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Ecofeminist Theory and Grassroots Politics

STEPHANIE LAHAR

This essay proposes several guiding parameters for ecofeminism's development as a moral theory. I argue that these provide necessary directives and contexts for ecofeminist analyses and social/ecological projects. In the past these have been very diverse and occasionally contradictory. Most important to the core of ecofeminism's vitality are close links between theory and political activism. I show how these originated in ecofeminism's history and advocate a continued participatory and activist focus in the future.

Ecofeminism makes such big promises! The convergence of ecology and feminism into a new social theory and political movement challenges gender relations, social institutions, economic systems, sciences, and views of our place as humans in the biosphere. According to Charlene Spretnak, "Ecofeminists address the crucial issues of our time, from reproductive technology to Third World development, from toxic poisoning to the vision of a new politics and economics—and much more" (1988, 8). Ecofeminism is potentially a "global movement that is founded on common interests yet celebrates diversity and opposes all forms of domination and violence," writes Ynestra King (1989, 20). Underneath these encompassing visions, however, there are almost as many definitions of what ecofeminism is as there are theorists and activists.

Ecofeminism has gained national and international recognition in the last fifteen years as a progressive and critical social theory and as a grassroots activist movement. The newness of the movement, the breadth of issues it encompasses, and the diversity of people thinking and writing about ecofeminism have resulted in considerable confusion about what ecofeminism actually is, who ecofeminists are, and what they have to say about current issues ranging from women's health to development and biotechnology. In the most inclusive claims about who makes up the ecofeminist movement, homemakers organiz-

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ing to eliminate toxic chemicals from their homes and neighborhoods, professors teaching and writing in universities, activists standing between trees and the bulldozers coming to fell them, and protestors making peace encampments at military bases are all ecofeminists, whether or not they identify themselves as such. In other formulations, only those who explicitly affiliate themselves with a particular theory are ecofeminists—but the theory varies according to who is describing it. Broadly, however, ecofeminist theory includes a systemic analysis of domination that specifically includes the oppression of women and environmental exploitation, and it advocates a synthesis of ecological and feminist principles as guiding lights for political organizing and the creation of ecological, socially equitable life-styles. The question is, can ecofeminism speak to many different people in potentially overlapping but sometimes extremely disparate spheres of activity? Is ecofeminism even a single theory or movement?

In this essay I explore how ecofeminist theory and the political activism with which it originated in the middle to late 1970s and early 1980s are linked, highlighting several important debates and differences within ecofeminist thought. I then present parameters I believe are important to the future development of ecofeminism, working out an ontological and moral ground for ecofeminist theory. My aim is to contribute to the development of a coherent general framework through which diverse ideas and projects can be elaborated and energized. Finally, I show critical connections between ongoing theoretical development and political activism.

Ecofeminism's Analysis of Social Dysfunction

An ecofeminist analysis includes the human exploitation of the nonhuman environment in its list of interwoven forms of oppression such as sexism and heterosexism, racism and ethnocentrism. Specific theories differ as to the cause or causes of social and environmental domination and exploitation, but conceptual dichotomies are seen as key to maintaining such conditions. These include oppositional and value-laden categories of masculine and feminine, mind and body, public and private, and nature and society, which in turn rest on and uphold a basically Cartesian, atomistic worldview that has characterized Western thought. Accompanying this is a sense of psychological splitting, an existential isolation in which people tend to lose touch with their own value and internal coherence as well as that of human and nonhuman others through processes of objectification. In human extremities such as pornography or war, for example, individuals are ultimately stripped of any sense of humanity or subjectivity as they are reduced to a sexual object or a faceless enemy.

The mutual exclusion that thinking in conceptual dichotomies engenders makes us think that violence against women, militarism, and the destruction

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of ecosystems are issues that can be analyzed separately. Politically, we may feel that we have to make trade-offs between social and environmental initiatives, choosing, for example, child-care programs *or* pollution cleanups. Furthermore, the existential isolation that is sign and symptom of the social condition that ecofeminism sees and critiques weakens us as potential agents of social and political change.

The central theme of most versions of ecofeminism, therefore, is the interrelationship and integration of personal, social, and environmental issues and the development of multidirectional political agendas and action. Ecofeminism is transformative rather than reformist in orientation, in that ecofeminists seek to radically restructure social and political institutions. Women's liberation is contextualized in human liberation and a more ecological way of living on the earth.

Within this broad context, how have ecofeminists expressed their values through political activism? What is the theory or theories that have supported ecofeminist politics up to this point, and what parameters and directives will lend coherence and robustness to continued political development?

