

What Is Ecofeminist Political Philosophy? Nature, Gender, and the Political

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“The story about ecofeminism that I want to tell... concerns its existence as a body of political theory. My narrative begins with the premise that ecofeminism contains an inherently democratic political vision, even if that vision is not stated as explicitly as it might be.” Catriona Sandilands¹

“[Ecofeminism can be explored] from a number of different angles... as an oppositional political discourse and set of practices imbedded in particular historical, material, and political contexts.” Noël Sturgeon²

I. *Val Plumwood and critical political ecology: finding, and embracing, the political*

Where can we find ecofeminist political philosophy? Consider the third chapter of Val Plumwood’s last book, *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason*, titled “Rationalism and the Ambiguity of Science,” where she elaborates how the Western master narrative of rationality locates scientific and epistemic authority in a stance of transcendence, distance, separation, dispassionate disengagement, thereby producing a hierarchical, instrumentalizing relationship between the knower and the known. Although the dominant conception of rationality holds that this purported ontological separation and affective neutrality on the part of the researcher is not only necessary for “objectivity” and “universality” (both of which are preconditions for

¹ *The Good-Natured Feminist: Ecofeminism and the Quest for Democracy* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), p. xvii.

² Noël Sturgeon, *Ecofeminist Natures: Race, Gender, Feminist Theory, and Political Action* (New York, Routledge, 1997), p. 3.

achieving something called “truth”), but is certainly and necessarily free of any political relations, Plumwood notes how a closer investigation reveals it is otherwise. “Objectivity is usually seen as excluding the emotional, the bodily, the particular, the personal, and of course especially the ‘political.’ Rationalist influences devaluing the body and emotionality and identifying them as feminine are clearly influential here” (p. 42).

Plumwood then writes of the dangers of construing scientific epistemology in such a way:

“In the absence of care and respect for what is studied and of responsibility to those who will be affected by it, it is inevitable that the knowledge relation is constructed as one in which the known is merely a means to the knower’s ends or to the ends of power which they, in the absence of respect and care, will come to serve. The presence of a politics is particularly clear when the item known is itself threatened for ratiogenic reasons, as a direct result of what has been learnt about it.Power is what rushes into the vacuum of disengagement; the fully ‘impartial’ knower can easily be one who...will bend their administrative, research, and pedagogical energies to wherever the power, prestige, and funding is. Disengagement then carries a politics, although it is a paradoxical politics in which an appearance of neutrality conceals capitulation to power. (p. 43).

Plumwood, in drawing on a rich body of feminist (and environmental) thinking in order to show how knowledge norms are built on the devaluation, exclusion, and exploitation of women, the body, the emotions, people of color, and an objectified, de-animated, instrumentalized nature, is not the only philosopher who has noted how our axiological inheritances, masquerading as “fact” and “truth,” conceal the power relations undergirding them, and how this very act of concealment is an expression of power. What

Plumwood does do especially well, I think, and thus wherein lies the strength of her unique contribution is in her uncompromising insistence that we must conduct a *political* as well as epistemological analysis of the ecosocial problems with dominant forms of rationality, making plain that it is *not* that we need to expunge the ‘hidden’ and illicit political dimensions of our constructions of reason but rather that we need a *better, more* critical politics, of reason and other kinds of knowledge—a “critical political ecology” as she names it later in the book. All knowledge-projects have a political dimension, the political (here, appearing as an interested point-of-view) is unavoidable and not something to repudiate or minimize. Rather, Plumwood exhorts us to realize, we must make certain that our knowledge projects, scientific or otherwise, and the ethico-political alignments they support are on the side of life, nature, community, and justice rather than exploitation, destruction, commodification, and extinction.

However important this analysis of the politics of rationality may be,³ my intention here is not to repeat Plumwood’s argument regarding the relationship of dominant discourses of rationality to anthropocentrism, and human exclusions and oppressions—Plumwood does this quite sufficiently already! Instead I want to ask here what does it mean to make visible, as do Plumwood and other authors I shall discuss shortly, the political relations that suffuse our theories, discourses, value-systems, and practices in such a way that they have sanctioned the destruction of the natural world?

³ And certainly it is important, as Plumwood’s explication in *Environmental Culture* (2002) and many of her other writings of the “ratiogenic” causes of environmental crisis as well as her powerful arguments for a reconceptualization of reason that constitutes rationality as the process of taking account of human ecological embeddedness and ecosocial interconnectedness, seems key to engendering the profound shift in values and practices necessary to ensure the survival and flourishing of living planetary systems. Showing how dominant forms of instrumental rationality put in the service of global capitalism is, from an ecological perspective, profoundly *irrational* is a helpful intervention into Western material-semiotic practices of science, technology, and capitalism that deploy notions of reason-as-mastery in order to subjugate nature and marginalized human groups, such as colonized people, women, and the poor.

