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# Essentialism in Ecofeminist Discourse

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ON 17 NOVEMBER 1980 in Washington, D.C., two thousand women encircled the Pentagon, blocking entrances, weaving doors closed with brightly colored yarn, and weaving webs of yarn and ribbon that contained artifacts from their daily lives. These women also planted cardboard tombstones on the Pentagon's lawn, inscribed with the names of victims of U.S. militarism, colonialism, toxic contamination, and sexual violence. This nonviolent direct action, known as the Women's Pentagon Action, was the first explicitly "ecofeminist" action in the United States, and in it women protested against military violence, ecological violence, racism, and social, sexual, and economic violence toward women.

Ecofeminism emerged in the 1970s as part of the women's liberation movement and more recently has begun being articulated in the margins of academic discourse. The term "ecofeminism" is used by some activists and academics to refer to a feminism that connects ecological degradation and the oppression of women. Much of ecofeminist direct action seeks to resist and subvert political institutions, economic structures, and daily activities that are against the interests of life on earth. Much of theoretical and academic ecofeminism seeks to identify, critique, and overthrow ideological frameworks and ways of thinking, such as value-hierarchical dualistic thinking,[1] that sanction ecological degradation and the oppression of women. Beyond this, ecofeminism seeks to bring forth different, nondominating forms of social organization and human-nature interaction.

Ecofeminism does not lend itself to easy generalization. It consists of a diversity of positions, and this is reflected in the diversity of voices and modes of expression represented in ecofeminist anthologies. The ecofeminist anthologies *Reclaim the Earth*,[2] *Healing the Wounds*,[3] and *Reweaving the World*,[4] and the issues of *Heresies*[5] and *Hypatia*[6] on feminism and ecology include



the work of women from different countries and social situations, and their work does not adhere to a single form or outlook. Poems, art, photographs, fiction, prose, as well as theoretical/philosophical/"academic" works are included. Ecofeminism's diversity is also reflected by its circulation in a variety of arenas, such as academia, grass-roots movements, conferences, books, journals, and art.

Because of this diversity, I agree with the contention of ecofeminist activist and theorist Carolyn D'Cruz that it is more useful to consider ecofeminism as a discourse than as a unified, coherent epistemology. D'Cruz's view of ecofeminism as discourse is useful because it makes room for the voices of a variety of positioned subjects that share political and ethical concerns.[7] I am emphasizing the diversity within ecofeminism and the usefulness of considering ecofeminism as a discourse to illustrate that there is no epistemological position that all ecofeminists can be said to share. Ecofeminism derives its cohesion not from a unified epistemological standpoint, but more from the shared desire of its proponents to foster resistance to formations of domination for the sake of human liberation and planetary survival.

## THE ESSENTIALIST/CONSTRUCTIONIST TENSION IN ECOFEMINISM

Critics of ecofeminism reside both inside and outside of the ecofeminist movement. Within the movement, social and socialist ecofeminists employ materialist methods to analyze class and capitalist economic systems, whereas cultural ecofeminists often employ spiritual or associative, poetic modes to explore oppression on a personal as well as on a larger social level. Many critics within ecofeminism align themselves with the constructionist position of social or socialist ecofeminism, and dismiss cultural ecofeminism for being "essentialist." Essentialism usually refers to the assumption that a subject (for example, a "woman") is constituted by presocial, innate, unchanging qualities. Constructionism, on the other hand, usually refers to the assumption that a subject is constituted by social, historical, and cultural contexts that are complex and variable. Essentialist arguments posit that women and men are endowed with innate qualities or essences that are not historically or culturally contingent, but eternal and unchanging, an outcome of their biology, which is understood as fixed.

For social and socialist ecofeminists who wish to transcend traditional stereotypes of women that naturalize their nature in terms of biology, essentialism in cultural ecofeminism poses serious problems. Social ecofeminism, the form of ecofeminism developed at the Institute for Social Ecology in Vermont, primarily by Chaia Heller, emphasizes that the association of women with nature in Western capitalist patriarchy is largely a social (historical and cultural) construction and that the liberation of nature will only come

human oppression, most notably capitalist patriarchy, are replaced by nonhierarchical, nondominating forms of social organization. Social ecofeminism combines radical feminism's "body politics" with the social ecological perspective developed by eco-anarchist Murray Bookchin to link ecological and social domination, and explore their specific effects on women.