GRASSROOTS ACTIVISM

In the New England town of Brattleboro, Vermont, a handful of women and men from an ecofeminist affinity group gathered on Mother's Day in 1987. On a dewy hillside surrounded by woods and marsh, they looked over a prototypical scene: a developer from another state had cleared much of the land in an area that had rapidly been losing open space and valuable wetlands. Eighty-six condominiums were to be built, second and third homes far beyond the means of most area residents. A long strip had been bulldozed near the condos right through the marsh. A member of the group describes their action:

> Eight of us went out early in the morning, with plants and gardening tools, and began to plant the strip. A great colorful, wonderful garden emerged—it didn't feel as though we were working on it, it just happened. The people who lived neighboring the development started to come out,and they brought flowers to plant and seeds. We claimed the strip as a community garden.[1]

In the afternoon the developer arrived, and the group blocked his way until he agreed to talk with them about their concerns. Several hours later, the protesters gave him "permission" to plow under the community garden. A week later the neighbors, who had not previously organized, went to a selectmen's meeting to object to the developer's plan to close the road for a week to blast to lay pipes—and they won. The victory was small but important. The Mother's Day Garden, like many ecofeminist actions, accomplished

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several goals. It was a direct protest as well as an invitation to the developer to consider community and environmental impacts. It also empowered people who were not initially involved to take responsibility for the community and area in which they lived.

The largest identifiably ecofeminist actions that have taken place in the history of the movement were the Women's Pentagon Actions in November of 1980 and November of 1981, which were organized by participants in the "Women and Life on Earth: Ecofeminism in the 1980s" conference in Amherst, Massachusetts. In these nonviolent direct actions, women surrounded the Pentagon, issuing a Unity Statement that called for social, economic, and reproductive rights as well as an end to the arms race and the exploitation of resources, people, and the environment. In the 1980s ecofeminism became a presence and, in some cases, an organizing principle in decentralized movements on the American and international left. Initiatives that ecofeminism has both drawn from and contributed to include the peace movement, the direct action movement, and Green party politics.[2] Ecofeminism shares overlapping goals with these other loosely organized movements including equitable and peaceful social relations, and sustainable and nonexploitative economic systems and life-styles. It also shares a spirit of resistance to institutionalized power structures and is committed to nonviolence and open processes of communication. As has been the case in other activist movements, ecofeminists have attempted to implement these ideals among each other and outwardly. They have encountered through debates and differences a struggle to find ground between two poles: on the one hand a prematurely unified theory and political praxis that obscures and suppresses differences, and on the other an indiscriminate pluralism that results in vague thinking, passivity, and political inertia.

THEORETICAL ORIGINS

Ecofeminism draws theoretical concepts from ecology, especially a principle of life's interdependence, and from feminism, especially a social analysis of the domination of women that is also linked with racism and classism. Disparate strands from these sources and others including feminist spirituality and issue-oriented activism do not make for an easy, definitive synthesis, and various theorists have weighted their analyses differently.

Well-known theorists such as Ynestra King and Starhawk trace different lineages for ecofeminist theory, often echoing their own intellectual and political journeys. King acknowledges a debt to Murray Bookchin's philosophy of social ecology as well as to a long study of social and political theory and to feminist social analyses. She advocates a "critical analysis of and opposition to the uniformity of technological, industrial culture—capitalist and socialist—[that] is crucial to feminism, ecology and the struggle of indigenous peoples"

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(1989, 177). This is a rational and politically anarchist position. According to Noel Sturgeon, King "has prominently figured in the promulgation of ecofeminism as a position on the American left which is deeply rooted in the politics and practice of the direct action movement" (1989, 15). King differentiates her conception of ecofeminism from other liberatory political movements, however, which according to her "see themselves as outgrowths of the past—even possibly as a vindication or revenge for the past, rather than as preceding or anticipating the future." She frames ecofeminism as "the practice of hope," explaining that "to have hope . . . is to believe that [the] future can be created by intentional human beings who now take responsibility [for it]."[3]

Starhawk, on the other hand, finds a base for ecofeminism in a very different background of feminist spirituality, claiming that "Ecofeminism is a movement with an implicit and sometimes explicit spiritual base." She outlines feminist, or earth-centered spirituality as a source for a value system for ecofeminism. For example, "the second base concept of earth-centered spirituality is that of interconnection . . . [this] translates into compassion, our ability to feel and identify with others—human beings, natural cycles and processes, animals and plants" (1989, 178). Starhawk draws a political agenda from principles she has developed through a practice of an earth-based religion.

