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Ecofeminism revisited

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Ecofeminism Revisited: Critical insights on contemporary environmental governance

Abstract

Echoing other papers presented in this special issue, this article re-evaluates a collection of feminist works that fell out of fashion as a consequence of academic feminism embracing poststructuralist and postmodernist trends. In line with fellow contributors, the paper critically reflects upon the unsympathetic reading of feminisms considered to be essentialising and universalistic, in order to re-evaluate, in my case, ecofeminism. As an introduction, I reflect on my own perhaps unfair rejection of ecofeminism as a doctoral researcher and early career academic who, in critiquing 1990s international environmental governance, sought to problematise the essentialist premise on which it appeared to be based. The paper thereafter challenges this well-rehearsed critique by carefully revisiting a sample of ecofeminist work produced between the late 1970s and the early 1990s. In an effort to avoid whole-sale abandonment of the wealth of feminist theory often labelled as Second wave or render feminisms of the past redundant as feminist theory changes over time, this paper re-reads the work of ecofeminists, such as Starhawk, Susan Griffin and Vandana Shiva, to demonstrate their contemporary relevance. In so doing, the article argues that a contemporary re-reading of ecofeminism offers insights allowing for a radical rethinking of contemporary environmental governance.

Introduction: Background and Reflection

Along with the types of feminism somewhat arbitrarily lumped together under the prefixes of radical and cultural, ecological feminist theory has been extensively critiqued and largely abandoned by gender scholars and feminist activists. In fact, the anti-essentialist turn that marked what is commonly (perhaps unhelpfully) understood under the umbrella of third wave feminism, was particularly damaging for ecofeminism, which generally sought to consciously promote women as privileged knowers of the natural world. While this left ecofeminism vulnerable to being labelled essentialist from within the canon of feminist thought, the early 1990s simultaneously witnessed ecofeminism becoming, at least ostensibly, influential in (inter)national environmental governance and policy making. Most notably, the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED, also known as the Rio Earth Summit) echoed ecofeminist rhetoric to encourage women's participation in green governance (Braidotti, et al. 1994; Buckingham, 2004). Launching the international community's commitment to the fairly novel idea of sustainable development, the Rio Earth Summit saw a concerted effort to promote women's visibility and participation in environmental initiatives globally. This objective, along with a wider call to engage and include civil society in environmental governance, was presented as vital to achieving sustainable development. In fact, opening UNCED, Maurice Strong, the Director of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), espoused the 'special relationship' between women and nature and the UN's 'manifesto' for achieving sustainability in the 21st Century, *Agenda 21*, included a stand-alone chapter dedicated to women's relationship to the environment and their key role in environmental governance. It is fair to say then that ecofeminism inhabits an interesting and unusual place within the history of feminism and international environmental governance. This is because the theory, as radical as it was, experienced a fleeting, and arguably unlikely, moment of success in terms of influencing mainstream international agreement making on sustainable development. This very formal recognition of a special relationship between women and nature, regardless of the intent of those involved in the formal negotiations in 1992, chimed with the assumptions underpinning the main thrust of the ecofeminist movement.

Earlier in my career, I was at pains to problematise the uneasy alliance that was cultivated between international environmental policy makers and ecofeminists (Foster, 2011; 2014). At the time, I argued that this synergy was bolstered by the fact that ecofeminists were rather conservative in how they interpreted gender; relying on conventional stereotypes linking women to care and nurture. These essentialist ideas underpinning ecofeminism, rather than presenting a radical alternative to gender ideologies, in fact reproduced the mainstream and, as a result, were fairly seamlessly appropriated by mainstream sustainable development proponents. Today, I admit that I regret my wholesale rejection of classic ecofeminism. As such, this article, like others in this special issue, stands as a corrective by exploring the nuances, and relevance, of this feminist trend. Indeed, in the contemporary context of international environmental politics, which is marked by a growing determination to solve

environmental problems through technological interventions and by marketising environmental goods and services, a more caring, healing and sensitive ecofeminist approach would, in my opinion, be welcome.

