

From Feminism to Ecology

Ariel Kay Salleh

Somewhere in the late 70's there arrived without doubt an idea whose time had come: the eco-fem connection. For my part, mother and academic, generation of the cold war and the counter-culture, I had been a feminist for some years, active in the anti-uranium movement, and now working in Wollongong I was made daily more aware of the environmental ravages that come with frenetic industrial production. The seed of my own eco-feminist consciousness was planted at the burial of a small daughter. Her birth and death opened me to the metabolism of nature and the sense of my own life in its never ending cycle of reciprocity and exchange. Some years later this feeling got caught up in my academic teaching and writing, and as I read the Frankfurt School of critical sociologists, Adorno, Horkheimer and Marcuse, particularly their critique of instrumental rationality, things began to fall into place. In 1979 I wrote a paper applying this theory to aspects of the feminist movement, but my attack was lodged in a broader critique of contemporary society—its prevailing instrumentalism and devastating indifference to both human and natural environments.¹ Feminism, peace and ecology had ceased to be single issue reformist concerns; different facets rather of a ground swell for cultural and moral revolution.

I decided to try the eco-fem idea out on a couple of thinking male friends. Obviously it poses a threat to ideological orthodoxies at both ends of the political spectrum, but even less firmly aligned environmentalists may respond negatively it seems. The father of a small humanist-Marxist group in Melbourne reacted instantly and decisively to the suggestion of an intrinsic relation between ecology and feminism, saying how dangerous it was because it involved a claim to some special feminine

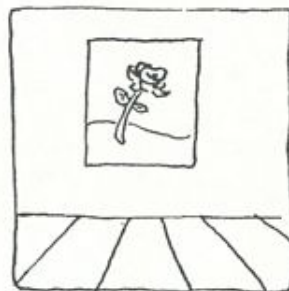
knowledge and was therefore an argument for irrationalism. The short sighted prejudice and blatant illogic of the charge speaks for itself. An organiser of the recent Schumacher conference in Sydney was more bland in his response. He smiled patronisingly at the idea, dismissing it as a pretty obvious connection considering the abundant metaphors linking Woman and Nature in our culture. These ill considered comments touch on two issues which can be underscored from

the outset. One is that the eco-fem position is both an experientially based and rationally constructed critique of an irrational male-produced social order. The second is that the common metaphorical play on Mother/Nature themes is not just incidental, but profoundly symptomatic of the root problem behind the present crises.

On study-leave in 1981, I discovered women all over the world trying to formulate their perception of the link between ecology and feminism. It's not my brief here to give comprehensive documentation of this development, although I do plot the broad parameters of the movement, naming a few of its heroines and network organisations, its radical actions, its journals and books, in another recent article.² Here, I am more interested in the socio-logic behind its emergence.

Why has the eco-fem connection come about just at this time? Women's involvement in the ecology movement appears to be overdetermined. Several levels of explanation can be produced to account for it and the probability is, that each of these explanations bears tangentially on the feminine ecological consciousness. The model of determination is one of mutually interpenetrating and mutually reinforcing

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tendencies: biological, psycho-analytical, phenomenological, social psychological, social structural, historical, mythological, ideological and epistemological. Yes, the lot.

To begin with, an argument for the special character of women's ecological sensibility may involve claim to an intrinsic constitutional or *biological* difference between the sexes. The latter case is most commonly made by conservative thinkers and ideologues including their modern brothers the socio-biologists, and the general line is that the anatomy and physiology of women's reproductive process is necessarily such as to confine their social, intellectual and emotional functioning to human nurture and associated tasks. For this reason, the argument goes, the social division of labour between men and women is inevitable and good because it protects women's 'natural vulnerability'. Given the assumed differences of capacity, the issue of sexual inequality is considered inappropriate here. This attitude runs through the western political tradition from Aristotle, through the Church Fathers, to Locke, Hegel and even Marx, and 20th Century feminists are still battling its consequences.³ This is a right and necessary political stage for feminism, but it may yet prove to be the case that irreducible sexually grounded potentials do actually exist: a knowledge which feminists would then have to assimilate and respond to. The most pertinent source of such natural differences at present seems to be related not so much to women's smaller physique, perverse body shape or so-called periodic indispositions, but to the hormonal flows which accompany sexual activity in the mature female. The stimulation of estrogen and its ongoing presence in the body produces a gentle and passive orientation in a person, male or female; a nurturant life-affirming sense of being; an empathic and receptive attitude to the world.