Socialist ecofeminism, the form of ecofeminism proposed and advocated by environmental historian and ecofeminist Carolyn Merchant, shares social ecofeminism's constructionist position and belief that revolutionary social change and the overthrow of capitalist patriarchy are required for human liberation and planetary survival. Unlike social ecofeminism, socialist ecofeminism advocates new forms of socialism (rather than state socialism or a social ecological form of anarchy) as potentially ecologically sustainable economic and political frameworks.[8] In socialist ecofeminism, changes in the spheres of social reproduction, biological reproduction, and production are required to restructure gender relationships and human-nature interactions in order to achieve an egalitarian and ecological transformation of society. The use of essentialism in cultural ecofeminism appears to be at odds with the shared constructionist position of social and socialist ecofeminism.

Because I do not pretend to play the "god trick,"[9] I identify myself as a social ecofeminist who believes that there is something to be learned from cultural ecofeminism and that essentialism within cultural ecofeminism does not necessitate its rejection. Based on these beliefs, I direct the following questions (à la Diana Fuss)[10] toward the social/ist[11] and cultural[12] positions within ecofeminism: If cultural ecofeminist texts are essentialist, what is the motivation behind the use of this concept? Can essentialism ever be used strategically as a form of resistance? To what extent is there slippage between the social/ist and cultural positions within ecofeminism? Do the constructionism and essentialism of these respective positions imply and rest on each other? It is with these questions in mind that I explore the criticism of essentialism levied against cultural ecofeminism by some social/ist ecofeminists.

Some social/ist ecofeminists respond to the presence of essentialism in cultural ecofeminism by criticizing and dismissing cultural ecofeminism because of a fear that implying the existence of innate links between women and nature reinforces the patriarchal stereotypes based upon women's "innate" biological and psychological characteristics. To social/ist ecofeminists, ideas such as woman as nurturer, woman as caretaker, and woman as closer to nature have been used to oppress women, limit their sphere of activity, and squelch their potency as social and cultural agents.[13]

Mistrust and criticism of essentialism is not new to feminism. Most feminists are acutely aware of the many ways in which essentialist arguments have been used to oppress women. One example of the perpetuation of sexist representations of women through essentialist arguments, illustrated by feminist Judith Genova, has to do with the size of their brains:



> Around the turn of the century, researchers were convinced that the five ounce difference in weight between male and female brains was the cause of female cognitive inferiority. . . . Happily, in what soon came to be known as the "elephant problem," elephants and whales rescued women from this particular argument. If intelligence were a matter of absolute brain weight, elephants and whales would outscore men on intelligence tests handily. Since this was clearly absurd (species chauvinism remains unchanged today), absolute brain weight was quickly abandoned as a measure of intelligence. In its place various other relative measures were proposed: brain weight as an expression of body weight, body height, thigh bone weight or cranial height. . . . The only alternative that gave men significantly heavier brains and thus preserved the already established prejudice was to express brain weight as a measure of body height.[14]

This example illustrates why many feminists have a knee-jerk reaction of dismay and dismissal to biological or psychological essentializing of women—essentialist arguments have been a common ploy used to mark "woman" as incapable of fully acting as an agent of culture, society, and history. That biological essentializing of women still informs common working definitions of woman today is evidenced by media headlines such as "Brain Dead Mother Has Her Baby."[15] As feminist and cultural critic Valerie Hartouni points out, such headlines make sense only if motherhood is understood solely as a "biologically rooted, passive—indeed, in this case, literally mindless—state of being. Within this understanding, motherhood is cast as 'natural' or 'instinctual,' a synonym for female, the central aspect of women's social and biological selves, the expression and completion of 'female nature.'"[16]

It is distaste for essentialism's "regressive potential" that causes some social/ist ecofeminists to dismiss cultural ecofeminism. The tension between social/ist ecofeminism's constructionist position and cultural ecofeminism's use of essentialism in its efforts to forge a specifically woman-based culture and spirituality echoes a similar tension within feminism and all politics based upon a shared identity. Feminist critic of science Evelyn Fox Keller has articulated the same essentialist/constructionist tension within feminism as follows: "Discussions of gender tend to lean towards one of two poles—either toward biological determinism, or toward infinite plasticity, a kind of genderic anarchy."[17] To social/ist ecofeminists, essence has been socially inscribed on women for the purpose of legitimating their domination by men. Social/ist ecofeminists make it clear that although women and nature have been related in Western culture *historically* to oppress women, neither of the two entities have either innate essences or an essential connection. Essence, they argue, is not in itself pansocial or presocial or a determinant of social structure. In the words of Carolyn Merchant, "There are no unchanging 'essential' characteristics of sex, gender, or nature."[18]

## Constructing Essences

Two cultural ecofeminist texts that have been repeatedly dismissed as essentialist by some social/ist ecofeminists are Susan Griffin's *Woman and Nature*[19] and Mary Daly's *Gyn/Ecology*.[20] Griffin's *Woman and Nature* has been accused of essentialism by former social ecofeminist Janet Biehl in her book-long critique of ecofeminism, *Rethinking Ecofeminist Politics*:

> Psycho-biological ecofeminists believe that women, owing to their biological makeup, have an innately more "caring" and "nurturing" way of being than men. . . .
>
> That associations were created by patriarchal and patricentric cultures to debase women does not deter psycho-biologistic ecofeminists from consciously identifying themselves with nonhuman nature itself. They are often inspired by Griffin, an early ecofeminist writer, who proclaimed, "We know ourselves to be made from this earth. We know this earth is made from our bodies. For we see ourselves. And we *are* nature. We are *nature seeing nature*. We are nature with a concept of nature. Nature weeping. Nature speaking nature to nature."[21]

Although Biehl did at one time consider herself a social ecofeminist and put effort into developing a theory of social ecofeminism, in this text she explains that she was impelled to revoke her affiliation with ecofeminism altogether because of its infusion with cultural[22] ecofeminists. It is her belief that the presence of cultural ecofeminists within ecofeminism renders the movement contradictory, incoherent, and ineffective.

Janet Biehl interprets Griffin's text as regressively perpetuating the patriarchal essentialist associations of women with nature and men with culture that have been used to oppress women. I argue, however, that alternative interpretations of Griffin's text are possible. It seems unlikely that Griffin as a feminist would be interested in perpetuating the oppression of women. If she is not using essentialism for this purpose, how else might she be using it? Can Griffin's text be interpreted as an instance of deploying essentialism strategically as a form of resistance? Furthermore, is it possible to read constructionism within Griffin's use of an "essential" association between women and nature?

Griffin's *Woman and Nature* is a dialogue between two voices, the voice of patriarchy and the voice of women and nature. In this text, the patriarchal voice repeats from a disembodied, universal subject position the reasons the domination of women and nature is justified. While the separation of women and nature from men and culture is cemented with the use of these two voices, the essentialist association of women with nature and men with culture can be interpreted as a tactic of resistance just as easily as it can be interpreted as compliant with hegemonic uses of dualism, and the content of the text can be read to substantiate this interpretation.

Through the use of the repetitive patriarchal voice, which espouses



essentialist arguments about "woman's nature" to explain the reasons women are necessarily subordinate to men, the text illustrates the extent to which women's essence has been *historically constructed* by patriarchal scientific discourse as inferior to that of men to perpetuate masculine privilege. *Woman and Nature* illuminates one view of how Western woman's essence has been created and transformed over time by specific historical acts, and the text functions, in part, as a critique of objectivity and a challenge to the hegemony of scientific discourse. The maintenance of a voice that is simultaneously the voice of both women and nature can be interpreted, however, as leaving in place essentialist notions of women as closer to nature than men, at the same time that the content of this text shows these essentialist notions to be historically constructed. Because *Woman and Nature* explores the historical construction of essences of women and nature, which implies that essences do change, this text cannot be unambiguously classified as essentialist or constructionist; constructionism is implicated in Griffin's use of essentialism.

Mary Daly's *Gyn/Ecology* has been criticized along with *Woman and Nature* for being essentialist, for putting forth the idea that women and nature are innately linked. Socialist feminist Alison Jaggar has written:

> Mary Daly, for instance, appears to endorse the "native talent and superiority of women." None of these authors attempts to provide a systematic account of just what are women's special powers, other than their capacity to give birth, nor of the relation of these powers to female biology. Moreover, the authors' style of writing is invariably poetic and allusive rather than literal and exact. But there is a repeated suggestion that women's special powers lie in women's special closeness to non-human nature. The radical feminist author Susan Griffin, for instance, has written a very popular book that draws parallels between men's attitudes toward women and their attitudes toward non-human nature. Of course, as we shall see later, such parallels are capable of a number of interpretations, but Griffin herself suggests that women and non-human nature are inseparable from each other.[23]

*Gyn/Ecology*, like *Woman and Nature*, however, can be interpreted as simultaneously essentialist and constructionist, asserting women's essentialized gender characteristics while acknowledging the construction of woman's essence within a particular social, cultural, and historical context. Daly's *Gyn/Ecology* is concerned with uncovering the ways in which patriarchal Western religion, myth, and language have constructed an essential notion of woman that has been used to legitimate the subordination and oppression of women, as well as with seizing and reconstructing the gender category "woman" for the sake of empowering women.

The essentialism that Griffin's and Daly's texts contain can be interpreted as a conscious oppositional strategy rather than as unconsciously regressive. None of the criticisms of these cultural ecofeminist texts that I have come across acknowledge that all essences are contextual, arising out of specific

historical, cultural, and social situations. Feminist Donna Haraway makes the related point that ecofeminism in general, and the work of Susan Griffin in particular, can only be understood "as oppositional ideologies fitting the late twentieth century. They would simply bewilder anyone not preoccupied with the machines and consciousness of late capitalism."[24] This statement points to the strategic deployment of essentialism within particular historical and political contexts and, in this sense too, essentialism rests on constructionism.