Overall, then, this article contends that there has been a change in emphasis in environmental governance, from a focus on civil society/women's inclusion in environmental decision making to a problem-solving approach rooted in market based and technological solutions. As a result, present-day environmental governance finds more in common with the symbolically masculine realms of economy, technology and science, making it a timely juncture to reconsider the relevance and value of those classic ecofeminist works that have been widely discredited by contemporary feminists. To that end, this paper presents a novel re-evaluation and application of this body of work. Drawing on authors such as Susan Griffin, Charlene Spretnek, Starhawk, Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies, this article not only contributes to the scant literature that has sought to defend ecofeminism (see Sargisson, 2001) or explore its continued influence on policy (see Buckingham, 2004), but presents an initial attempt to demonstrate ecofeminism's critical potential in the context of the so-called Anthropocene.

In order to present this argument, the paper is structured as follows. First, I review some of the ecofeminist classics and identify the general themes, and corresponding critiques, of different branches of ecofeminism. Second, I demonstrate the shift in contemporary trends in environmental governance, most notably, focussing on the contemporary idea of the Anthropocene that, since at least 2012, has dominated the international environmental policy terrain. Finally, this article presents insights offered in classic ecofeminism that could work to critically interrupt these trends and present the building blocks for a new form of radical environmental politics.

Ecofeminism: Main themes and critique

Generally, ecofeminism has been concerned with the complex interrelationship between environmental degradation and women's subordination. Founded in the 1970s, it is commonly understood that the term ecofeminism (or *ecofeminisme* to be precise) was coined in 1974 by the French feminist Françoise d'Eaubonne. In her book *Le Féminisme ou la Mort* (1974), d'Eaubonne sets out many of the key themes recurrent in ecofeminist thought, such as the role of patriarchy in ecological destruction and the potential of women as agents better able to manage the natural environment. In particular, d'Eaubonne argued, as many ecofeminists thereafter, that women, the feminine or even feminism was central to reversing the trends of environmental degradation. Moreover, she argued that women, residing at the

interface of nature and culture, would be best placed to steward societies to a more equal and sustainable future.

D'Eaubonne set out many of the themes that recur in ecofeminist theory and throughout the ecofeminist movement. While these themes are well-rehearsed in the ecofeminist canon, ecofeminism has been characterised as a fractured movement that mirrors the intellectual cleavages found in feminism. To some extent, ecofeminism appears to replicate the agonisms between feminisms, largely forming around the commonly articulated strands; liberal, radical, socialist (Merchant, 1990) and later, deconstructive (such as Warren, 1994; Plumwood, 1993). However, the transposing of feminist strands onto ecofeminism is rather unhelpful. First, there is significant slippage between the supposedly different strands and, rather than finding agonisms, one actually finds a great deal of intellectual synergy. Second, it is worth noting that while the liberal tradition has undoubtedly found an expression in feminism, there is no such synergy found between liberalism and ecofeminism. Any hybridisation between these two 'philosophies' has been at best superficial and runs more in line with a diluted (light green) reform style environmentalism (Merchant, 1990: 100) than a deep (dark green) ecologism. In fact, some ecofeminists, such as the social ecofeminist Ynestra King (1998), go so far as to reject the idea that liberal feminism can be reconciled with ecologism at all. Arguably, then, radical and socialist ecofeminism(s) dominate classic ecofeminist work and, as such, these strands are the focus of this article.

Sharing common ground with the radical/cultural strand of feminism are the spiritual and affinity ecofeminists. Affinity ecofeminists are labelled as such to mark their 'affinity' with 'nature' (and, incidentally, women's difference from men). Affinity ecofeminists engage in an overt celebration of women and femininity that they perceive as closely interconnected with nature. In particular, affinity ecofeminists emphasise women's supposed 'life-giving', nurturing and caring characteristics both to demonstrate a synergy, or more precisely affinity, with the Earth (which is also represented as 'life-giving') and to promote the idea that women are agents of ecological change (see Collard, 1988; Griffin, 1978). Spiritual ecofeminists sit within the affinity approach and are, in many ways, the fullest expression of affinity ecofeminism (Mellor, 1997: 56). For the spiritual wing of the affinity ecofeminist movement, the starting point for political change is very much rooted in theological, rather than in political or economic, debates (see Starhawk, 1990; Christ, 1990; Spretnek, 1990). The main thrust of the spiritual ecofeminist argument is that conventional religions, common to the West, reject female and Earth-bound deities, instead imagining a male/masculine God that, crucially, resides in the sky. Conventional religions distinguish the Divine from that which is Earthly and therefore invest less in protecting and caring for the planet. This, they argue, is the religious assumption that perpetuates ecological degradation. Countering this, the spiritual ecofeminists tend to draw on (or, read more critically, appropriate) ancient, Eastern and indigenous religious/spiritual traditions that promote(d) the feminine (through, for example, goddess worship) and recognise(d) the Earth as sacred and alive. For these ecofeminists spiritualism works as a guide on how to organise for political activism as well as

