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Ecofeminism and Mothering

Ecofeminism and mothering are deeply interconnected in Western ideological constructions of both nature and gender. Ecofeminism as a set of principles emerged in the 1970s with the increased awareness of the connections between women and nature. Françoise d'Eaubonne established the Ecology-Feminisme Center in Paris in 1972, and in 1974 she first used the term *ecofeminisme*. D'Eaubonne addressed the need for an ecological revolution led by women, which she claimed would establish equality of gender relations and bring an end to the power of one group over another—including the domination of humans over nature. D'Eaubonne linked environmental degradation with patriarchal culture, and believed that a social structure based on *feminisme* would prevent the destruction of human beings and the planet. D'Eaubonne's *feminisme* was based upon the principles of complete equality and the absence of all oppression; in effect, no one gender group or species would have power over the other.

Woman and Mother Exploited

Ecofeminism, as it has developed further through the work of such theorists as Carolyn Merchant,

Karen J. Warren, Charlene Spretnak, Ynestra King, Judith Plant, and Val Plumwood, among others, locates the domination of women and the domination of nature as interrelated and overlapping. As posited in Merchant's *The Death of Nature*, women and nature both suffer under patriarchal domination, as they historically have been treated as objects to be exploited, consumed, controlled, subdued and tamed. The Earth is depicted (both currently and historically) in feminized terms, and the descriptive language is complex and fraught with ambivalence: nature is portrayed as fertile, nurturing, and protective (stereotypically maternal); sexualized and seductive (as observed and possessed by men); and wild, dark, and dangerous (needing to be tamed and civilized). According to ecofeminist theory, this complex representation of female nature as simultaneously alluring, nurturing, and dangerous justified the patriarchal domination and exploitation of nature throughout history—particularly with the advent of new science, colonization, and the industrial revolution in European cultures. Within this mechanistic and masculinist discourse, nature-woman is constructed as needing and deserving of being possessed, penetrated, and domesticated by the more rational and civilized white male, as depicted within Western ideology.

According to ecofeminist theorists, this system of patriarchal domination negatively impacts all living beings—including nature, women, indigenous people, and the poor. In this sense, ecofeminism overlaps with environmental justice theory, which argues that the racial, social, and economic underclasses are most negatively impacted by environmental pollution and degradation because they lack the economic and political power to protect their communities. Ecofeminist and environmental justice theorists argue that the exploitation of nature, women, and people of color takes place because the rights of the individual (man) come before those of the community (all living things). A solution offered by ecofeminists is the "partnership ethic" advocated by Merchant in *Reinventing Eden*. In this work and elsewhere, Merchant promotes a "moral ethic of care," similar to the belief system of many Native American tribes, in which human beings live in a balanced and equitable relationship with all living things. In a partnership community,



African activist Wangari Maathai (center) planting trees as part of the Green Belt Movement in Kenya.

no group or species holds power over the other, and interdependence replaces individualism.

Expanding Field of Study

Ecofeminism is an expansive field of study with numerous branches: liberal, social, socialist, and cultural. It also has multiple applications, including scientific, philosophical, historical, literary/artistic, psychological, and spiritual. A significant aspect of ecofeminism is political activism; ecofeminist writers, academics, and scientists work to protect and preserve environmental rights. The so-called “mother” of American environmentalist movement was Rachel Carson, author of the acclaimed *Silent Spring*, which exposed the dangers of dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane (DDT); Carson’s research demonstrated the deeply negative impact of toxics and chemicals on the environment, animals, and humans.

In Africa, Wangari Maathi founded The Green Belt Movement to help restore denuded land in

her country, enlisting poor African women to help plant millions of trees to stop the soil erosion and improve soil quality, food production, water quality, and economic prosperity. In India, Vandana Shiva founded Navdanya, an organization that works to preserve the biodiversity of seed and food, as well as what it calls the “democracy” and “sovereignty” of water. Winona LaDuke, a Native American author and environmental activist and founder of the Indigenous Women’s Network, White Earth Land Recovery Project, and cofounder (with The Indigo Girls) of Honor the Earth, fights to protect the environmental rights and land of Native American communities throughout North America. Petra Kelly cofounded the Green Party Movement in Germany and fought against the use and creation of weapons of mass destruction. In her work and writing she claimed connections between sexism, war, and environmental degradation.

Nature and Earth as Mother

In her forthcoming *Polluting Mama: Ecofeminism, Literature, and Film*, Heidi Hutner argues that the relationship between mothering and nature is crucial to ecofeminist theory and ecofeminist activism on linguistic, spiritual, political, and ideological levels. Hutner claims that the very way in which nature is constructed in language is inextricably bound with culturally constructed concepts of motherhood, such as the expressions “mother nature” and “mother Earth,” which are embedded so deeply in Western culture that it would be impossible to detach them. Hutner suggests that there are deeply complex ideological, feminist, and ecological ramifications inherent in this linguistic construction of mother-as-nature-as-Earth.

Spiritual Branches

Some spiritual branches of ecofeminism are tied to mothering through the belief in Earth-goddess worship. Starhawk, for example, holds that a human return to the mother goddess is “Mother Earth, who sustains all growing things” and will heal the deep ideological rifts between men and women, humans and nature, God and the human world within our Western cultural identity. For spiritual ecofeminists, then, the mother Earth or mother goddess is the center of all spiritual life.