Many of the critics of cultural ecofeminism could be called guilty of resorting to an essentialist notion of essentialism—dismissing it as unconditionally "bad" without examining the specific ways in which it is used in specific situations. Many of them could also be called guilty of resorting to an essentialist notion of cultural ecofeminism or ecofeminism, dismissing all their multifaceted projects based on the interpretation of certain texts as essentialist.[25]

## Marginalizing Ecofeminist Discourse with the Label "Essentialist"

If, as is the case with *Woman and Nature* and *Gyn/Ecology*, it is possible to read constructionism within essentialism and to interpret the use of essentialism by cultural ecofeminists as a conscious strategy working for, not against, the liberation of women, what is going on when texts such as these are labeled "essentialist" and dismissed as regressive? It is true that the texts of Griffin and Daly do not employ the same stylistic devices as the works of most social/ist ecofeminists. Griffin writes in a way that she calls "associative"; *Woman and Nature* is poetry as much as it is prose. In *Gyn/Ecology*, Daly writes in a style that she calls "gynocentric." Neither of these texts ascribe to the stylistic devices of traditional academic writing or traditional philosophical discourse. To what extent does the criticism of cultural ecofeminism as "essentialist" by social/ist ecofeminists serve to privilege certain positions and discursive practices within ecofeminism over others, and police what counts most in ecofeminist discourse? How does the criticism serve to privilege some ways of knowing over others? To what extent do these criticisms serve to maintain the very same dominant discursive practices and ways of knowing that voices within ecofeminism and feminism call into question?

The move toward privileging traditional discursive practices that takes place with the accusation of essentialism comes through in the complaint of Alison Jaggar from the previous section. She argues that both Daly and Griffin put forth essentializing notions of woman's nature and write in styles that are "invariably poetic and allusive rather than literal and exact." By implying that Griffin's and Daly's texts are essentialist and then describing them as "poetic and allusive," Jaggar draws an association between essentialism and associative poetic writing. This association implies that there is something



better about discursive practices that employ "literal and exact" language, and the criticism works to marginalize the work of ecofeminists who do not write in this way.

Whereas Jaggar marginalizes the discursive practices of some (cultural eco)feminists on the basis that they are essentialist, Janet Biehl marginalizes their epistemological practices. The epistemological privileging that often accompanies the accusation of essentialism is made transparent when Biehl moves from calling (cultural) ecofeminism "irrational" to criticizing it for being essentialist.[26] The epithet of "irrational" is interesting, because it is one that has historically been used so often in the service of essentializing "the other" and dismissing their subject positions and knowledges as "false." In calling (cultural) ecofeminism as "irrational," Biehl implies that her epistemological position is superior, a common use of the word "irrational." What is curious, though, is that she uses this word to dismiss works such as *Woman and Nature*, which by means of both their style and content, contest notions of rationality, objectivity, totalizing epistemologies, and discourses of truth as masculinist and oppressive and situate these notions as historical and cultural events. Biehl's criticism also implies that one of the goals of ecofeminism is the articulation of a coherent, totalizing epistemology. Although this may be the desire of a few ecofeminists (and one former ecofeminist, Biehl herself), such criticisms work to obscure the many ecofeminist voices that do not strive for a unified epistemological position.

The way of knowing that Janet Biehl assumes to be rational, in contrast to cultural ecofeminism's "irrationality," is social ecofeminism. Although both cultural and social/ist ecofeminists resist patriarchy, social/ist ecofeminists in general believe that changes in social, political, and economic systems are required for the liberation of both women and nature. Cultural ecofeminists, on the other hand, generally believe that changes in human consciousness and spirituality are inseparable from the changes in institutions that are required for the liberation of women and nature. To them, oppression is a sign of spiritual crisis—political and cultural transformation will not occur without a concurrent shift in human consciousness.

It would seem that in practice the criticism of cultural ecofeminism as "essentialist" circulates within ecofeminism to privilege social/ist ecofeminism and its materialist ways of knowing (which are also more "academic") and to marginalize cultural ecofeminism and its spiritual and intuitive ways of knowing, and their respective voices. The criticism of cultural ecofeminism as "irrational" implies that the goal of ecofeminism is the development of a unified theory of oppression (using historical materialism). In so doing, the partial perspective that materialist methods offer is not acknowledged and the plurality of perspectives that do fall under the umbrella of ecofeminism is not encouraged.