the condition from which a better environmental politics can flourish. This is exemplified by Starhawk who believes that 'Pagan values and perspectives make important contributions to ecofeminist analysis and organising' (1990: 74) and Spretnek who recognises the continuum between spirituality, rituals and the shaping of an ecopolitics (1990: 6).

Needless to say, affinity ecofeminism, especially the spiritual kind, has been widely dismissed. In light of the widespread turn towards poststructuralist and postcolonialist informed feminisms that dominated the academy in the 1990s and 2000s, affinity ecofeminism has been intellectually marginalised (see Biehl, 1991; Sandilands, 1991; Leach, 2007). Unsurprisingly, these critiques centre on the essentialist/universalist assumptions and ethnocentrism underpinning the affinity brand of ecofeminism. Affinity ecofeminists rest the potential of women to save the planet on what they see as women's essential propensity to care and they see women as having a special bond with the Earth in that both 'woman' and planet 'cultivate' life. This link is considered to be so fundamental and intimate that affinity ecofeminists argue that the female body, or more specifically the maternal body, stands as a marker of planetary health:

> [B]ecause of women's unique role in the biological regeneration of the species, our bodies are important markers, the sites upon which local, regional or even planetary stress is often played out. Miscarriage is frequently an early sign of the presence of lethal toxins in the biosphere. (Diamond and Orenstein, 1990: x)

It is the nexus constructed between women and nature, rooted in bio-logics, which justifies women as special knowers and expert stewards of the planet. Consequently, this perspective has been critiqued for reducing women to their maternal role thereby excluding those who identify as women but who do not have children through either choice or capacity (Foster, 2014) and for reinforcing the woman-nature nexus that has historically been used to legitimise women's exclusion from public domains such as wage work and politics (Biehl, 1991: 25). Similarly, as white scholars and activists based in the United States produced the lion's share of this ecofeminist work, the affinity/spiritual wing in particular has been critiqued for its ethnocentrism and for appropriating theological trends more common to indigenous and Eastern cultures (Mellor, 1997: 55). More generally, these ecofeminists are uncharitably ridiculed as 'placenta eating pagan hippies' (Thompson and MacGregor, 2017:48) who cannot possibly be taken seriously; intellectually or politically.

Nonetheless, revisiting this body of ecofeminist work, including that which is labelled affinity and spiritualist, one must be minded not to reproduce these caricatured and simplistic critiques. During the 1980s ecofeminism, while having one foot in the academic world, was far more concerned with activism than scholarship (Thompson and MacGregor, 2017). Many ecofeminist works were designed to promote political action and read more like manifestos, recruiting women to the cause, than detailed pieces of empirically grounded scholarship. In addition, to some degree, the focus on the special bond between women and nature was a strategy designed to promote the idea that women are key stakeholders in this very

important project (Braidotti et al., 1994). Second, a careful reading of the work of affinity ecofeminists only goes to highlight that their position is much more complicated and nuanced than their critiques make out. For example, even the likes of Starhawk and Griffin, when read carefully, shy away from essentially linking characteristics to gendered bodies in an empirical sense. For example, Starhawk's appeal, in her contribution to Diamond and Orenstein's (1990) important edited collection *Reweaving the World*, is for *everyone*, regardless of gender, to treat nature in line with the traits commonly assigned to femininity. Similarly, Griffin's contribution to the same collection of essays (1990), while prone to rousing feminine personifications of the Earth, also takes a social constructionist approach to gender. Rather than solidifying binary gender categories through essentialism, these ecofeminists present a contradictory picture of gender. In one breath, they valorise femininity, especially motherhood, and then, in the second, they acknowledge masculinity and femininity as constructed, rather than essential categories, to uphold inequality and legitimise the degradation of nature (Griffin, 1990: 88). Finally, and importantly in relation to this article, affinity ecofeminists tend to draw on the discourses of spirituality and magic and often use poetry and art to articulate their position (Diamond and Feman Orenstein, 1990: xi). This is one of the reasons they have been so easily dismissed. However, communicating in this way challenges the very scientific and technological approaches to nature and the environment that have arguably worked to nature's detriment and that, as discussed later, dominates discussions on how to manage the environment through climate change mitigation and adaptation.