What does it mean to talk about environmental theorizing as a space of the political?

What does it mean to interrogate the meanings of ‘the political’ itself, and the sites and manner in which it appears? And how is this ecofeminist?

In raising these and related questions, this paper represents a preliminary—the first that I am aware of—identification of some common threads and themes running throughout the work of several contemporary environmental theorists who examine the entanglements between concepts and categories of gender, nature, and the political. These engagements, arising at the intersection of ecofeminism, radical green political theory, and discourses on the political (including political activism), point to the existence of a field demarcated by permeable borders that could be usefully termed “ecofeminist political philosophy.” I here wish to speak in a non-totalizing, non-reified way of certain general approaches and modes of inquiry that emerge in this sort of philosophy I am naming. Since this paper both draws together concepts, methods, arguments, analyses, terms, and themes in already existing work as well as suggests other sites of inquiry that can benefit from an application of these collected themes, I here present ecofeminist political philosophy *prescriptively* as well as descriptively. Now of course, descriptions along with prescriptions are never innocent, never “disinterested,” so clearly my choices here are based on exclusions as well as inclusions, and the boundary around what counts in this area could be drawn in other ways. Let this, then, represent one possible way that ecofeminist political philosophy could be articulated.

II. Ecofeminist political philosophy: definitions and questions

I will provisionally define *ecofeminist political philosophy* as an area of intellectual enquiry that examines the political status of that which we call “nature” using the insights, theoretical tools, and ethical commitments of ecological feminisms and other liberatory theories such as critical race theory, queer theory, postcolonial theory, environmental philosophy, and feminism. It is the principal tenet of all ecofeminisms that varieties of oppression, especially but not exclusively the oppression of women and nature, are interconnected, and that these intersections of oppressions manifest on both material and conceptual levels.⁴ That the degradation and subordination of both women and nature are regarded by ecofeminists as linked conceptually, historically, and materially, not “essentially,” should at this point, some three decades from the published origins of academic ecofeminist theorizing,⁵ be well-recognized by those working in related fields, such as environmental philosophy and feminism. But noting how this recognition highlights the *political project* of ecofeminism has not been as well

⁴ Rosemary Radford Ruether, in her latest book, *Ecofeminism, Globalization, and World Religions* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005) expresses this familiar ecofeminist claim with neo-globalist flavor, effectively bridging the gap between so-called materialist ecofeminisms and philosophical ones:

“Ecofeminism sees an interconnection between the domination of women and the domination of nature. This interconnection is typically made on two levels: ideological-cultural and socioeconomic. On the ideological-cultural level women are said to be ‘closer to nature’ than men, more aligned with body, matter, emotions, and the animal world. On the socio-economic level, women are located in the spheres of reproduction, child raising, food preparation, spinning and weaving, cleaning of clothes and houses, that are devalued in relation to the public sphere of male power and culture. *My assumption is that the first level is the ideological superstructure for the second.* In other words, claiming that women are ‘naturally’ closer to the material world and lack the capacity for intellectual and leadership roles justifies locating them in the devalued sphere of material work and excluding them from further education and public leadership” (p. 91, emphasis added).

⁵ Most ecofeminist genealogies trace the origins of the term to the 1974 publication of Françoise d’Eaubonne’s essay “Le Temps de L’Ecofeminisme”; According to Karen Warren in personal conversation, the first two explicitly philosophical ecofeminist essays were published near-simultaneously (and unbeknownst to one another) by Warren (“Feminism and Ecology: Making Connections,” *Environmental Ethics* 9, no. 1, Spring 1987;) and Plumwood (“Ecofeminism: An Overview and Discussion of Positions and Arguments.” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 64, *Supplement on Women and Philosophy* (June 1986)). The two major anthologies containing a range of ecofeminist writings and positions, *Healing The Wounds: The Promise of Ecofeminism* edited by Judith Plant (Philadelphia, New Society Publishers); and *Reweaving The World: The Emergence of Ecofeminism* edited by Irene Diamond and Gloria Orenstein, were published in 1989 and 1990, respectively.

articulated. Ariel Salleh, in 1997's *Ecofeminism as Politics: Nature, Marx, and the Postmodern*⁶ provides an exception to this. There Salleh writes,

The basic premise of ecofeminist political analysis is that ecological crisis is the inevitable effect of a Eurocentric capitalist patriarchal culture built on the domination of nature, and the domination of Woman 'as nature'. Or, to turn the subliminal Man/Woman=Nature equation around the other way, it is the inevitable effect of a culture constructed on the domination of women, and domination of Nature 'as feminine.

