to narrate not only the origins of the oppressed woman/nature connection, but a corresponding nonbiological singular identity for women in relation to nature. By this point, many ecofeminists were calling for "a central theoretical place for the diversity of women's experiences, even if this means abandoning the project of attempting to formulate one overarching feminist theory or one women's voice."⁶⁸ The universalizing voice called for in object relations fell from grace soon thereafter as its assumptions were called into question from a range of perspectives.

Despite these calls for diversity (which do not in themselves challenge identity politics, about which I say more in chapter 3), I contend that most ecofeminists remained strongly committed to a central logic of identity established in cultural feminism and borrowed into diverse ecofeminisms,

even if that commitment is never again so clearly stated. Identity simply went underground and tends to be assumed in a great deal of subsequent ecofeminist writing. According to the logic of identity politics, women share a common experience of oppression, including relations to nature, that renders women a coherent group with a discernible set of interests, reveals a distinct set of women's experiences that are different from men's, and, in many understandings, represents women as privileged speakers of a new and unique transformative consciousness that includes nature. In the following chapters, I will argue that this logic does not work for feminism (especially ecofeminism) or for any politics of nature. But the purpose of challenging this logic is to reveal (or construct) what I understand to be positive and worth preserving from the desire to create an ecofeminist oppositional identity—its democratic impulse.