King and Starhawk exemplify different backgrounds in thought and experience among ecofeminists, especially as they urge, in King's case, a conceptual/rational transformation and, in Starhawk's, a spiritual/psychological one as the motivational core of social change. As a result of these different paths to a similar, often identical activist politics, there is some friction and some complementarity in tracing ecofeminism's heritage as well as its fundamental principles.

A point of departure for ecofeminist theory in its earliest formulations was analyzing a transcultural symbolic association and devaluation of women and nature. Ecofeminists were, and are, interested not only in confronting the fallacies of biologically determined gender roles but in delving into the deeper psychological and cultural/mythic base of a value-laden polarization between "primitive" nature and "civilized" society. The so-called domestic sphere of women's work and activities across many times and cultures includes caring for children, the elderly, and the sick and working close to the land. This has traditionally been regarded as less "civilized" and therefore lesser in value, than the public sphere of men's work and activities. Sherry Ortner analyzed this deep attitudinal split in an article written from a structuralist perspective and often cited by ecofeminist theorists, "Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?" (1974).

The dark side of the woman/nature association is especially vivid in the intersections of women's oppression and the exploitation of nature in many developing countries today. For example, all over the world Western "green revolution" agricultural methods have been imported into developing

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countries either through a misplaced altruism or, increasingly, under pressure as a short-term intensive method of cash-crop production to pay off Third World debts. Green-revolution methods include growing crops in monocultures using genetically engineered seed, chemical pesticides, deep plowing, and intensive irrigation, which permanently destroys indigenous soils. These have replaced traditional methods that have long sustained soil fertility, including mixed and rotational cropping that renews soil nutrients and repels pests, using appropriate plowing depths and irrigation methods for the local soils, and integrating practices of animal husbandry, forestry, and agriculture. Vandana Shiva has shown how in India, as in many parts of the world, women's impoverishment has increased and their status decreased relative to men as the environment has been degraded, exacerbating prior gender inequities. A direct correlation has been noted between regions that have adopted the most green-revolution technology and increased violence and discrimination against women. As one example, Shiva notes:

> The Kallars, a landless community in Tamil Nadu, have, over the last 10 to 15 years, started routinely dispensing with their girl children. The logic of dispensability is linked to the green revolution which, through commercialisation, introduces a differential wage labour, on the one hand (with men getting Rs. 13 a day and women getting Rs. 6) and, on the other, creates a demand for dowry which has driven the poverty-stricken community to female infanticide. (1988, 119)

Through explicit and measurable links between environmental degradation and violence against women, Shiva shows that "in the perspective of women engaged in survival struggles which are, simultaneously, struggles for the protection of nature, women and nature are intimately related, and their domination and liberation similarly linked" (1988, 47).

One of the primary debates in ecofeminist theory concerns the causes of domination and the exploitation of women, nature, and others, as well as where and when these should be located. Riane Eisler and Charlene Spretnak, for example, each argue that prototypical patterns of domination can be traced to the invasion of Indo-European societies by nomadic tribes from Eurasia about 4500 B.C. According to this analysis European society, in the Neolithic period was free of modern forms of oppression, and, significantly, was also "matrifocal, matrilineal, peaceful [and] agrarian" until "barbarian invaders from the barren fringes of the globe [left] in their wake destruction . . . what characterizes these invaders is that they [brought] with them male dominance along with their angry gods of thunder and war" (Eisler 1990, 29).

Aside from the questionable interpretations of the archaeological evidence on which this argument is based, some ecofeminist and feminist theorists have regarded a theory of domination describing origins in a collectively misogynist,

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anti-natural male consciousness that suddenly "arrives" as politically naive and irrelevant to a modern analysis and deconstruction of the dynamics of oppression (Biehl 1989; Prentice 1988). Such a claim based in ancient history does not address the processes by which a "dominator" consciousness and social practices originally developed. Instead, alternative models have connected the exploitation of women and nature to cultural, scientific, and economic factors that are more historically accessible, on the premise that examining the convergence of these factors can lead to an understanding of how to deconstruct them. Carolyn Merchant (1980, 1989) and Vandana Shiva (1988) both do this by tracing the transformations of cultural practices and symbols from the Enlightenment to the present day. Shiva claims that "the reductionist world-view, the industrial revolution, and the capitalist economy were the philosophical, technological, and economic components of the same process" (1988, 23). She calls the practices by which this complex expands "maldevelopment."