...Women are not 'closer to nature' than men in any ontological sense. Both women and men are 'in/with/of nature', but attaining the prize of masculine identity depends on men distancing themselves from that fact. *Ecofeminists explore the political consequences of this culturally elaborated gender difference* (p. 13, emphasis added).

All ecofeminisms implicitly have a political analysis, and are political interventions into a variety of discourses and practices. Ecofeminist political philosophy makes the implicit political content of ecofeminism explicit. Or, to repeat slightly differently what was stated earlier, an ecofeminist political philosophy critically examines ways conceptions and praxes of nature and gender are entwined with our understanding of what constitutes the political. Ecofeminist political philosophy addresses questions like the following:

- How are concepts like "nature" and "the natural" deployed to justify relations of exclusion and inequality, relations that particularly affect women, people of color, non-heteronormative persons, the differently abled, and other-human-Others?⁷

⁶ Ariel Salleh *Ecofeminism as Politics: Nature, Marx, and the Postmodern* (London: Zed Books, 1997).

⁷ The term "other-human-Others" is borrowed from Karen Warren, who uses it frequently in her book *Ecofeminist Philosophy: A Western Perspective On What It Is and Why It Matters* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002) to collectively name those

- What is the political status of that which is called “nature”; “the environment” and/or “the more-than-human world”?
- How is nature ‘itself’ excluded from the domain of the political, and what would it mean to regard non-human beings and entities as political subjects, capable of political speech?
- Can nature have political subjectivity?
- How are discourses about both the environment and politics suffused with gendered ideology, and how does this condition how we address problems related to all three?
- How are liberatory theories such as critical race theory, postcolonial theory, queer theory, and feminism *contributing* to philosophical and ecological projects that seek to overcome anthropocentric domination of the natural world?
- How are liberatory theories such as the above *failing to recognize* the environmental movement as a conjoined site of liberatory struggle, and how can this be corrected?
- What is the relationship between theory and praxis, and what is gained when both include considerations of gender identity and gender analysis?

I will not in the remainder of the paper address each of these questions individually; rather, I present them as representative of the line of inquiry that an ecofeminist political philosophy takes. Although the methodology here is synthetic and not analytic, nonetheless it may be helpful before moving on to an examination of certain figures to parse out some of the qualities of each component of the term (although it should *not* be considered to be a merely additive model; i.e.

ecofeminism+politics+philosophy *does not* = ‘ecofeminist political philosophy’!) Doing so may help show why this particular combination captures what the work of certain

humans who have traditionally been excluded, oppressed, or marginalized under white supremacist anthropocentric capitalist patriarchy .

ecological feminists (in this paper I examine Plumwood, Catriona Sandilands, and Bonnie Mann), when taken together, contributes to environmental, feminist, and political theorizing, and illuminates what's at stake and what's to be gained when we think gender, nature, and the political together.

Starting with the first term, what makes these questions **ecofeminist** is that they ask about *intersections* of oppressions, exclusions, and marginalizations that particularly impact women and nature, making visible the ways that women, beings and entities in nature, and other human Others are linked in what Catriona Sandilands (to whose work I will turn shortly) refers to as a contingent "chain of equivalencies" that position each, relatedly but not identically, as an object of masculinist and exploitation and degradation. The second term, **political**, is the concept that has been most undertheorized here and perhaps in environmental philosophy more generally. Rather than offer a definition of 'the political,' I want to suggest, following particular green political theorists like Douglas Torgerson, Alex Latta, Cate Sandilands, and John Dryzek, that **the political** is more to be understood performatively and phenomenologically than instrumentally; as a space (or as spaces) where particular qualities and experiences of collectivity, of interlocution, translation, interpretation, contestation, negotiation, discussion, are to be had. The political has an embodied and performative dimension, is process rather than ends-oriented, and is an open space where notions of democracy, citizenship, power, participation, speech, self, society, the oikos, polis, and nature are continually produced, interrogated, and transformed.⁸ In agreement with both Val Plumwood and Karen

⁸ See P. Alex Latta, "Locating Democratic Politics in Ecological Citizenship" *Environmental Politics*, Vol. 16, No 3, 377-3939, June 2007; Catriona Sandilands, "Opinionated Natures: Toward A Green Public Culture" in *Democracy and the Claims of Nature: Critical Perspectives for a New Century*. Ben Minteer and Bob Taylor, eds. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield 2002); John Dryzek, *The*