That the essentialist criticism functions, in part, to privilege social/ist ecofeminism and materialist methods became clear when I realized in the

course of reading ecofeminist texts that cultural ecofeminists had been named by social/ist ecofeminists. Although former social ecofeminist Janet Biehl, social ecofeminist Ynestra King, and socialist ecofeminist Carolyn Merchant appropriate the term "cultural" feminism, or ecofeminism, in most of the texts referred to in this way, the author did not refer to herself as a cultural feminist or ecofeminist. Cultural ecofeminism appeared to be a label social/ist ecofeminists used to designate what they did not want to be affiliated with, rather than a self-appropriated term used by ecofeminists interested in creating a woman-based culture and spirituality.[27] Furthermore, after reading cultural ecofeminist texts, it became clear that the discomfort between cultural and social/ist ecofeminists was one-sided. Some social ecofeminists spoke of cultural ecofeminism disparagingly, but not the other way around. It seemed that so-called cultural ecofeminists did not perceive a rift between themselves and social/ist ecofeminists. In this case it would seem that the power of naming has been deployed, like the label "essentialist," partially in the interest of privileging the position of social/ist ecofeminists.

Cultural ecofeminists such as Griffin and Daly have been criticized by social ecofeminists for being apolitical. Biehl has written, "By asking women to value their essential natures above men's, ecofeminism becomes an exercise in personal transformation rather than a concerted political effort."[28] In relying on more spiritual, psychological, and intuitive explorations of the oppression of women, instead of on materialist analyses of institutions, some social ecofeminists believe that the work of cultural ecofeminists does not spell out a path for political or social action, only a path for personal transformation. Some cultural ecofeminists have addressed the concern of social ecofeminists by suggesting that if social ecofeminists believe that cultural ecofeminism is apolitical, perhaps they are using a definition of politics that is too narrow. The essentialist language of Daly and Griffin indicates that for them the politics of women's liberation includes revaluing that which has been associated with women and devalued. Politics takes many forms, including discursive and linguistic resistance, as well as direct action. It is possible to read the works of Griffin and Daly as strategically deploying and reconstructing the characteristics that have been traditionally associated with women for the sake of fostering social and psychological transformations and empowering women while working to liberate women from their gender construct. Texts that assert in content and style the gender characteristics associated with women can be simultaneously essentialist and politically strategic. Feminist Elizabeth Weed describes the dilemma involved with writing essentially in feminism as the "ever difficult issue of what is at stake in the deployment of the very terms that one might be trying to displace."[29]

The criticism of cultural ecofeminism as essentialist, and hence apolitical, works to marginalize both ecofeminist writers that employ nontraditional discursive styles and those that press the necessity of a spiritual transformation of consciousness for the liberation of women and nature. The marginalization



of these voices within ecofeminism unconsciously reinscribes traditional discursive practices and ways of knowing. It works to privilege the work of social/ist ecofeminists with their emphasis on transforming the material conditions of life by overthrowing oppressive institutions, and it works to discount the work of cultural ecofeminists with their emphasis on transforming consciousness, reclaiming women's history, and fostering a woman-based culture and spirituality. Although the ultimate goals of both positions are the same, namely, women's liberation and an end to ecological degradation, social/ist ecofeminist criticisms of cultural ecofeminism privilege one means of achieving these goals over another, a transformation of social structures over a psychic transformation.

Feminists of color have been particularly critical of the essentializing move involved with asserting the claims of the gender category "woman." Like social/ist ecofeminists, some feminists of color have been concerned about a tendency within feminism to erase differences between women and universalize women's experience by employing an essentialist notion of women. Audre Lorde has criticized Daly's *Gyn/Ecology* for just this reason in her essay titled "An Open Letter to Mary Daly":

> To imply . . . that all women suffer the same oppression simply because we are women is to lose sight of the many varied tools of patriarchy. It is to ignore how those tools are used by women without awareness against each other.
>
> . . . I ask that you be aware of the effect that this dismissal has upon the community of Black women and other women of Color, and how it devalues your own words. . . . When radical lesbian feminist theory dismisses us, it encourages its own demise.[30]

Lorde, like some social/ist ecofeminists, criticizes employing an essential notion of women because it is invariably accompanied by an erasure of difference between women and it allows women with race, class, or national privileges to sidestep their obligation to take responsibility for their own power and participation in structures of domination. Essentializing women further assumes that certain experiences represent the experience of all women. In celebrating the commonalities of women and asserting a unified essentialized gender category "woman," the diversity of women's lives and histories across the boundaries of race, class, nationality, age, and sexuality is ignored.

Lorde's criticism is an extremely important one because it points to the potential of universalized notions of women or women's experience to incorporate some women and their experiences while marginalizing others. The criticism also points to the persistent problem in feminism and all politics based on common or collective identity of obscuring difference regardless of whether identity is taken to be essential or constructed.