But there is another aspect of female biological functioning which lends to the special life-affirming interest of women, and this is the act of giving birth

itself. Labour is dangerous and traumatic for a mother, an experience that engraves the meaning and value of life in flesh itself. On the other hand, as midwife and philosopher Mary O'Brien observes, the biology of male reproductive activity is full of personal disjunctions and dissociations from the life-process.⁴ The male reproductive experience is dualistic, an inclusion yet exclusion from the natural event. Paternity is essentially an abstract idea; birth and suckling are only visual experiences and the agency of an/Other. Yet, there is such a fundamental taboo surrounding these things in our culture, that it is difficult to discuss them

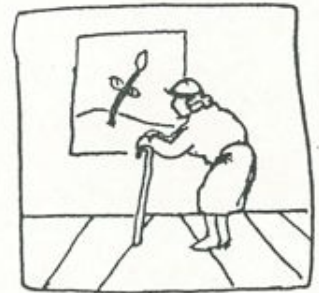
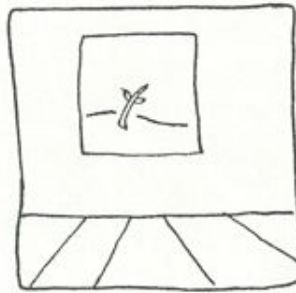
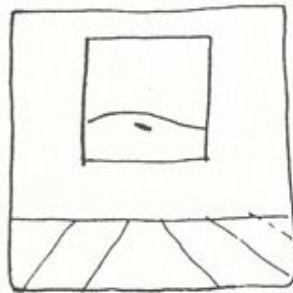
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without sounding obscene. The question to be asked of course is 'why?' Could it be that Man's separation from Nature originates in recognition of this peripheral role in species creativity?

Freud of all the masters, has come closest to theorising this profoundly loaded Man/Nature nexus with his *psychoanalytical* saga of the Oedipus complex. And this theory is just as much a model for the maturation of the individual as it is historically paradigmatic to patriarchal culture itself. Freud instantiates the beginning of patriarchy at the moment in history when men first sever cognitive from sensuous experience.⁵ So too, a boy child under the father's watchful eye must renounce his sensuous libidinal pleasure in his mother as he grows, and install her person with abstract love and respect in its place. This emotional cut establishes a dualism of natural and cultural orders; a disconnection that is

crucially formative to the masculine ego under patriarchy. By this means, Woman becomes cognitively objectified and 'manageable', though not without heavy cost to a man's later sexual relationships. Further, the desired object Woman, is herself split in two by this process, the two parts representing the rift in the masculine psyche: on the one hand, is the mother Madonna and God's police, on the other, a dammed Whore who must be everything that the first is not. This act of libidinal repression, the first break with Nature, psychologically prepares a mind for the detached self-alienated thought mode of which the cogito, utilitarian calculus and scientific method are familiar forms.

The denial and splitting-off described here by the psychoanalytical school is overlaid by a further cleavage. This is spelled out in Nancy Chodorow's *phenomenological* account of gender formation.⁶ Whereas a girl child experiences her first living relationship empathically as a fusional continuum between self and mother, the boy child's ego identity emerges negatively, by differentiation between self and M/Other. Masculine identity is thus at its very foundation constructed oppositionally, by exclusion of those characteristics which nurturant Woman displays. There seems to be also an element of threat in this intimate dependency on an/Other, hence the compulsive need for separation, fight/flight which some men show. This kind of selfhood, essentially apart from others, is a fragile state, and not surprisingly men must have recourse to devices which bolster the ego. Aggressive competition, aggrandisement through ownership of property and control of others, technological knowledge, are some of these instruments. Engels' thesis on the significance of inheritance is not incompatible with this either.⁷ The history of patriarchy thus can be read as a vast collectively contrived compensation. The preoccupation with personal potency in all its social manifestations, the making over of the environment according to Man's



will, these things are attempts to control the terror and estrangement which exists at the core of the patriarchal ego.