Warren, and in sharp contrast to most of the rest of anthropocentric western political philosophy, I hold that in (some) ecofeminism(s) the political is not limited to the human; the more-than-human world too is capable of political agency, action, and speech and can assert claims that human beings are capable of recognizing, and are thus under a moral obligation to do so.⁹ **Philosophy** is both the easiest and hardest term here to define. Let me just say that philosophy necessarily involves the process of questioning basic assumptions, strives to make intelligible those things that putatively remain outside the domain of the thinkable—or, more accurately, the un-thought through. Philosophy raises for critical evaluation those very concepts, beliefs, values, and practices that are so taken for granted that they are the furniture and fabric of our ecosocial lives; to raise a few relevant examples, questions about rationality; what it is and who has it, and what it confers morally and politically; what counts as ‘speech’, ‘language’, and ‘communication’ ; the relation between *necessity*—the putatively apolitical feminized realm of the body, nature, and the oikos—and *freedom*, the masculinistly conceived realm of rational debate, independence, culture, and the polis.

While we are at the business of unpacking terms, I’ll offer as well a (non-comprehensive) dissection of the term *ecofeminism*. Feminism has always adhered to the injunction that nothing is outside of the political, that power relations inhabit all aspects of life—hence the emblematic phrase, “the personal is political.” At a minimum, the political involves the production, distribution, and use of power; feminism argues that women’s subordination is the result of the unjust and alterable exercise of male

Politics of the Earth: Environmental Discourses (New York: Oxford 2005); Bonnie Mann, *Women's Liberation and the Sublime: Feminism, Postmodernism, Environment* (New York: Oxford, 2006).

⁹ See Plumwood on the “intensional recognition stance” developed in chapter 8 of *Environmental Culture*; also Warren 2002; and my Ph.D. dissertation, “Subject to the Laws of Nature: Ecofeminism, Representation, and Political Subjectivity” (University of Oregon, Dec. 2006).

dominance and power, not natural fact. Thus the “feminist” part of ecofeminism contributes the awareness that any philosophy is always already political, saturated with power relations; the “ecological” part of ecofeminism contributes the awareness that these power relations extend throughout the relations between human and non-human nature, thereby including nature in the category of beings unjustly dominated and oppressed.

So where does this leave us in terms of understanding what an ecofeminist political philosophy might be? I have already offered some of the work of Plumwood, exemplar, I would argue, of ecofeminist political philosophy. Returning to a critical presentation of particular ecofeminist figures whose work I think fits within this field that I am naming, I will now turn to two others, radical democratic theorist Catriona Sandilands, and feminist phenomenologist and philosopher of place Bonnie Mann, in order to illustrate some of the ways that the questions listed previously get taken up and addressed.

III. Catriona Sandilands: Equivalency, subjectivity, and democratic speech

Democratic theorist and ecofeminist cultural studies scholar Catriona Sandilands in *The Good-Natured Feminist: Ecofeminism and the Quest for Democracy* laments that, with the exception of certain discourses such as environmental justice, environmentalism on the whole lacks a clear idea of “the political,” that it fails to locate investigations, interrogations, and propositions regarding the constitution of the political as a central element in most environmental struggles, acting “as if saving the earth were a task that overrides the importance of democratization” (1999, 154). To support this contention she

cites tendencies within the environmental movement to treat environmental problems as either technocratic problems for experts and bureaucrats to address, as matters of personal consumption habits, or as mystical, personal experiences, highly idiosyncratic, and inaccessible to anyone other than the reified, individualized eco-self. Such tendencies, Sandilands argues, have led to the depoliticization of nature, and she asserts that we must (re)claim nature as a sphere of the polis, the collective, and of a radical democratic politics that places our relationship with nature at the center of our lives as political animals.

Although I think that Sandilands overstates the case somewhat—environmental movements, even those which utilize fairly conventional discourses and strategies, are always self-consciously calling for political action and thus understand themselves as political actors as such—nonetheless Sandilands points out something very significant. One of the most salient questions for environmentalists is not how to best exploit existing political avenues for the sake of making gains for the more-than-human world, not about how humans ought best “represent” the interests of nature in incorrigibly anthropocentric political arenas, but to question, and ultimately reconfigure what counts as politics itself; to revise, or rupture where necessary, traditional political categories and assumptions about who or what counts as a political subject and what counts as political action and speech, and challenge the instrumentalist view of politics in favor of a view that considers politics as a space where ecological subjectivities are formed, contested, destabilized, and re-formed. Ecofeminist political philosophy wonders how nature can have a voice in the polis. This leads to other sorts of philosophical tasks and questions, as Sandilands notes.