One manifestation of the combination of developments and maldevelopments Shiva refers to is the commodification of both "natural resources" and people. When landscapes and ecosystems are regarded as commodities, then members of an ecosystem, including human beings, are treated as "isolated and extractable units" (Cronon 1983, 21). One face of the problem lies in the values and reinforcing structures of most social and economic systems, but it is also internalized in individuals. Even with a high degree of personal awareness and maturity, we are conditioned by collective perceptual filters to experience in predetermined ways the subjectivity/objectivity of other persons, beings, and things. This means that social projects must be both deeply personal and political to render transformative changes. Ecofeminism's context for social analysis is nature, since it contains and includes all humans and human creations as well as nonhuman existence.

Ecofeminism must continue to dissemble the multiple layers and strands of ideologies and practices that power a dysfunctional society and make it dangerous to individuals and to the totality of life. I believe that the search for some singular and original seed of domination in the distant past does not really help us with this. We should proceed, instead, to further develop models of the interlocking dynamics of oppression, so that when we are working for liberation in one area we are able to see links and contribute to opening up other areas as well.

Parameters and Cautions for a Progressive Theory

Ecofeminist theory aspires to an integrated and intersubjective view of human life and society in/as part of nature. Ultimately, this is an encompassing natural philosophy that we should think of not as a blueprint to be developed by one or two utopian thinkers but as a cultural revolution. In the face of

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various claims about key concepts and themes for ecofeminism, can and should we try to establish a set of general principles? What purposes would this serve?

My assertion is that we need to define guiding parameters for our theory that can continually be refined but that provide recognizable directives and contexts for the development of ecofeminist analyses and social projects. These are important for many reasons, but among them is the historical demonstration that some philosophies lend themselves to contemplation and inaction—for example, the largely mental politic of postmodernist deconstruction in its academic and literary forms, or the inward mysticism of metaphysicians such as Heidegger, touted by ecological theorists such as Arne Naess who advise us to think like a mountain.[4] Other philosophies lend themselves to action, the expression of will, and political participation; for example, the political analyses of Emma Goldman, foremother of direct action as protest. Ecofeminist theory has in the past developed in close dialogue with political praxis. In ecofeminist dialogue in the past several years, however, particularly in debates about environmental ethics and the relation of ecofeminism to feminist spirituality, reference to political praxis has decreased relative to earlier discussions.[5]

Ecofeminism is highly critical of most current social and political institutions and thereby serves a deconstructive or dissembling function that supports political resistance. To fulfill this deconstructive potential, its criticisms must continue to be acted upon by the expression of resistance through direct action on life-threatening issues (militarism, violence against women, the nuclear industry, pollution and toxics, environmental destruction). Ecofeminism also aspires to a creative and reconstructive function in society, as King's "practice of hope." To fulfill a reconstructive potential, a social philosophy must extend a social critique and utopian vision into imperatives for action. This means that life-preserving values and policies must be promoted and carried out beyond circles of personal affinity and academic philosophy and brought into public arenas. Reconstructive projects that ecofeminist theory and activism has contributed to include, for example, community forums on social or environmental issues and those at intersections such as biotechnology; state legislation supporting the civil rights and safety of groups that historically have had little political power; the reallocation of private and public resources and funds to socially responsible uses; alternative housing and land-use arrangements; and local alternative economic systems.[6] Unlike the largely mental politics of postmodern, poststructuralist social critiques in the academy as well as some systems of environmental ethics, ecofeminism's popular and political base in grassroots organizing and direct action has fanned the will to personal and collective action from its inception.

Maintaining a balance of critical and creative directions is crucial to the continued political potency of ecofeminism. Can we afford not to have an action-oriented philosophy at a crisis point in social and natural history, when

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we are literally threatened on a global scale by annihilation by nuclear war or ecological destruction? Ecofeminism's promise is that it provides not only an orientation and worldview but also a basis for responsible action. In order for the movement to fulfill this promise, I believe that it is necessary to establish broad parameters that diverse ideas and actions can be referred to, and to maintain critical and vitalizing links between theory and praxis.

I offer the following four points of focus to help create and maintain a firm ground for social and ecological responsibility and political participation. These are that we (1) treat ecofeminism as a moral theory, (2) engage in the project of working out an integrated philosophy of humanity and nonhuman nature, (3) view this theory as a living process inseparable from the individuals and groups who think and practice it, and (4) maintain an active political and participatory emphasis that is both deconstructive (reactive to current injustices) and reconstructive (proactive in creating new forms of thinking and doing).