Socialist and social ecofeminists (for example Caldecott & Leland, 1983; Mies & Shiva, 1993; Shiva, 1989; Merchant, 1980; Mellor, 1992; 1997, King, 1990; 1998; Salleh and O'Connor, [1991] 2009) as well as being grounded in feminism and ecologism, are also informed by socialism and anarchism respectively. Like their affinity/spiritual cousins, social(ist) ecofeminists recognise those values linked to masculinity as foundational to environmental ills and those related to femininity to be potentially emancipatory. However, these scholars and activists tend to acknowledge, more definitively, masculinity and femininity as socially constructed categories. Social(ist) ecofeminists focus on economic and other inequalities, highlighting both (global) capitalism and patriarchy as the systems rendered operational through the exploitation and oppression of nature and women. In addition, social(ist) ecofeminism is also critical of the way that technology is used to control, degrade and destroy the environment as well as the impact this has had on women's lives and livelihoods (Shiva, 1989; Mies and Shiva, 1993). The suspicion of (the patriarchal capitalist appropriation of) technology is a recurrent theme in much ecofeminist scholarship, especially that published after the Chernobyl disaster in 1986 (see Spretnek, 1990; Mies and Shiva 1993). These anxieties around technology cover an array of initiatives, from nuclear power and weaponry to new reproductive technologies. Across the gamut, women and nature are either constructed as the direct targets of control or unequally affected by the consequences.

Indeed, while less biologically reductionist than their affinity counterparts, socialist/social ecofeminists still recognise an affinity between women and nature even if they do not carry the affinity tag. In this regard, the affinity between 'women' and 'nature' is not a biological one but an experiential one as it originates from shared oppressions and exploitations under patriarchal capitalism. As such, it is not unusual for social(ist) ecofeminists to extend their analyses to include elements of class and ethnicity as exacerbating factors intensifying experiences of oppression and exploitation (Mies & Shiva, 1993; Shiva, 1989; 1998; King, 1990; 1998). However, while social(ist) ecofeminists manage to side-step many of the essentialist pitfalls of affinity ecofeminists, it is important to note that they still hold traditional 'female' roles of mothering and nurturing in high regard. Further, while social(ist) ecofeminists tend to empirically premise their work in women's experiences of exploitation and domination under capitalist patriarchy and, subsequently, draw parallels with the exploitation of nature, many are equally not afraid to communicate through poetry or make references to female deities (Mies and Shiva, 1993: 101).

In the spirit of this special issue, it is worth noting that, despite the cataloguing of ecofeminisms as affinity, spiritual, social and socialist, these categories are somewhat misleading as there is considerable overlap across ecofeminist positions (Mellor, 1997: 68-70). Rather than differences of approach causing antagonisms within the ecofeminist movement, there was a great deal of intellectual cross-fertilisation between the scholars and activists who inhabited this field (Spretnek, 1990). With so much in common, it is unsurprising that the social(ist) ecofeminists and affinity/spiritual ecofeminists were subjected to many of the same critiques. In particular, the shared oppression thesis has been problematised for universalising women's experiences by insisting that *all* women feel a commitment to protecting the planet (Mellor, 1997: 67). As such, this position has been dismissed on the grounds of universalism – universalising women's experience and objectives. However, it should be noted that similar to the essentialism of affinity ecofeminists, the universalism of social(ist) ecofeminists, may well have been utilised as a deliberate political strategy – simplifying the message and encouraging support (Thompson and MacGregor, 2017).