This problem of voice, this problem of speaking nature, is at its core a problem of the subject. Rendering nature knowable involves a process of subjectivation, constructing nature as a subject [in the many senses of the word]¹⁰...is the task of environmentalism...

But the problem of subjectivation is, fundamentally, a democratic one, as it is the political context of democracy that requires the public creation or representation of a speaking subject. It is through speech that actors reveal their interests and needs to one another; it is through political rhetoric that persuasion and negotiation take place....How, then does nature speak—reveal and persuade—for itself? (p. 80)

Sandilands here reveals an important dilemma for ecological politics: how to admit the voice of (a non-unitary) nature into our political processes, how to recognize the claims that nature asserts as political speech (a formidable enough task of its own!), but to do so in such a way that nature's specificity, particularity, and non-humanness is not effaced. How do we listen to and *respond politically to the more-than-human world on mutual, dialogical terms?* It is in wrestling with these questions, I would contend, where an ecofeminist political philosophy is indispensable. Ecofeminism brings the theoretical clout of feminism and its long tradition of working through the ethical and political dilemmas of difference—i.e. how to construe difference not as justification for domination but *as* difference—to the political problem of recognizing, hearing, taking account of and communicatively responding to non-traditional political actors. The reasons and solutions for the fact that nature has been rendered “speechless” in traditional

¹⁰ The polysemic senses of the term “subject” which should be applied to nature Sandilands lists, following *Webster*, as “a topic; a theme; a person or idea being discussed. One who is under the authority of another; the word representing the person or thing acting”

political arenas are similar to those noted by feminists in the case of the exclusion of women. As Sandilands observes,

For a woman, for example, the right to speak differently and not be spoken for is not merely a question of claiming equal power in the privileged male domain of speech but a way of discovering or creating a new voice to express experiences not apprehensible through dominant constructs; *democracy requires a different kind of speech* not just more of the same. This process represents both means and ends: the creation of a new series of codes through which to perceive and act in the world and through which to challenge and therefore change dominant and oppressive constructions of sense (Sandilands 1999, p. 80, emphasis added).

Furthermore, according to Sandilands, we must open our political processes and processes of political subjectivation to the more-than-human world in a way that does not posit a fixed, static, singular identity for nature. To do this, we must recognize that the struggles of nature to be heard in our political processes are bound up in a “chain of equivalencies” with other radical political struggles, not just in solidarity, but for their intelligibility. As Sandilands states, “The subject of environmentalism [i.e. nature] is always contingent on its articulation with other subject positions in some chain of equivalences...none is a “true” representation¹¹...but the ability of an environmental subject position to effectively challenge dominant discursive formations depends on its articulation with other democratic struggles” (p. 87). Ecofeminism, by showing the constructed, contingent, yet remarkably durable links between women and nature—conceptually, materially, symbolically—offers a way out of the current eco-political

¹¹ I.e. permanent, essentialized identities are not formed from these processes; the subject-positions in the chains of equivalencies are contingent, strategic, and unstable, coming into and out of being in through particular historical moments and times.

dilemma of how to represent nature non-anthropocentrically, how to avoid the problem of having human actors paternalistically “speaking for” nature and to reconfigure the political in such a way that nature appears on its own accord, is heard through its own voice. To see how this works, let’s consider Sandilands’ analysis further.

To take the example provided by ecofeminism, it is not simply that feminism and environmentalism are allied struggles, but that the very antagonistic forces of oppression that are seen to prevent women’s full identity as women and nature’s full realization as nature are one and the same; the fantasy is that women’s full identity is in part, *as* a self-realized nature. In this construction of political affinity, the two subjects exist as equivalences, occupying the same space in relation to the antifeminist, antiecological Other that presents the full constitution of either identity. ...

[T]he radical ecological notion of nature as speaking identity has emerged as a democratic subject position conditioned by notions of democracy already present in the other social movement struggles with which is not only contemporary but articulated....Democracy therefore involves the creation of new codes and meanings, new modes of speech, from these repressed identities to represent and construct alternative, liberatory ways of being in the world for that oppressed group (1999, p. 87).

We can understand Sandilands here to be saying that feminism and ecology are not just allied struggles but in some way co-constitute each other; and that the political claims made by women in the history of feminist struggles to not just permit formerly-excluded women into an unchanged polis on the terms of its masculinist rulers, but to reconfigure politics itself, as well as to acknowledge its role in the production of alternate political subjectivities. The process by which this takes place for Sandilands, and I would

argue for all ecofeminist political philosophy, is democracy, but not democracy construed formalistically and as constituted by rules and procedures, such as regulations for voting or petitioning congress and the like, but democracy as another name for a public sphere¹² where ecological citizens and subjectivities are formed, contested, and continually re-made through performance, play, debate, and embodied collective and public engagement with the other beings, human and otherwise, with whom we share what might be called the ‘ecopolisphere.’