The first parameter I have outlined is that ecofeminism be treated as a moral theory—a prescriptive psychological and social model that includes an idea of future potential and how best to unfold it, not just an analysis of how things were in the past or are currently. Philosopher Amélie Rorty defines such a theory and what it should do:

> Besides characterizing the varieties of well-lived lives, and formulating general principles and ideals for regulating conduct, a moral theory should tell us something about how to get from where we are to where we might better be. While it needn't prescribe a decision procedure for determining every detail of every choice and action, it should, in a general way, be action-guiding: constructing a robust ethical theory requires an astute understanding of *psychology and of history* (1988, 15; italics added).

Furthermore, a moral theory must emerge out of a felt sense of need and personal connection with the issues at hand, not just out of an abstract process of reasoning. Ethical systems based only in abstracted values fail to draw real commitments and can too easily be used as tools of manipulation and deception—for example, to rationalize military aggression on the basis of furthering democracy. Ecofeminism must be adequately grounded and contextualized to be a "robust" and action-guiding ethical theory. It should, therefore, have a foundational characterization of reality (an ontology) and escape some of the traps of classical philosophy that have helped to support conceptual splitting and dualisms. In particular, ecofeminism needs to avoid assumptions of either classical materialism or classical idealism, with connotations of inanimate substance set in opposition to a purely subjective, psychic, or spiritual quality. This means that we must develop concepts and personal sensibilities of self

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and world that move beyond conceptual dichotomies. Our paradigms and experiences of self and world must be monistic but differentiated to reflect their real basis in earthly life, accounting for both the integrity of individuals and collective realities and functions.

Basically, we are looking to develop a better alternative to a classically Western atomistic, materialist worldview—without simply flipping to its polar opposite, a holistic, idealist one with a mirror-image set of problems. Ultimately, an atomistic view that reduces life to its smallest increments endangers our lives through a fascination with the manipulation of genes and nuclear power, ignoring the interlocking relations, functions, and activities of natural and social communities. And yet holism as a principle that gives superior explanatory power and/or value to a collective entity or community can also endanger our lives by undermining the integrity of individuals and their specific needs and interests. Women and other oppressed categories of people should be especially wary of paradigms that could be construed as advocating the sacrifice of individual needs to a "greater whole"—whether that be the family, society, or "Gaia," a planetary entity. The latter has made its appearance as an ideal in some ecofeminist writing after James Lovelock took the ancient Greek earth goddess's name to describe his scientific theory of the earth as a self-regulating organism, and this was taken up by various poets, philosophers, and ethicists as a paradigm for nature. I believe, along with Marti Kheel, who writes from the context of animal liberation, that ecofeminist theory must be especially careful in outlining its guiding principles to "address the importance of individual beings *as well as* the larger whole" (1990, 9).

The key to incorporating the integrity of individual and collective realities is an expanded concept of nature that we, as gendered human beings, can then find a place in. We must understand "natural" and "social" histories (as well as our personal lives) as processes of differentiation and incorporation that are expressions of nature rather than emerging *out of* nature. This way we neither annihilate ourselves in nature (reducing ourselves to a small and therefore expendable part) nor sever ourselves from the nonhuman environment and from those aspects of ourselves unmediated by social processes.

At the core of the expanded concept of nature that I advocate is the rejection of a subject/object split at its root—the opposition of human consciousness and a mechanical nature—and the adoption, instead, of an ontology of nature as *fundamentally material and subjective*. This acknowledges different types of subjectivity in natural phenomena that include (but are not limited to) human life and mental processes. In these terms human consciousness is a specialized form of subjectivity but in no way exclusive or original. Imbuing nature with both materiality and subjectivity provides a substantial basis for commonality as well as differences between human beings and nonhuman life, without the mystification of a discontinuous conceptual leap from nature to human existence.

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In a realm of human possibilities that exists continuously with, and as an aspect of, nature, we can proceed to explore gender, race, and other categories of human difference as particulars rather than as oppositional qualities. They are specific elaborations of the human species, complex constructs of biological givens and subjective mediations. In actuality, biological sex or genetic heritage is only a small part of what we experience as gender or race. As Donna Haraway reminds us, "race and gender are the world-changing products of specific, but very large and durable histories" (1989, 8). An expanded concept of nature affects our thinking and experience of human diversity in terms such as gender and race in two important ways: first, it prevents our collapsing them into purely biological/materialist explanations, thereby dismissing our own subjective creation and participation in those differences; second it renders nonsensical the total detachment that characterizes extreme processes of objectification by providing us with an irrefutable basis for mutual identification with others, in a shared natural heritage and physical/subjective existence.