Alice Walker, a self-proclaimed paganist (and womanist) follows a similar spiritual path in her work and discussions about *The Color Purple*. In her poem, “The Earth Is Our Mother,” Walker articulates a distinctly ecofeminist spiritual connection to the mother Earth—linking the nature body of the Earth with a human mother’s body—and this mother Earth connects all living things in her loving “embrace.”

Female Reproductive Biology and Ecofeminism

There is a historical relationship between mothering and environmental and peace activism; according to Hutner, many women have felt the “call” to fight against environmental degradation to protect their families from environmental toxins, pollution, nuclear waste, and disaster.

The impact of toxics and pollution on female reproductive biology plays an important part in the connections between mothering and ecofeminism, according to Hutner. In *Having Faith*, Sandra Steingraber examines the delicate relationship between the mother’s body with the developing fetus and young nursing child, and points to the effect of environmental pollution on the placenta and breast milk. Embryos, fetuses, infants, and children are especially sensitive to environmental damage in their early stages of neurological and hormonal development. As mother’s bodies transfer poisons and unwittingly and adversely impact their young, they may be rendered infertile as a result of environmental pollution.

Ecofeminist theory allows for an analysis of the highly charged and complex concepts of the mother’s womb—which can be made toxic through pollutants—as a sacred and protected space. Hutner argues that in an environmentally degraded world, mothers are both at fault for polluting their own children (or for being infertile), and they are viewed as responsible for cleaning up the world. A novel such as Margaret Atwood’s *Handmaid’s Tale* warns of the potential impact of such reasoning. In the fictional nation of Gilead, a land so polluted that human reproduction has diminished significantly, women are forced to procreate for the “good of the nation,” are blamed for their inability to conceive, and are punished when they give birth to “monsters.”

Critics of Ecofeminism

Some critics argue that ecofeminism goes too far in embracing the woman and nature connection, which idealizes the female-as-natural and reifies the position that women are not capable of functioning as rational thinkers. Ecofeminism has also been charged with setting men up as inherently outside of any real connection with the natural world. In other words, by idealizing the female-nature connection, some ecofeminists may be accused of recreating the very dualities it seeks to erase. Despite these claims, ecofeminists claim to move out of these binaries and include men, women, children, the elderly, and people of all races, cultures and classes in their theories.

See Also: Atwood, Margaret; Demeter, Goddess; Dinnerstein, Dorothy; Environments and Mothering; Paganism (New Paganism) and Mothering; Wicca and Mothering.

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Economics of Motherhood

The beliefs that motherhood should be highly valued and that those who have primary responsibility for rearing children should be adequately rewarded are popularly held; however, there is disagreement on how to appropriately compensate parents and caretakers (mothers, fathers, grandparents, and childcare workers). In lieu of a paycheck, some question if there is another way to ensure that the responsibility of child rearing is valued.

A Mother's Work

The last century has witnessed the evolving concept of how to compensate those who undertake parenting. With the onset of industrial revolution, the home ceased to be the main site of work. Both women and men were pushed to work long hours outside of the home, and with that came the dilemma of who would care for the children. Solutions have included mothers (and more recently fathers), older siblings, grandparents, childcare centers (sometimes connected to work sites), preschools, co-ops, and a community of support. However, mothers still assume most responsibility.

Though many women have held jobs through the ages, their wages have consistently been lower than men's, which meant that women were often the obvious choice to assume primary responsibility for child rearing. Women were (and still are) often paid less on the premise that their incomes were secondary, and because they were more likely to be clustered into female-dominated (and undervalued) professions, including teaching, caretaking, and domestic work. Because of this, some feminists argue that having mothers care for the children

with the men more focused on their jobs emerged more as a consequence of economics than gendered instincts. In the early 1970s, this issue galvanized feminists to question why women were expected to primarily undertake childrearing responsibilities. As a result, many women took jobs outside the home and sought to popularize the notion that every mother is a working mother. However, their looming question remained unanswered: why is the responsibility of child rearing so undervalued, both emotionally and financially?

The Price of Motherhood

In her 2001 book *The Price of Motherhood*, Ann Crittenden argues that motherhood and child rearing imposes many hidden costs on women, which she refers to as the mommy tax. Some are obvious (no compensation for caring for your own children) and some are not (child rearing does not qualify women for social security). Women often take time off from work to raise children, inhibiting their career growth and diminishing their incomes. Child rearing is valuable to society, but is not compensated as such, Crittenden states, and the cumulative effect is that women are far more likely than men to be poor.

The Value of Mothering

In 1972, in order to determine life insurance policy payouts, Chase Manhattan Bank determined "the replacement value of the mother," by considering all of the responsibilities that go into parenting (such as being a maid, chauffeur, food buyer, dishwasher, nurse, and seamstress) and concluded that a mother's work was worthy of an equivalent annual salary of \$13,391 (\$60,000 in 2008). These calculations were primarily based on what mothers would have to pay in order to get the job done using outside assistance.

With the increasing use of assisted reproductive technologies (ART) and the employment of surrogate mothers, women's reproductive labor is attaining some value; however, some fear that if ART is left unregulated, some surrogates will be taken advantage of. While compensating outsourced work is one issue, paying mothers directly challenges many assumptions about a mother's worth.

In 1983, the late economist John Kenneth Galbraith advocated for including a mother's respon-