IV. *Bonnie Mann and an ecofeminist political philosophy of place*

To conclude this rather whirlwind tour through some of the questions and figures that form ecofeminist political philosophy, I’ll briefly examine some elements of the work of feminist phenomenologist Bonnie Mann. In this important new book, *Women’s Liberation and the Sublime: Feminism, Postmodernism, Environment*¹³ Mann explicates how some of the longest-standing modernist philosophical constructions that devalue the natural world, such as the Kantian sublime, converge with certain very recent philosophical trends that claim to have supplanted the modern, namely postmodernism. Some postmodernisms, Mann shows, posit a conception of all of reality as linguistically constructed, thus denying the materiality of such things as bodies and nature, in such a way that we become caught in the ecologically-dangerous fantasy that we are untethered from our live flesh-and-blood bodies and the live trees-and-rivers environments in which they are embedded, thereby rendering us *atopos*, literally, *displaced*. Mann compellingly

¹² For further development of the notion of a green public sphere, see Douglas Torgerson, *The Promise of Green Politics: Environmentalism and the Green Public Sphere* Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999; for a related notion of a green public culture, see Sandilands, “Opinionated Natures: Toward a Green Public Culture” in Minteer and Taylor, *op cit*.

¹³ Bonnie Mann, *Women’s Liberation and the Sublime: Feminism, Postmodernism, Environment* (New York: Oxford 2006).

argues for a recuperation of the more-than-human world (which in her book variously appears as “necessity,” “place,” “nature,” “the earth” and “the material”) within feminist theory, feminist practice, and philosophy more generally. The case is convincingly made that the feminist liberatory project foundationally involves the question of freedom; the problem of freedom and necessity is basic to (masculinist) Western philosophy. Mann carefully and forcefully elucidates the ways that freedom has been traditionally conceived of as in opposition to necessity, showing how freedom, since at least Kant (but really much earlier) is figured as the realm of independence, transcendence, the rational, the sublime, the mental/spiritual, and the political while the realm of necessity has been figured as the realm of dependency, immanence, of the bodily, beautiful appearances, corporeal restriction, and most importantly of the natural world—i.e. “nature”—the physical, ecological, tangible, sensible, animate, place-bound natural world. Mann’s book, in tracing these connections, shows how these associations have served to both oppress women (who are associated with the realm of necessity/nature) and to sanction the degradation of the natural world. This indeed, as Mann argues, an important task for both feminism and philosophy—a task which under my provisional definition locates this argument as ecofeminist, although Mann herself does not explicitly name it as such, instead opting for the term “environmentalist feminism.”¹⁴

¹⁴ Mann does make one direct reference to ecofeminism, to the work of Shiva and Mies in a footnote (p. 20 n. 32). However, although her entire book deals with the relationship between the interconnections between the repudiation and inferiorization of nature in Western thought and deed and the domination and exploitation of women and things that are regarded as “feminine” (such as necessity-work), it seems a strange omission to not locate the work in the context of ecofeminism, or at least explain why it is *not* located there. However, my choice to label Mann’s work as representative of an ‘ecofeminist political philosophy’ when she herself does not take up one of these terms certainly raises the familiar question of appropriation in regard to naming things “ecofeminist.” (It should be noted that I brought this up to Mann in personal email correspondence, and she replied that her experiences as an activist had caused her to view the term ecofeminism distastefully, although she admitted that she had done very little reading in the area of ecofeminism, especially ecofeminist philosophy. This raises yet another political issue for ecofeminism, namely its struggles to overcome a certain stereotyped image that persists despite the rigorous attempts of ecofeminists to address and dispel misconceptions about it and those who identify with it).

Mann argues against a postmodern feminist conception of bodies and places as linguistic constructions and for, in her words, a “feminist politics of the-body-in-place which understands our capacity for freedom as integral to the relationship between bodies and places, but realizes that this freedom requires *a politics of body and of place*—a politics that is founded in an affirmation of our dependence on the earth. This earth is not a prison-house, and the body that returns to it is not a text” (Mann, p. 129, emphasis added). Calling for us to build a politics that acknowledges the interdependency between people and ecological places, a politics that eschews the violence against the natural world that becomes sanctioned when we conceive of human freedom as freedom *from* the realm of nature and bodily necessity instead of freedom as conditioned upon locatedness in an ecosocial world, Mann writes,