The purpose of working out an integrated philosophy of humanity and nature is not only to challenge dualisms to reflect more clearly our lived experience in theory but also to describe relations among women, men, society, and nonhuman nature in a way that is conducive to a high quality of life and antithetical to oppression and exploitation. There are a few potential pitfalls we need to be cognizant of as we develop a synthesis that relates an expanded sensibility of nature and specific social agendas. In outlining parameters for ecofeminism that are aimed at transforming personal sensibilities as well deconstructing conceptual splits, it is important to acknowledge and integrate rational, emotional, visceral, imaginative, and intuitive modes of experience and expression. It is also critical, however, to distinguish ontological and phenomenological descriptions and emphasize a necessary discrimination between symbolic and literal existence.

In popular ecofeminist literature one commonly comes across feminized earth and nature images, but there is a troubling absence of critical discussion about them. To relate to the earth as a mother—an entreaty from bumper stickers as well as scholarly essays—is an analogy that is imaginatively inspiring. But "Mother Earth" and the pronouns "she" and "her" in philosophical/theoretical discourse (as in "her forests, rivers, and different creatures have intrinsic value" [Diamond and Orenstein 1990, xi] tend to reify precisely the unexamined woman/nature associations ecofeminism has challenged since its beginnings. Additionally, the psychological effect of understanding the earth as a fundamentally feminine parent is to reduce our sense of the vast and varied subjectivities of the planet and all its life to our projections of human consciousness and to blur the diversified forms of the natural world with our associations to human bodies, or even the particular human body of our own mother. When Paula Gunn Allen calls to "the planet, our mother, Grandmother Earth," and to us to attend to "her" as she "is giving birth" (1990,

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52-54), the anthropomorphization diminishes more than expands our awareness, evoking good and bad psychological associations with parenting that we have received and given rather than a sense of wonder that comes from stretching our consciousness to relate to something much bigger than human existence.

Another potential pitfall, which is related to the confusion of symbolic and concrete realities, is for ecofeminists to promote unintentionally an essentialist view of gender differences. This confirms a fear of many outside of ecofeminism that it is a new version of biological determinism that privileges women's relationship to nonhuman nature. This happens, for example, in Brian Swimme's essay, which appears in the most recently published anthology of ecofeminist writing:

> My proposal is that we learn to interpret the data provided by the fragmented scientific mind with the holistic poetic vision alive in ecofeminism. What is this holistic vision? . . . I would simply point to the perspective, awareness and consciousness found most clearly *in primal peoples and women generally* (1990, 17; italics added).

Marti Kheel and others have noted that conceptual and ethical frameworks marked by care, compassion, and person-to-person accountability can help model the type of thinking and decisionmaking that can help reconstruct human relations to nature, and perhaps this is what Swimme means to suggest (Kheel 1985). Feminist theorists have made phenomenological studies of predominately female traits that include an ethical/moral orientation—an "ethic of care"—and alternative epistemologies, or "women's ways of knowing" (Gilligan 1982; Belenky et al. 1986). These are useful as historically specific descriptions. There is a danger, however, for ecofeminism to reify unwittingly an "ethic of care" or "women's ways of knowing" as universal and biologically determined qualities (and thereby imply that women are limited to these) by dropping them into ecofeminist theory without the historical and cultural contexts in which they developed.

For ecofeminism to fulfill its promise as an emancipatory theory, we must be especially careful in accounting for traits that for complex historical reasons have become gender associated in our culture, even though these may at present describe collective norms. This means that we must be cognizant of what we omit from our theories as well as what we include. Our admission of a specific physical, cultural, and temporal position can give our ideas life and credibility while empowering others to articulate their own unique contribution. This helps us understand a body of ideas such as ecofeminism as embodied ideas—not an abstractable theory but a process inseparable from the persons who think, struggle with, carry, and live it in specific times and places.

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Sustaining Political Momentum

The struggle to develop an organic and discriminating view of nature and society, which also includes an understanding of gender and other human differences, is the futuristic edge of ecofeminist theory. But if ecofeminist theory is to remain accountable and connected to the people who have developed it in the past and who carry it now, imperatives for change must also be translatable into political action at the grassroots level. Clearly there are global issues that ecofeminism can and has already helped us analyze and organize around. But situations also rise up in our personal lives and in our communities each day that demand our comprehension, assessment, and action. Amélie Rorty cautions us to test the viability of theory with actual political situations: "a moral theory that recommends political and psychological reforms must also pay attention to the ways in which its proposed redirections can effectively and successfully be brought about, given actual conditions" (1988, 15).