The Otherness which develops between the sexes is exacerbated by yet another level of determination: sex role socialisation during childhood. This *social psychological* conditioning, and often deforming process, tends in most cultures to follow the pattern—women, nurturant and expressive; men, competitive and instrumental.⁸ Girl children are thus allowed more free play of their feelings from the outset, boys are encouraged to inhibit emotional display, but aggressive behaviours as befits the warrior/bread-winner role. Girls are taught to be supportive of others, caring and protective, to mend hurt feelings and disrupted social situations, to massage the other's ego. It could be said that women produce the emotional surplus value which keeps the wheels of social exchange turning in the patriarchal system. Women's own ego gratification is not necessarily met in this process however. They are socialised for contingency, to attend to the needs of others as required. Hence the relatively intermittent achievement pattern exhibited even by professional women. What eventuates from this feminine role socialisation that is positive thought, particularly in ecological terms, is a responsiveness to the surrounding environment, a collaborative and protective attitude.

Their unique biological responsibility, the psychology of gender formation and the contingency socialisation which women receive, results in their unequal *social structural* distribution through the opportunity grid of society at large. Anthropologist Sherry Ortner has noted that women's work always involves the mediation of exchanges between nature and culture—sweeping floors, cooking vegetables, washing small bodies and clothes, in other words, putting the dirt back 'where it should be'.⁹ Few women arrive at positions highly rewarded by income or status. True, prevailing assumptions about women are prejudicial to their

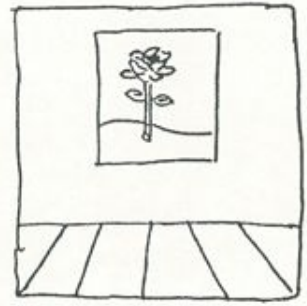
acceptance in the public sphere, but objective forces aside, women's training leaves them with very ambivalent feelings about achieving success in masculine terms. First, there is the fear of threatening the masculine ego and thereby inviting social rejection if too successful. Other women are simply pulled between traditional feminine role aspirations and realising their own individual talents in society alongside men. This internal conflict, resulting from exposure to two radically competing and largely incompatible reward systems is a very real inhibitor of

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women's success. But so is the practical alternative of undertaking both goals at once. Women who opt for the double-shift have less chance to compete as equal with men, but this can result in their having a more flexible attitude to their work, and fewer vested interests in the reward structure. Further, women who work alongside men are often, as a result of values implanted by their earlier socialisation, disgusted and disillusioned by what they see. For many reasons then, women remain relatively detached from the masculine dominated opportunity structure of our society and this leaves them free to question the value of what goes on in it.¹⁰ The climate of self interested capital and academic speculation, the rapid exploitation of natural resources for profit, of technological advance for its own sake, these things are not particularly impressive to women, 'educated' or otherwise.

Many women's ecological sense has been sharpened by the *historical* fact that they are both mothers and intellectually trained workers. Their political consciousness thus resists the split between private and public spheres of responsibility and the denial of concrete feeling for organisational efficacy which deforms conventional politics. These women want both to use their mental emancipation and to preserve what is humane in their traditional role, but because most women activists can meet these two structurally opposed sets of demands only partially the prevailing system is not a very gratifying one for them. The social marginality experienced by intellectually trained women is painful, but if they are mothers as well, they find themselves living right inside the kernel of a key ideological contradiction. This disjunction in daily experience abrades and sharpens the critical awareness.¹¹ It helps women see behind the fetish practices which make up the instrumental society of men. In fact, if ecological devastation is the outcome of success in masculine role attainments, then the insight surely arrives that the less women are 'liberated' in these terms, the better for all of us.