[How] we understand, how we *revere or disregard*, relations of dependency will determine a great deal about what kind of political institutions we build. Of course, in our violence to the natural world we turn away from an equally fundamental obligation, an obligation to the earth that gives us life, moment by moment, breath by breath, while we build a world to live in....this is to say that, like ourselves, *our social world* is dependent on the earth for sustenance. Further, it is in this relation of dependence that ‘the political’ becomes meaningful to begin with....[R]elationships of dependence and vulnerability are the ground or space on which domination is built, and struggles for liberation, equality, democracy, and so on are waged. How we understand, how we *revere or disregard* our relation to the planet, will be key in every instance to how we engage political questions. This essential relationship between persons and places gives the political another sort of weight and depth, makes the political another sort of urgent matter. If we understood our world-making to entail a fundamental obligation to protect and support our relation to the

earth, *which is its founding possibility*, what a different sort of world we would make! (Mann, p. 138).

Mann illustrates that fundamental philosophical questions and categories, such as the relation between freedom and necessity, are political categories and carry a politics that affect both women and nature. An ecofeminist political philosophy makes visible these hidden political dimensions, showing how traditional philosophical categories are built on exclusions of women, nature, and subordinated others, have generated a false vision of the human that is un-dependent on the realm of nature. Ecofeminist political philosophy proactively asks what sorts of politics we *should* have that acknowledges and embraces these very relations of intra-and transhuman dependency, asks how we can self-consciously construct a politics, and fashion our political institutions, policies, and practices such that they consider one of our most important tasks to care for the thing that makes human freedom, and political life, possible: the earth.

V. Conclusion: *Quilting an ecofeminist political philosophy*

By choosing to highlight the three authors that I have engaged here, Val Plumwood, Catriona Sandilands, and Bonnie Mann, I hope to have shown some things about this field that I am calling ecofeminist political philosophy. I do not claim to have definitively established what does and does not count as ecofeminist political philosophy, and in fact, I don't think such a task is either possible or desirable. Let me borrow a metaphor to help describe ecofeminist political philosophy from Karen Warren. In her monograph *Ecofeminist Philosophy*¹⁵ she has a chapter entitled "Quilting Ecofeminist

¹⁵ Op cit.

Philosophy.” In this chapter Warren, a logician by training, rejects conventional analytic conceptions of theory as “providing a set of necessary and sufficient (“if and only if”) conditions for whatever is being theorized about, [and views that assume] that such conditions can or ought to be specified in order for a particular account to count as a ‘theory.’ ”¹⁶ In defending ecofeminism’s status as a theory despite its lack of a complete and all-inclusive list of necessary and sufficient conditions for its ethico-political prescriptions, Warren does *not* claim that there are no boundary-conditions for what does and does not count as ecofeminist:

The conception of theory that I propose is this: There are some necessary conditions of feminist theory. If there were not there would be no grounds for calling the theory ‘a theory’, for calling a feminist theory ‘feminist,’ or for calling an ecofeminist theory ‘ecofeminist. ‘ But one cannot specify, ahead of time, so to speak, what the ‘sufficient conditions’ of right acts or morally acceptable human conduct is. For that one needs to know things about the historical, material, and social contexts. (p. 66)

Warren, in replacing this notion of ethical theory as consisting of necessary and sufficient conditions, instead offers the metaphor of the quilt as providing a way to think about theories:

Theories are like quilts. The ‘necessary conditions’ of a theory (say, ecofeminist philosophical theory) are like the borders of a quilt: they delimit the boundary conditions of the theory without dictating beforehand what the interior (the design, the actual patterns) of the quilt does or must look like. The actual design of the quilt will emerge from the diversity of perspectives of quilters who contribute, over time, to the making of the

¹⁶ Warren, p. 66.

quilt. Theory is not something static, pre-ordained, or carved in stone; it is always *theory-in-process* (p. 66).

Warren goes on to explain that similar to a quilt (and the quilt she has in mind is the AIDS Names Project Quilt, although any quilt can serve as a model), that there are some things that properly belong in a quilt and some that don't—for example, a quilt is made of patches, the patches are sewn together to create a coherent entity, and as a whole the quilt serves a purpose, say to provide warmth and comfort, to bring women together in a shared activity,¹⁷ or to give testimony to the experiences and stories of the group—be it Pennsylvanian Amish communities, people who have lost loved ones to AIDS, or Hmong immigrants. Thus there are certain boundary conditions for a quilt, and minimal purposes it must serve—otherwise it will not be a quilt. However, what cannot and should not be determined in advance is what the *interior* of the quilt will contain, that is, what sorts of patches it will have, what fabrics they will be made of, how they will be arranged, to which other patches they will be sewn, when they will wear out and need to be replaced. Thus, minimally, “nothing that is knowingly, intentionally, or consciously racist, sexist, racist, or classist” belongs on the quilt, “nor does anything that is not, in some way, about nonhuman nature or human-nature relationship” (Warren, p. 67). But even given these ‘restrictions,’ an untold number of potential patches remain that could be sewn into the quilt, in any number of combinations.¹⁸