## Essential Constructions

I have explored how constructionism is implied within essentialism and how the criticism of some ecofeminist texts as "essentialist" works to privilege materialist voices and the position of social/ist ecofeminists, and to marginalize spiritual voices and the position of cultural ecofeminists within the movement. Now I shift my focus to a brief exploration of the following correlative question: To what extent are essentialist notions implicated in the social/ist ecofeminist position, which is typically considered to be more of a constructionist position than cultural ecofeminism? Having located the dependency of cultural ecofeminism's use of essentialism on variable historical and political contexts, here I will briefly explore the possibility that social/ist ecofeminists' constructions can remain fixed.

The social/ist position within ecofeminism focuses on economic, social, and political institutions such as capitalism, patriarchy, and the nation-state for the purpose of showing the ways in which they have fostered the domination of nature and human oppression along the lines of gender, race, class, sexuality, age, etc. Social/ist ecofeminism unites ecological degradation with the personal concerns of women by rebelling against the ways in which women's bodies and minds are "poisoned" along with nature by capitalist patriarchy. Social/ist ecofeminism draws on the radical feminist insights of body politics and the idea that the "personal is political" to recognize and rebel against the many ways in which the social and ecological "poison" of capitalist patriarchy is inscribed in women's bodies and minds.[31] Social/ist ecofeminism also makes women's roles in biological and social reproduction central in theory construction.[32]

Social/ist ecofeminists' interest in women's bodies as a site of power struggle is one point at which essentialism steps into their constructionist position. The body and biological sex for some social/ist ecofeminists are part of material nature; they are "natural," not socially constructed. The constructionist position of social/ist ecofeminism, then, depends on a bit of essentialism: women are made, not born, but they are socially constructed out of naturally sexed anatomical raw material. Basing gender on material nature or biological sex necessarily naturalizes and essentializes gender.[33]

Although social/ist ecofeminists might, in general, be more straightforward in their recognition of differences between women than are cultural ecofeminists, their politics retain the category "woman" as basic. Social/ist ecofeminists recognize that "woman" is a mobile construction that rests on spatially and temporally variable social relations, and they deny that there is any immutable eternal essence that defines women. Social/ist ecofeminists often work, however, with a historically continuous, simple, essentialized notion of "woman" despite their recognition that "woman" is a construction, a mutable representation with a history.

Social/ist ecofeminists, as social constructionists, also run into another



contradiction: If "woman" rests solely on variable social relations, how can the category be asserted without essentializing women? In the words of Diana Fuss, "Is it possible to generate a theory of feminine specificity that is not essentialist?"[34] It is not my goal to answer these questions. I raise them to illustrate the point that just as it is possible to read constructionism within cultural ecofeminism's use of essentialism, it is possible to detect essentialism within the constructionist position of social/ist ecofeminism.

Interrogating the use of the label "essentialist" within ecofeminism shows that it is a site of power struggle within ecofeminism's politics of liberation over the production of ecofeminist knowledges, circulating within ecofeminism in part to maintain hegemonic discursive practices by privileging materialist ways of knowing over spiritual and intuitive ways of knowing. The application of the label "essentialist" by some social/ist ecofeminists is performing one of the same acts they fear from essentialism—erasure of difference. Discussion and debate over the efficacy of different political strategies is important in ecofeminism, but cultural ecofeminism has often been too quickly labeled "essentialist" and dismissed. Criticism of ecofeminism's essentializing tendencies is important to ensure critical self-reflexivity and for examining the ways in which essentializing may sometimes work against the goals of women's liberation by homogenizing the diversity of women's experiences. Dismissing cultural ecofeminism on this basis, however, precludes the possibility of learning from this position and obscures the legitimacy of the variety of positions and discursive forms under ecofeminism's umbrella.

Rather than despairing about ecofeminism's "incoherence" and employing tactics to marginalize certain voices within the movement, ecofeminists and feminists can take the variety of positions within ecofeminism as a sign of the movement's vitality. The uses of essentialism by ecofeminists can be explored for their political intentions and their points of effectiveness and ineffectiveness in liberatory politics, instead of dismissed unconditionally as "regressive." Instead of throwing out ecofeminism altogether because of a presumed incompatibility of social/ist and cultural ecofeminism, feminists and ecofeminists can recognize that both are resistive strategies that share the goals of ending oppression and fostering planetary survival. The extent to which there is slippage between the social/ist and cultural positions within ecofeminism can be recognized, as can the extent to which the essentialism and constructionism of these respective positions imply and rest upon each other.