While the critiques of ecofeminism as universalising, essentialising and ethnocentric should not be downplayed, this article argues that ecofeminism, despite its flaws, offers some very valuable insights that can help in the critical interrogation of contemporary environmental politics. These include the ecofeminist anxieties around the role of technology, the ecological potential of alternative ways of thinking typified through spirituality, magic and the arts, and the possibilities that arise from blurring the nature/culture binary. This article will visit each of these insights; however, at this juncture, it is first worth assessing the contemporary landscape of environmental politics.

Shifts in Environmental Governance: From civil society participation to geo-engineers

1992 was an important year for international environmental governance and, incidentally, ecofeminism. This is because in 1992 the Rio Earth Summit (or UNCED) generated an international consensus around the concept of sustainable development, which has since been the established and establishment 'guiding mantra' of environmental policymaking. It was at Rio that the World Commission on Environment and Development's (WCED) definition of sustainable development was adopted. This definition reads as follows:

> [D]evelopment that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It contains within it two key concepts: the concept of 'needs', in particular the essential needs of the world's poor, to which overriding priority should be given; and the idea of limitations imposed by the state of technology and social organisation on the environment's ability to meet present and future needs (WCED, 1987:43).

In addition to adopting and launching sustainable development, Rio also saw the adoption, or perhaps more accurately, the appropriation of ecofeminist rhetoric. Indeed, the ecofeminist movement, often under the auspices of a particular approach to development known as the Women, Environment, Development (WED) approach, was undoubtedly animated and energised in the preparatory processes leading up to, and during, the summit (Braidotti et al., 1994). For example, in the run-up several meetings were held in Miami relating to women, children and the environment and during the summit (eco)feminists held a parallel conference – *Planeta Femea*. While the mobilisation of ecofeminism around the event is explainable – given that the ecofeminist movement itself was still quite buoyant in this time period – what is perhaps more surprising is the ways in which ecofeminist ideas were implicitly and explicitly represented at the official conference and in the policy guiding outputs that followed (such as *Agenda 21*).

There are many reasons why ecofeminism was considered relevant and appropriate at the time. For example, the focus on intergenerational justice central to the definition of sustainable development meant that women were considered crucial, due to their role as mothers at the reproductive interface of future generations (Foster, 2014). In addition, the Earth Summit occurred between the UN Decade for Women (1975-1985) and the landmark 1995 World Conference for Women held in Beijing and, as such, there was an emerging appetite to empower women across the globe. In this era of initiatives to empower women, it was argued that sustainable development would be best achieved through improving women's participation and representation in environmental governance. This participation was legitimised through an appropriation of ecofeminist rhetoric that reproduced and reinforced nature and the environment as a policy domain especially suited to women. Despite being closely associated with radical forms of feminism, it is unsurprising that ecofeminism was so easily appropriated given that the idea that women and nature share a

common bond reinforces existing gender ideologies and does little to challenge gendered power relations (Foster, 2011).

In 1992, then, the landscape of international environmental politics was dominated by efforts to improve governance through encouraging participation from civil society, including women. Indeed, this meant relying on an idea that women have a special bond to the natural world and therefore reinforcing the women-nature nexus already established in the popular imaginary. It would be inaccurate to reduce the proposals made at Rio to solely improving governance, representation and participation, especially as attention was lent to the role of technology and the market in sustaining the environment without hindering development. Nonetheless, at least in theory, improving governance and empowering women were regarded as fundamental to achieving sustainable development (Foster, 2016; Buckingham, 2004).

As is common to UN conferences that yield policy initiatives, UNCED has been reviewed on a fairly regular basis (every five years in fact). As part of this review process, the Rio Earth Summit received its 20-year review in 2012 at a summit also held in Rio (referred to as Rio+20). However, Rio+20 was markedly different from its 1992 predecessor. First, it was met with far less enthusiasm from the international community and its accompanying policy-informing document, *The Future We Want* (2012), has been subject to significant critique. For example, commenting on Rio+20 and *The Future We Want,* Bigg (2012) and Clémençon (2012) note that very little that was meaningful was said and that nothing new was presented. Indeed, the UN Women's Major Group responded to Rio+20 with a scathing critique, remarking that it represented a failure to both 'women and future generations' (Women Engage for a Common Future, 2012).