Grace Paley, one of the organizers of the "Women and Life on Earth: Ecofeminism in the 1980s" conference, formed an affinity group with women in her rural Vermont town in 1977. She describes the value of a core group in which members can share ideas and experiences but remain connected to the community as a whole:

> You do find people come from our affinity groups and are working in the towns very seriously, and with other people. It's not an inward group, it's a group that goes outward. There are women that I've worked with who are doing marvelous things— agricultural conservation, and town work on recycling and energy. [One woman] does extraordinary work in schools . . . [she] has girls talk to their grandmothers and collect oral histories.[7]

Paley and others from her group have also been part of demonstrations at the Seabrook, New Hampshire nuclear power plant for almost twenty years, as part of a larger umbrella network of antinuclear activists in New England, the Clamshell Alliance. Like many of us, she has found her political and community work informed and generated by many different sources, including ecofeminism. So how do we reconcile different alliances? Are there particular benefits in linking diverse actions and projects with ecofeminism? Does this mean that ties to other movements or theories must be broken? Are there reasons *not* to link activist projects with ecofeminism?

Anne Cameron is among those who raise objections to using the term ecofeminism as a rallying point for diverse activist initiatives. Her argument is that

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> suddenly, "feminism" is being avoided as a term . . . the term "ecofeminism" suggests that the old "feminism" was not at all concerned with ecology, could not have cared less about the environment, had no analysis of industrial exploitation, and ignored the need for peace.
>
> The term "ecofeminism" is an insult to the women who put themselves on the line, risked public disapproval, risked even violence, and jail. It is an insult to the women who made rape openly and publicly unacceptable, it is an insult to the women who encouraged us . . . to stop sexual abuse of women and children, and the horror of incest (1989, 64).

Cameron's argument is important in reminding us that ecofeminism is not an ahistorical revelatory vision that will save the world, negating the hard work and thinking that preceded and continues to inform it. I do not believe, however, that her criticism of ecofeminism is fair, nor is it an accurate reading of the intentions of those who originated the term—most of whom, like Ynestra King, have a long history of feminist activism and have in no way discarded the term feminist. Regarding oneself, a particular viewpoint, or an action as ecofeminist does not need to precipitate an identity crisis in the sense of having to give up other affiliations. Sometimes it renames and reworks social activism and feminist projects that already have a history but may not have distinguished or emphasized the social and ecological interrelations that ecofeminism reminds us of and holds us accountable to. There are a multiplicity of feminisms, for example, with widely differing analyses of sources of oppression as well as who or what is oppressed, the degree of change that is needed, and how it should be accomplished. Some of these are frankly incompatible with ecofeminism's principles; some are complementary. Theoretically and/or politically incompatible orientations include separatist cultural feminisms that do not perceive any basis for commonality with some other people, and some brands of liberal feminism that accept the status quo of most existing social institutions, promoting only women's movement within them. The hallmark of many socialist feminist orientations, on the other hand, is the interdependence of institutional oppressions such as capitalism, racism, and patriarchy. Ecofeminism shares this as part of its analysis but also challenges the limitations of a purely "social" frame of reference.

Donna Haraway notes that inside and outside the boundaries of feminist inquiry, some theoretical/political positions argue for "the historical superiority of particular structured standpoints for knowing the social world, and possibly the 'natural' world as well" (1989, 6). She gives the example of Marxism, which sees forces of economic production and reproduction as primary factors determining both social and human-environmental relations; I would add for comparison versions of radical feminism, which see human gender relations as

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central. In my definition of ecofeminism's parameters, nature is present as a context but there is no privileged axis of analysis that is equivalent to economic production or gender relations—rather, there is a focus on relations among multiple factors that compose a particular phenomenon rather than on one primary factor that others derive from or are secondary to. This is not to say that ecofeminism necessarily has a better or truer perspective on what is really at play in complex issues, but that the absence of a preconceived bias for a primary cause or factor enables a flexible analysis that is potentially more responsive to direct experience. It also provides for a wider array of confrontational or reconstructive responses. For example, an ecofeminist perspective on biotechnologies (reproductive technologies, genetic engineering) may bring social/historical contexts such as the gendered politics of science or environmental contexts such as the complex and fragile nature of biologic communities to bear on political activism aimed at making or changing public policies. But it is the mutual and cumulative effects of social/political/environmental processes that ecofeminism takes as a special responsibility to notice, describe, and respond to. These are often more serious or urgent than the effects of an isolated process or processes.

