

Published as Ariel Salleh, 'Merchant's *Earthcare*',
Environmental Values, 1997, Vol. 6, No. 4, 372-73.

Review of Carolyn Merchant, Earthcare: Women and the Environment. New York: Routledge, 1995.

Carolyn Merchant's book Earthcare is the most recent of several volumes from her, which range from The Death of Nature, 1980, an influential study of Bacon's impact on Western science to Radical Ecology, 1992, a survey of contemporary eco-philosophies. Earthcare collects together excerpts from her history of mechanistic thought, earlier published work on New England settlers and tribal Indian farmers, and essays on women's environmental activism in the United States, Sweden, and Australia.

While nature was once represented by the image of Gaia. Eve, or Isis, the rise of capitalist economics, science and technology, has broken this spiritual link. Many North American ecofeminists re-invoke ancient symbols as part of their political practice, but the source of ecofeminist inspiration is something far more mundane. Merchant writes that

the socialisation of women as caretakers and nurturers, the degradation of women's livelihoods and bodies, and the double burden born by women workers and homemakers in capitalist, socialist, and colonised countries [is what] has often propelled them to act... (pxi).

Earthcare spells out women's quite heroic responses to the modern assault on life, and the book is richly supplied with photographic plates of feminine visionaries and street fighters. But women's eco-activism is not new. Throughout the 19th Century, middle class wives in the United States gave leadership to wild life conservation both through Women's Clubs and in bodies such as the Audubon Society. Readers may be astonished to read of public interest groups such as a Women's Forestry Committee and Women's National River's and Harbors Congress, active around 1900. To quote Mrs Robert Burdette of Pasadena:

While the women of New Jersey are saving the Palisades of the Hudson from utter destruction by men to whose greedy souls Mt Sinai is only a stone quarry, and the women of Colorado are saving the cliff dwellings and pueblo ruins of their state from vandal destruction, the word comes to the women of California that men whose souls are gang-saws are meditating the turning of our world famous Sequoias into planks...(p111).

Merchant teaches in the Department of Environmental Science, Policy and Management at the University of California Berkeley, and her academic position has led to sojourns in Sweden and Australia. The Chapter 8 essay 'Peace with the Earth' was originally written with Abby Peterson from Gothenberg and published in 1986. As far as I know, Chapter 9 'The Ecological Self', has not been published before. Its treatment of Australian women's environmental activism and theory updates a local study contained in Hutton's anthology Green Politics in Australia, 1987. And perhaps Merchant's account is the stronger for being written by an outsider to the scene.

Earthcare opens by sketching out the main lines of Merchant's preferred socialist ecofeminist argument contrasting this with liberal, cultural, and social, ecofeminist stances. She is at one with the line taken by Maria Mies from Germany and India's Vandana Shiva, whose classic co-authored text Ecofeminism, 1993, demonstrates that only when ecofeminism gets to grips with capitalism, will it enable women in the West to work in solidarity with Third World sisters. The analysis of capitalist structures also protects ecofeminist theory from dismissal for resting on simplistic 'essentialist' ideas of masculinity and femininity.

What socialist ecofeminists are talking about is prioritising social attitudes and practices that sustain the reproduction of life over and above the productivist order that rules today. Merchant recommends that we embrace an earthcare ethic based on partnership with nature. Some ecofeminists might argue that the partnership notion keeps intact the classic Western Humanity / Nature dualism, simply replacing the 'versus' by a 'with'. From a deep ecological point of view we actually are nature or as ecofeminist Susan Griffin puts it: we are nature weeping for nature.

But Merchant is not naive about the difficulties which might get in the way of implementing a partnership ethic. Obstacles include the entrenched power of homocentric economic institutions like the IMF and World Bank; antagonism from communities in the South over massive resource consumption by the North, and an ongoing sex/gender crisis in the so called developed world. As a guide to implementing partnership, Merchant calls up the Miami 1991 Women's Action Agenda 21. World wide, women want corporate accountability, basic needs fulfilled before profits, education and welfare security, voluntary birth control and childcare time shared equally with men.

In an attempt to be comprehensive in scope and easily understood, Merchant's writing sometimes reduces and oversimplifies complex theoretical positions. But she does not pretend to be a philosopher. Her contribution remains that of an historian of science. As such, Merchant is a founding mother of the international ecofeminist movement and Earthcare is the document of an often invisible her/story.

Merchant, C. 1980. The Death of Nature. San Francisco: Harper.

Merchant, C. 1992. Radical Ecology. New York: Routledge.

Hutton, D. 1987 Green Politics in Australia. Sydney: Angus & Robertson.

Mies, M. and Shiva, V. 1993. Ecofeminism. London: Zed.