The criticisms of Rio+20 and *The Future We Want* as presenting a far from transformative agenda are largely valid. However, some subtle discursive shifts identifiable at Rio + 20 demonstrate a sea change in the terrain of international environmental politics. For example, in contrast to the 1992 Rio Earth Summit that adopted the WCED definition of sustainable development, building policy consensus around this approach, Rio+20 opened with a new concept called the Anthropocene. The Anthropocene is a term used to describe the contemporary geological epoch and refers to the profound impact the human species (the *Anthropos)* has had on the planet largely as a consequence of industrialisation and economic development. In other words, the idea that humans exist in a period that can be labelled the Anthropocene suggests that humans have so fundamentally altered the ecosystem they have transformed the geological strata (in the same way a meteor strike or earthquake might). This means that humans can now be considered a geological force or agent (Steffan, et al. 2011; Biermann, 2012; Malm and Hornberg, 2014). This idea dominated Rio+20. In fact, a film entitled *Welcome to the Anthropocene* (2012) was used to open the conference. *Welcome to the Anthropocene* depicts the Earth from space, visually illustrating how it has changed

throughout recent human history – something demonstrated by an increase in artificial light generating from growing urban centres across the planet. The film's voiceover remarks as a closing statement that 'we have shaped our past, we shape our present and we can shape our future.' The Anthropocene, while acknowledging humanity's significant impact on the ecosystem, also celebrates human technological innovation - seeing technology as a means to meet the challenges of the geological era. As such, the Anthropocene typifies a key aspect of contemporary environmental politics, namely a belief that technology is central to adapting to environmental problems. Instead of improved (environmental) governance and (women's) participation as the key to better environmental management, which marked the discourses of UNCED in 1992, contemporary salvation from environmental ruin is in the hands of (geo)engineers offering technological solutions (Steffan, 2011).

In addition to the emphasis placed on the Anthropocene at Rio+20, there were a couple of other discursive shifts worth reviewing here. Hand in hand with the fore fronting of the role of technology in adapting to environmental changes was the insertion of the concept of the green economy. The green economy refers to encouraging the greening of markets, including initiatives that encourage the creation of green jobs and improved production efficiencies such as better waste management and sustainable energy usage. The shift towards a greater emphasis on the technological and market-based solutions underscored by Anthropocene rhetoric is related to a shift away from the discourses of women's participation in environmental governance that typified the 1992 Rio Earth Summit. The move to 'a technology-based and innovation-oriented approach to environmental policy' (Jänicke, 2008: 557) takes precedence over the civil society engagement encouraged in the early 1990s. Indeed, one might go further to suggest that what has been witnessed is a shift from the symbolically feminine construction of nature in need of healing through a symbolically feminine care ethic to symbolically masculine domains of 'fixing' the planet through technologies and the market (Foster, 2017). To that end, as it is now engineers, scientists and economists who are tasked with creating the technologies and market levers necessary for the survival of the human species in the face of climate catastrophe, the expedience of appropriating ecofeminist arguments and approaches is no longer necessary. To contemporary environmental policy makers, ecofeminism is irrelevant. However, as I argue in the next section, while ecofeminist tropes have been widely abandoned by policy makers in the era of the Anthropocene, ecofeminism, as a field of critical ecological scholarship, may well find itself better placed than ever to make sense of contemporary environmental governance.

Ecofeminism: Insights and inroads

While it is important to acknowledge the criticisms of ecofeminism as essentialist, universalist, ethnocentric and so on (Biehl, 1991; Braidotti, 1994; Leach, 2007, Foster, 2011), it is equally important not to completely abandon this scholarship just because there are some aspects that in today's context are politically and ethically problematic. As Lisa Downing has emphatically discussed in her book, *Selfish Women* (2019), it is important to engage with work from feminists (and women) that might not meet the ethical or political standards of contemporary feminist engagements. Abandoning a school of thought because it includes some less palatable aspects, after all, is not replicated in other (male dominated) fields of political theory or philosophy. With Downing's call for engagement in mind, here I discuss the contemporary relevance of classic ecofeminism.