The eco-political action that comes out of this motivational complex is a gut level trial and error kind. How does one 'fight' for a nurturant world anyway? How to legitimate action as 'political' without losing its quality as women's action? Can the voice of those whose daily labour is to nourish and to bond even be heard as a 'political' voice? Perhaps the concept of politics has become so fetishised as to make this impossible now. While women activists sometimes lack a theoretical analysis of what they are doing, they do bring to the practical organisational level a tacit understanding of group structure and dynamics, the micro-physics of power, that is very sophisticated. One catch is that their educational level and style may inhibit them from getting in amongst the broader majority of



Michele Godwin. *Growth*. 1980. Pen and ink. †

women, the isolated consumer cells of suburbia where a mass opposition to the technological imperative would need to come from. This is not to suggest that such a movement must take the form of a mass public-political front though. A women's ecological resistance has a unique historical and micro-political option: to work through the diffuse and invisible catalytic process of primary relations, the domestic sphere.

Turning now to a very different aspect of the feminine consciousness—the mythical allusions attaching to femininity in patriarchal culture. These are themes which, at a deeply unconscious level, subtly condition women's sense of themselves and men's images of women. The mythic level appears to be a transmutation of the primal psychosomatic cut from sensuality and the natural mother which symbolically locates men once and for all within the cultural sphere, and women outside of this along with Nature. To point to this as ideological fabrication is not to deny what poet Adrienne Rich calls the amazing transformative capacity of women's natural bodies, nor to deny men's links with the natural either.¹² Rather, it is to examine how this superimposed stereotypic dualism has become a politically repressive verbal machine. Girls come to adulthood with assumptions about themselves as essentially Other, as instinct driven, irrational creatures, temptress, earth mother, dark, evil, damp, passive, moon goddess, yin and so on. Masculine imagery by contrast, elicits rationality, sun, activity, goodness, light and order. The masculine evokes law, regularity and permanence, while feminine attributes imply unpredictability. Symptomatically, the break with the original Whole eventuates in a polarity wherein all the ominous aspects of experience, what men cannot themselves control, are associated with the 'feminine', the rejected mother, the rejected parts of self. As psychiatrist Phyllis Chesler tells us:

*What, oh what do men want? To forget, to deny, to relive: the rape, the dismemberment, the murder of the original parent. Matricide, not patricide, is the primal and still unacknowledged crime. Father killing comes only later . . .*¹³

The compulsion to remake the world, build permanence and identity, are substitutes for the abandoned knowledge of oneness with M/Other and within self. This compensatory instrumentalism of the masculine ego is reflected in ancient notions of Man as

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form or essence, and Woman as merely matter/mater/inert stuff, like Nature. Recognition of women's potency is too much threat, it is felt as annihilating to men. Woman is only 'good' when she is domesticated, bound by the father's law. Nature too must be harnessed.¹⁴

Metaphor is not merely the prerogative of the poets. Day to day communication takes place in a complex web saturated with mythopoeic images. Not only does this ideological constellation infuse reflective, even philosophical thought, it helps to give legitimacy, a sense of right feel to political decision making. The so-called metaphorical tie between Woman and Nature has evolved in the western patriarchal tradition into an established antithesis between things historical, actively produced by men, and the passive natural sphere which is women's world. The pairs in this dichotomy may be complementary but they are not symmetrical, one side is always valued over the Other in hierarchical fashion. This provides a

powerful ideological device for the justification of patriarchal domination. Consider for example, these interlocking themes:

the artificial distinction between nature and history

the conventional assumption that phenomena grounded in nature are necessarily regressive

and that historically produced phenomena are necessarily progressive

the historical gender differentiation between masculine and feminine that is superimposed over the natural continuum of sexual variation

the association of the masculine with the historical order by way of a productivist problematic

the association of the feminine with the order of nature by way of a reproductivist problematic,

the identification of productive activity with the public sphere

the identification of reproductivity with the private sphere

the concomittant valorisation of productivity

*the complementary de-valorisation of reproductivity and its associated life-affirming activities*¹⁵