It could very well be, as I have argued, that the membrane that separates cultural ecofeminism's use of essentialism from social/ist ecofeminism's use of constructionism is not as impermeable as it would at first seem. By showing that constructionism can be read within cultural ecofeminism's use of essentialism and that essentialism is not far beneath the surface of social/ist ecofeminism's use of constructionism, it is possible to destabilize the social/ist ecofeminist criticism that cultural ecofeminism is essentialist. Feminists

and ecofeminists can recognize that the different orientations of the social/ist and cultural ecofeminist positions may not be so different after all and that the essentialist/constructionist tension in the production of ecofeminist knowledges does not forestall ecofeminism's political effectiveness. Ecofeminism demonstrates that it is possible to unite politically without assuming a unified position or a totalizing epistemology. One of the recurring themes in ecofeminism is "unity in diversity"—the idea that difference does not have to mean domination. Just as recognizing differences among women does not preclude the possibility of connection and sharing a common identity for the sake of struggling together for liberation, recognizing differences among ecofeminists does not preclude the possibility of uniting on the basis of shared political and ethical concerns. The vitality of ecofeminist actions, such as the Women's Pentagon Action described in the opening paragraph of this essay, lends substance to this claim.

## Notes

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1. For a discussion of value-hierarchical thinking as a patriarchal conceptual framework, see Karen Warren, "Feminism and Ecology: Making Connections," *Environmental Ethics* 9 (1987): 6.
2. Leonie Caldecott and Stephanie Leland, eds., *Reclaim the Earth: Women Speak Out for Life on Earth* (London: Women's Press, 1983).
3. Judith Plant, ed., *Healing the Wounds: The Promise of Ecofeminism* (Santa Cruz, Calif.: New Society Publishers, 1989).
4. Irene Diamond and Gloria Feman Orenstein, eds., *Reweaving the World: The Emergence of Ecofeminism* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1990).
5. *Heresies: A Feminist Journal of Art and Politics*, no. 13 (1981). Special issue on feminism and ecology.
6. *Hypatia* 6, no. 1 (Spring 1991). Special issue on ecological feminism.
7. Carolyn D'Cruz, *Ecofeminism as Practice, Theory, Discourse: An Archaelogical and Genealogical Study* (Thesis, Communication Studies, Murdoch University, Murdoch, Western Australia, 1990), 41–42.
8. Mary Mellor promotes a similar position under the name "feminist green socialism" in *Breaking the Boundaries: Toward a Feminist Green Socialism* (London: Virago Press, 1992).
9. Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 189. Donna Haraway uses this phrase to refer to the masculinist viewpoint that sees "everything from nowhere."
10. This line of questioning is an ecofeminist-specific version of that used by feminist Diana Fuss in *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature, and Difference* (New York: Routledge, 1989). In this text, Fuss locates essentialist/constructionist debates within the identity politics of feminism, cultural studies, and gay and lesbian studies, and explores the two positions, exposing their mutual reliance and destabilizing the prevasive assumption that essentialism is unconditionally "bad." I owe much to this work—Fuss's arguments provide the theoretical grounding of this essay in many places.
11. I use the term "social/ist" to refer to the shared constructionist position of social and socialist ecofeminism.
12. Some ecofeminist writers use other terms (such as "radical," "radical cultural," and "psycho-biologistic") to refer to this position in ecofeminism and feminism.
13. Such criticism abounds in the work of social/ist ecofeminists and has been applied to both cultural ecofeminism and cultural feminism. A few examples follow: "Ecofeminist writers influenced by cultural feminism . . . tend to see women as 'closer to nature' than men, and women's essential nature is inherently more ecological than men's" (Janet Biehl, "What Is Social Ecofeminism?" *Green Perspectives* 11 [October 1988]: 2). "Some radical feminists (e.g., so-called 'nature feminists,' Mary Daly, Susan Griffin, Starhawk) . . . applaud the close connections between women and nature and urge women to celebrate our bodies, rejoice in our place in the community of inanimate and animate beings, and seek symbols that can transform our spiritual consciousness so as to be more in tune with nature. . . . [Radical feminism] mystifies women's experiences to locate women closer to nature than men" (Warren, "Feminism and Ecology: Making Connections," 14–15). "If women overtly identify with nature and both are devalued in modern Western culture, don't such efforts work against women's prospects for their own liberation? Is not the conflation of woman and nature a form of essentialism? Are not women admitting that by virtue of their own reproductive biology they are in fact closer to nature than men and that indeed their social role is that of caretaker? Such actions seem to cement existing forms of oppression against both women and nature, rather than liberating either" (Carolyn Merchant, Preface to *The Death of Nature* [San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1990], xvi). "Yet in emphasizing the female, body, and nature components of the dualities male/female, mind/body, and culture/nature, radical ecofeminism runs the risk of perpetuating the very hierarchies it seeks to overthrow . . . any analysis that makes women's essence and qualities special ties them to a biological destiny that thwarts the possibility of liberation. A politics grounded in women's culture, experience, and values can be seen as reactionary" (Carolyn Merchant, "Ecofeminist and Feminist Theory," in Diamond and Orenstein, *Reweaving the World*, 102). "The cultural feminist, in effect, believes that women may create a new, improved culture based on female natural law. The implicit nature philosophy within cultural feminism suggests that there exist certain inextricable female principles which women can know and incorporate in the creation of a radical women's culture. Women's 'innate' ability to cooperate, our increased ecological sensibility, and our peace-loving nature are simply a few of the female principles by which female nature abides" (Chaia Heller, "Toward a Radical Eco-Feminism," in *Renewing the Earth: The Promise of Social Ecology*, ed. John Clark [London: Green Print, 1990], 158).
14. Judith Genova, "Women and the Mismeasure of Thought," in *Feminism and Science*, ed. Nancy Tuana (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 211.
15. For example see, Yumi L. Wilson, "Brain-Dead Woman Gives Birth, Then Dies," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 4 Aug. 1993, pp. A1, A13.
16. Valerie Hartouni, "Containing Women: Reproductive Discourse in the 1980s," in *Technoculture*, ed. Constance Penley and Andrew Ross (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 30.
17. Evelyn Fox Keller, "The Gender/Science System; Or, Is Sex to Gender as Nature Is to Science?" in Tuana, *Feminism and Science*, 34.