Dismissed by mainstream social scientists, for their focus on the spiritual, theological and even magical (McMahon, 2016; Thompson and MacGregor, 2017), classic ecofeminists refreshingly stand in stark contrast to the rationalist, technocratic and problem-solving approaches that characterise contemporary environmental policy. Highlighting the distinction between healing and fixing respectively, the former presents modes of promoting and encouraging changes in fundamental attitudes with a view to creating a better ethic of care towards the environment and the latter looks for ways to amend and adapt to 'solve' or at least mitigate environmental challenges (Crist, 2013). The merging of spiritualism and politics or political activism presents a direct challenge to the rationalist approaches to environmental problems we see in contemporary environmental policy. Recently Martha McMahon, revisiting the work of Vandana Shiva, has astutely noted that these more magical modes of thought challenge modernity and, as a result, are deliberately 'trivialized for "messing up" the fantasies of modernity' (2016: 27).

Linked to spirituality as a mode for political activism is the importance of poetry, ritual and creativity to communicate and disseminate political and ethical ideas. This stands in contrast to the Anthropocene thinking that places its hope for environmental salvation in the market and technology, with economists, scientists and engineers (Steffan, 2012). Ecofeminists, who desire a more 'root and branch' shift in attitudes towards nature, place artists and other creatives at the centre of their activism. The ecofeminist solution to environmental problems then is considerably distinct from the technological optimism and technocentrism perpetuated by Anthropocene proponents. Rather than relying on technology to better enable humans to survive in increasingly hostile environments, ecofeminism:

> recognizes that the methods we choose in dealing with problems must be life affirming, consensual, and non-violent […] Moreover, because the creation of new images of living with the Earth is viewed as an essential element of the process of transformation, creative artists are an integral part of this new constellation. In short, ecofeminism radically alters our very notion of what constitutes political change. (Diamond and Orenstein, 1990: xii)

Political change for ecofeminists is significantly linked to embedding new ethics of care for nature and, as a result, presents an ambitious, perhaps utopian, project. As such, it is arguable that the role of spirituality and art works is a necessary counterbalance to Anthropocene thinking. As Lucy Sargisson (2001: 55) notes '[e]cofeminism is inspirational in a number of ways but absolutely not for its blueprints. Ecofeminism adopts a visionary tone. Ecofeminists dare to dream.' While this approach is easily trivialised (McMahon, 2016) by the environmental pragmatists who seek immediate action to immediate environmental challenges, it arguably has a place in contemporary radical ecologism. It calls for something that is more visionary and, as a result, potentially more sustainable in the long run.

As well as providing a different cognitive schema, ecofeminist work, especially that associated with social(ist) ecofeminists, is also valuable in its scepticism over technology. Social(ist) ecofeminists, in particular, went to some lengths to demonstrate the ways in which the capitalist appropriation of science and technology has been crucial in justifying exploitation; providing the tools to intensify processes of exploitation in relation to both nature and women (Merchant, 1980). Indeed, as noted above, much of the ecofeminist work written in the wake of the 1986 Chernobyl disaster (for example see Spretnek, 1990; Mies and Shiva, 1993) reflects on the devastating consequences of the misuse of technologies used to harness and control nature. Simultaneously, ecofeminists like Andre Collard (1988) and Mies and Shiva (1993) demonstrate pronounced anxieties around what they see as equivalent technologies designed to control and manage reproduction. These ecofeminists, tracing the trajectory of capitalist development, lament an era prior to capitalism where humans worked in harmony with nature (organicism) and critically interrogate the mechanistic view of the world that they regard as characteristic of capitalism where women and nature are recognised as objects of scientific enquiry and technological interference (Merchant, 1980). While primitivism is something that should arguably be avoided and while feminists like Donna Haraway (1991) have convincingly warned against a wholesale rejection of technology - that may after all play a part in eroding numerous binaries (women/men, nature/culture, biological/technological) - the critique of technology levied by ecofeminists remains important in the era of the Anthropocene. It has never been more necessary to place science and technology in the spotlight as we move towards a system of governance rabidly pursuing technological and market-based solutions to environmental problems.