The grid-like character of this constellation of attitudes is singularly oppressive: an overdetermined ideological code where every term is a corollary of every other. Ideology is very dependent on metaphor in this way, rationalisation by association is how it works. Each time a term is used, its constellation of positive and negative associations is drawn into play to enforce its 'good sense'. The dissolution of this archaic cerebral straight jacket promises to be one of the more substantial achievements of contemporary feminist criticism. But it is not just a feminist issue, ecological thinking is caught on the same grid.

This is what it comes down to, in fact, the oppression of women and exploitive management of the natural world, while

undoubtedly very material events, are nevertheless events brought about by the peculiar epistemological orientation of men. In their own ways, Susan Griffin and Caroline Merchant have both traced the cleavage between spontaneous self and reflectively controlled self in patriarchal culture, and the ravages brought about by this disturbed mind.¹⁷ My own parallel understanding arrived from reading the Frankfurt analysis. Marcuse identified the origin of this 'perpetual internal conquest of the lower faculties . . . in the culture of classical Greece. Horkheimer described how advances in knowledge at the Renaissance allowed Enlightenment man to conceive of himself as 'object'. The Cartesian split between subject and object and the Baconian image of science as command of disenchanted nature paved the way for detached rational manipulation of the objective world. The industrial revolution by providing a sophisticated machinery for the exploitation of natural resources and brutalisation of human beings as labour power propelled this instrumental mastery into the 20th Century. Of science, Marcuse observed: This self-estranged functional rationality yields knowledge only of a 'dead world' of matter, apprehended in terms of fungible atomic units, to be reduced and reassembled according to human will. The ideal form for presentation of this knowledge is the neutral algebraic formula, it being poor science, delusion, lies, to intrude value consideration on the generation of pure positive knowledge. The physicists' matter thus fades into mathematical and topographical relations; a vocabulary of events, projections and abstract possibilities is ushered in. The entire methodological trend implies a suspension of inquiry into the nature of reality or 'the reality of nature', replacing it with emphasis on the specific operations to be used in the latter's transformation.¹⁸

If masculine agency 'produces' knowledge by splitting subject and object, then dividing the object into discrete units in order to 'reform' it, what might be called a feminine or communion approach to knowing, expresses a sensibility that is not alienated from itself or its environment. Reflecting the fluid, dialectical, self-feeding a polyvalent character of things in the world, this attitude embodies the basis of an epistemology that is well matched to the study of ecosystems. What would this 'feminine' epistemology look like?¹⁹ This in itself properly constitutes another paper, but the immediate point to be made is this: It seems that an alternative, the obverse of the prevailing one-dimensional rationalism has been suppressed by men as a way of knowing and

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being in patriarchal culture. Some ecologists are trying to remedy this, though it is not clear that they are looking in the right place for their Other/Nature. Could it be that the silence men are now reaching for, is the silence women have spoken for centuries?

And so to the present conjuncture. The recent history of women's legal challenges to nuclear corporations in the U.S.A.; world wide concern over toxic pollutants to human and natural environments; the confrontation with rape; the Pentagon encirclement, Greenham and Pine Gap blockades; peace marches across Europe, among Japanese and Third World re-sisters; these things celebrate the manifold, life-affirming good sense of women. Feminists should not shun the double-edged metaphor of Mother-Nature.

This nexus both describes the source of women's power and integrity, and at the same time, exposes the complex set of pathological practices known as patriarchy: ecological crisis its latest symptom. Feminists can use this metaphor to bring the sons of patriarchy in touch with the origin or their compensatory drive to dominate and reassemble the world—woman, nature, whatever is Other. For the ecological revolution 'will not happen until men are brave enough to rediscover and to love the woman inside themselves. And we women too, have to be allowed to love what we are, if we are to make a better world'.²⁰ □

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NOTES

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