CONCLUSION

Ecofeminism is a growing theoretical and political movement. In its short history it has been characterized by considerable diversity among its participants as well as in some of its premises and assumptions. In general, ecofeminism brings strands of several philosophical orientations together in an incisive synthesis, including ecological principles of diversity and interdependence in human and nonhuman communities, and a particular feminist analysis of power relations and interlocking dominations. It also develops a utopian vision of human society integrated with the natural world. I have argued that ecofeminism can best be developed in the future by defining several parameters or points of focus that would serve as references for diverse ideas and claims. These would lend coherence to ecofeminist analyses while helping to avoid some pitfalls of theoretical contradiction and to maintain accountability between theory and political practice. One of the points of focus I suggest is the crucial philosophical project of continuing to develop an expanded concept of nature that can serve as a ground and context for social analyses and can also serve to connect us with our own embodiment and natural heritage. This needs to be worked out very carefully, with special attention to deconstructing cultural dualisms that have supported the association and concurrent devaluation of women, nonhuman nature, and other significant categories of people and things.

Ecofeminism's political goals include the deconstruction of oppressive social, economic, and political systems and the reconstruction of more viable

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social and political forms. No version of ecofeminist theory dictates exactly what people should do in the face of situations they encounter in personal and public life, nor is it a single political platform. The relation of ecofeminist theory to political activism is ideally informative and generative and not one of either prescribing or "owning" particular actions. Ecofeminist theory advocates a combined politics of resistance and creative projects, but the specific enactment of these is a result of dialogue between the individuals involved and the actual situation or issue. Ecofeminism contributes an overall framework and conceptual links to the political understanding of the interplay between social and environmental issues, and routes to political empowerment through understanding the effects of one's actions extended through multiple human and nonhuman communities.

Ecofeminism faces a challenge in maintaining, and to a certain degree, recovering a politically potent activist emphasis. Ecofeminism's critical frameworks and utopian visions are exciting and energizing—in one sense, it is a focus term for philosophies that integrate human society and nature and aim for an entirely new intellectual/perceptual/sensate experience of self and world. It is in no way ahistorical, however, as it is developed and lived by people with different backgrounds and asssumptions about the nature of gender roles, social arrangements, and human/environmental relations. Ecofeminism does make big promises. Their fulfillment depends on theorists and activists who can embody the broad and integrated sensibilities of self and world that ecofeminism helps develop and advocate and who can find the power and the energy to act on those sensibilities to make real social and political changes.

NOTES

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1. From a conversation with Sue Swain who was one of the organizers and participants in the Mother's Day Garden.

2. For specific treatments of ecofeminism's relation to the peace movement see King (1986), to the direct action movement see Sturgeon (1989), and to Green Party politics see Tokar (1987, 39, 85, 137) and Spretnak (1988).

3. From a plenary discussion at the "Culture, Nature and Theory: Ecofeminist Perspectives" conference at USC-Los Angeles, March 1987.

4. See Naess (1985), who is credited with introducing the term deep ecology. Murray Bookchin (1988) has critiqued deep ecology's strange reverence for Martin Heidegger whose mystical philosophy and ideological connection to Hitler's Nazi party give rise to profound questions about the suitability of his ideas as a basis for social revision and reconstruction.

5. In the three anthologies of ecofeminist essays that have been published (Caldecott and Leland 1983; Plant 1989; Diamond and Orenstein 1990) there is a progressive trend

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away from activist issues, which almost completely constitute the first anthology (in essays like "Black Ghetto Ecology" and "Greening the Desert: Women of Kenya Reclaim Land"), toward a greater proportion of philosophical discussions of ecofeminism's relation to environmental ethics and feminist spirituality in the last (in essays like "The Origins of God in the Blood of the Lamb" and "Deep Ecology and Ecofeminism: The Emerging Dialogue"). To what degree this trend is beneficial in rounding out and developing a more sophisticated theoretical base for ecofeminism and to what degree it may indicate a diminishment of political involvement and power or an unexamined change in who is defining ecofeminism are extremely important questions for ecofeminists to take up.

6. An example of one project that functions in several of the ways I have listed is Julia Russell's Eco-Home in Los Angeles, a demonstration home and community network that implements and distributes information on solar technology, water-conserving organic gardens, recycling, and composting; in addition it sponsors a community bartering system and revolving loan fund. In my home state of Vermont ecofeminists have organized forums on reproductive technologies and environmental conservation through the Burlington Women's Council, and ecofeminists were among those who lobbied against state legislation legalizing surrogate mother contracts and for a bill that recognizes and prosecutes "hate crimes" against minority groups, gays and lesbians.

7. From a 1988 conversation with Grace Paley.

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