The final aspect of ecofeminism that is worth revisiting as a counter to Anthropocene thinking relates to the nature/culture binary. Arguably, overcoming the nature/culture binary would work to undermine the hierarchies that legitimise human domination of nature (Warren, 1994). The nature/culture binary, in opposition, has led to culture (human, cognitive, rational) being placed in higher esteem than nature (non-human, corporeal, instinctual). Both Anthropocene proponents and ecofeminists have a stake in this debate. The former note how the Anthropocene, in acknowledging humans as a geological/natural force, erode the division between culture and nature as one and the same. In other words, human actions are natural and the concept of a distinct nature is a problematic construct (Arias-Maldonado, 2013).

However, it has been argued that this erosion, rather than eroding the distinction, centralises the role of humans and simultaneously absorbs nature into culture (Crist, 2013). This anthropocentrism only perpetuates the idea that humans can manage (natural) environments and, as a result, is not dissimilar to the logic that arguably led to environmental crises in the first place (Crist, 2013; Bauman, 2015).

Ecofeminists on the other hand have been accused of reinforcing the nature/culture binary in their efforts to reinforce how nature and culture is transposed onto gendered bodies. In other words, ecofeminists appear to ally men with culture and women with nature as a way to pursue an agenda that promotes women as ecological agents. However, it is important to note that the distinction of *humans* and nature is not so clear-cut. Recognising women at the interface of nature/culture, in part due to their roles in reproduction and also with the belief that the health of (women's) bodies is a barometer for planetary health, ecofeminists see humans as being part of nature. This holism also arguably works to erode the binary between nature and humanity and therefore undermine the value hierarchy attributed to each. As Diamond and Orenstein (1990: xi) noted in the preface to their famous edited collection, *Reweaving the World*:

> [Ecofeminists] embraced not only women and men of different races, but all forms of life – other animals, plants, and the living Earth itself. The diverse strands of this retelling and reframing led to a new, more complicated experiential ethic of ecological interconnectedness.

Employing the idea of interconnectedness to erode human/nature binaries and its attendant hierarchies may well be a better starting point to achieve environmental sustainability. That is not to reject the role of technology in contributing to environmental efforts, but to call for more mindfulness around the ways in which it is used. In other words, to ensure all interactions are *in support of life* in the broadest sense and not just human life alone.

Conclusion

During the 1992 sustainable development negotiations, there was a commitment to solving environmental problems through improving governance systems and shoring up stakeholders through broadening participation. In that, women were expediently constructed as specific stakeholders. Today, as I have argued here and elsewhere (Foster, 2017), the role of civil society participation has been significantly diminished in favour of a more ruthless set of technological and market-based responses. In the 1990s a great deal of energy and hope was invested in the concept of sustainable development, that in retrospect I believe embraced, albeit naively, an element of inclusivity. In more recent years, partly exacerbated by the 2008 financial crisis, that energy and hope has somewhat waned (Clémençon, 2012) along with the socially minded aspects of this concept. Simultaneously, and unsurprisingly, the commitment to aims in-line with ecofeminism have been diluted as environmental governance has been

linked less to civic participation and more towards market-based and technological fixes. While the Rio Earth Summit appropriated ecofeminism in an attempt to achieve particular political goals, Rio+20 marked an out and out rejection of these values and objectives.

Rio+20 highlights a shift from desiring to heal the planet (consistent with ecofeminism) to desiring to 'fix' the planet enough for human enterprise to be sustainable (Crist, 2013). In 1992, the appropriation of ecofeminist tropes about women's special relationship with nature were convenient for a number of reasons. In the context of emerging demands for women's empowerment and gender equality, the 1992 Rio Earth Summit presented an excellent opportunity to encourage women's participation. After all, this was a policy area – the environment – that women had long been associated with anyway. As a result of the appropriation of ecofeminism in the early 1990s, the movement was to an extent robbed of its critical potential. Moreover, especially while in the hands of policy makers, it was important for feminist scholars to challenge the essentialist and universalising character of these discourses. However, in the context of Anthropocene thinking, I would argue that in the current climate (and I mean climate in all its senses) an ecofeminist challenge has never been more necessary. Essentialism aside, offering counters to rationalism and technocentrism, ecofeminism stands in confrontation to mainstream environmental governance and, as such, I have made the case here that its radical and critical potential is worth reviving.

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