¹⁷ Warren notes that quilting has traditionally been a craft developed by women; I will add to this that it has been oft-remarked upon in women's histories that “quilting bees” have for generations served as a way for women living under conditions of isolation and repression in the patriarchal family to gather together to talk, form community, and offer support for one another, in a way that is socially acceptable.

¹⁸ Of course, most often quilts do have an intentional design, and quilters carefully and deliberately choose their pattern, fabrics, stitches, and so on. A quilt, even a “crazy quilt” is not a random set of patches whose only discernable design is one of exclusions rather than inclusions, and quilters put a great deal of thought and intention into the final design and pattern of the quilt. But this is still like theory-making: there are many many theoretical, empirical, symbolic, affective, and material elements theoreticians can draw upon to either include in theory or use to show why the theory is necessary. And the work of theory-making is precisely about

The quilt metaphor works well for ecofeminist political philosophy. Although it does not have permanently established questions, conditions, and tenets, nonetheless ecofeminist political philosophy has an identifiable form. The patches, however, and their placement and texture, can and do vary widely. Some ecofeminist political philosophy deploys traditional, supposedly irreformably anthropocentric political concepts and categories in the service of gaining greater recognition for the more-than-human world: for example “rights talk” in ecofeminist animal rights theory; Plumwood’s notion of humans as standing in solidarity with nature; Sandilands’ call to include nature in a dialogical democratic process as well as her extension of the public sphere to include the non-human; Mann’s critical reevaluation of the oikos and the polis, necessity and freedom as applicable to developing a feminist ethics of place. Other times ecofeminist political philosophy exposes the underlying power relationships that condition our knowledge practices and our ethics, showing that constructions of nature that are thought to be “natural” and “inevitable,” especially ontologies, ethics, and metaphysics that cast nature as background or subordinate (along with women and other inferiorized groups), are really political, allied with the interests of groups in power. Once this political character of our constructions and relations with nature is brought to consciousness, ecofeminist political philosophy compels us to ask where those political alliances *should* be—making the case that they should be with the more-than-human world, with the poor, the indigenous, with women; with all those who are oppressed through white supremacist anthropocentric capitalist patriarchy. Ecofeminist political philosophy politicizes gender

carefully selecting, choosing where to place, and adjusting where necessary the elements of the theory, constantly paying attention to both detail and overall design to be sure that the quilt turns out right.

and nature, thought together. And although I have not examined it here, ecofeminist political philosophy also examines the relation between theory and praxis, much in the manner that ecofeminist theorist Noël Sturgeon describes the idea of “direct theory,” a notion that encapsulates the ways that movement activists, such as environmental activists, are always in the process of creating and analyzing meaning *in the course of their activism*, are engaging in theory-making through and alongside action. Sturgeon’s concept of direct theory shows how theorists, including environmental philosophers, are always “inside the political relations they simultaneously analyze and critique; they are participant observers themselves” who cannot be understood to be in a rarified and reified sphere of the intellect, dualistically separated from the world that demands that people act.¹⁹

Following Warren, it is also possible to see ecofeminist political philosophy as one of the patches on the quilt of ecofeminism, a quilt-within-a quilt, as it were. “An ecofeminist philosophical quilt will be made up of different ‘patches’ constructed by quilters in particular social, historical, and material contexts, which express some aspect of that quilter’s perspective on women-other human Others-nature interconnections” (Warren p. 67). The ecofeminist political philosophy patch of the quilt of ecofeminism provides a particular perspective, and along with it lenses of analysis and a usable dynamic, and textured framework, for resolving for the conjoined oppressions of women, nature, and other human Others.

¹⁹ Noël Sturgeon, “Theorizing Movements: Direct Action and Direct Theory,” in Marcy Danalovsky, Barbara Epstein, and Richard Flaks (eds.), *Cultural Politics and Social Movements* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995). More on this deserves to be said; for the moment I direct the reader to my article “Ecofeminism and Forest Defense in Cascadia: Gender, Theory, and Radical Activism,” *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism: A Journal of Social Ecology*; (v. 17 no. 1 (March 2006)) for a further analysis of intersections between ecofeminist theory and direct action, in the context of the women’s and transgender forest defense movement in the Pacific Northwest.