18. Merchant, Preface to *The Death of Nature*, xvi.
19. Susan Griffin, *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978).
20. Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: The Meta-Ethics of Radical Feminism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978).
21. Janet Biehl, *Rethinking Ecofeminist Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1991), 12–13.
22. Biehl uses the term "psychobiologistic" rather than "cultural" in *Rethinking Ecofeminist Politics*; see 12–13.
23. Alison M. Jaggar, *Feminist Politics and Human Nature* (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Allanheld, 1983), 94.
24. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, 174.
25. Carolyn D'Cruz makes a similar point in *Ecofeminism as Practice, Theory, Discourse*, 51.
26. Biehl, *Rethinking Ecofeminist Politics*, 2, 5, 11–17, 99–100.
27. One exception is ecofeminist Charlene Spretnak, who associates herself with cultural feminism in *States of Grace: The Recovery of Meaning in the Postmodern Age* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1991), 127–33.
28. Biehl, "What Is Social Ecofeminism?" 2.
29. Elizabeth Weed, ed., *Coming to Terms: Feminism, Theory, Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1989), xxviii.
30. Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (Freedom, Calif.: Crossing Press, 1984), 67–69.
31. The idea that capitalist patriarchy produces social and ecological "poison" in women's bodies, referred to more succinctly as "ecocide in the body," has been developed by Chaia Heller and is central to social ecofeminism.
32. This idea has been put forward by Carolyn Merchant. See Carolyn Merchant, *Ecological Revolutions: Nature, Gender, and Science in New England* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 269–70.
33. For a feminist, green socialist account of the contradictions between essentialism and materialism, see Mary Mellor, "Eco-Feminism and Eco-Socialism: Dilemmas of Essentialism and Materialism," *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism* 3, no. 2 (June 1992): 43–62.
34. Fuss, *Essentially Speaking*, 69–70.

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# Ecofeminism and Deep Ecology

FREYA MATHEWS

TWO OF THE MOST important philosophies of nature that have been developing over the past decade or more, namely, Deep Ecology and ecofeminism, have offered different accounts of the way in which we should relate to nature. These are different accounts not so much of how we should *treat* the natural world, in light of its entitlement or otherwise to our moral consideration, but of how we should both construe and experience our *relationship* with it. Deep Ecology, as we shall see, takes a basically holistic view of nature; its image of the natural world is that of a fieldlike whole of which we and other "individuals" are parts.[1] It encourages us to seek our true identity by identifying with wider and wider circles of nature, presenting the natural world as an extension of ourselves, our self-writ-large, as it were. Since on this view our interests are convergent with those of nature, it becomes incumbent on us to respect and serve these common interests.

Ecofeminists, in contrast, tend to portray the natural world as a community of beings, related, in the manner of a family, but nevertheless distinct.[2] We are urged to respect the individuality of these beings, rather than seeking to merge with them, and our mode of relating to them should be via open-minded and attentive encounter, rather than through abstract metaphysical preconceptualization.[3] It is envisaged that the understanding born of such encounters will result in an attitude of care or compassion which can provide the ground for an ecological ethic.[4]

In this debate between Deep Ecology and ecofeminism, I find myself—if I might introduce a personal note here—somewhat theoretically conflicted, since I feel an affinity and a loyalty toward both these positions—toward the grand metaphysical vision of Deep Ecology and toward the ecofeminist

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