

# The Unquiet Dead

Anarchism, Fascism,  
and Mythology

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4. The White Goddess: Essentialism and the Land



I have felt troubled for some time over some white feminist practice and advocacy of essentialist “nature spiritualities.” This tendency is certainly not limited to feminists, but I find it most upsetting as it is performed by them—the political deployment of a belief structure under the premise of sisterhood can be insidious. If we are against fascism, we must ask in what ways we are replicating its themes in our struggle for freedom, and how may we fight that tendency. I write not as part of a relentless drift towards inertia, the enforcement of identity politics that prevents movement; rather, I want to examine the real friction present between white feminists and those they are trying to save. Essentialism has poisoned our common well for too long.

While I do not wish to affirm the social construction of racial difference, I feel a difference in tone around these practices: when they are performed by people of color from the cultures that originated them, they tend to resonate as cultural reclamation or reinvention. When they are done by whites, they feel like cultural appropriation and a deepening colonialism, or else as a disturbing appeal to elements of white history that are far from innocent.<sup>a</sup> Of course, my perception of these practices is founded in my political alignment—the Right sees white practices along these lines as either laughable or the exercise of white rights, and the actions of people of color as fearful signs that they are building an insurrection. However, let us refuse pretended objectivity; I choose solidarity, complexity, and uncertainty instead.

When the Goddess becomes a white woman, is She any less terrifying than the Christian God—and if so, is that not a reaffirmation of essentialist misogyny? How can we approach issues of gender, race, spirituality and the “natural world” without reinforcing the oppressive constructs inherent in each? How can white people show real solidarity to those with marginalized histories, the kind of solidarity that changes our mutual present? How can people of color engaged in resistance to white supremacy and efforts towards self-actualization be recognized in ways that do not prop up racial difference or assimilationist enclosure? Perhaps these questions seem less important when they are related to issues of spirituality, or self-definition, than when they come up in contexts more transparently to do with violence or money. I do not think they are; I do not think there is really much difference.

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a Obviously, there is a third category of people here: non-white people who rely upon spiritual practices from cultures not their own. While I think this can also be problematic, it is not my specific area of critique, because white supremacy charges white appropriations with far more destructive power in our culture.

## context

I am using “nature spiritualities” as an consciously inadequate umbrella term for a diverse and often contradictory array of appropriated spiritual practices, as performed in North America, but drawn from a variety of continents. They include indigenous North American beliefs and European witchcraft, Caribbean witchcraft, some Hindi beliefs, Buddhism, indigenous African beliefs, and more. Characteristics that seem to appeal to these appropriators include:

- 1) the practice or belief system comes from a non-Abrahamic background (it is not Christian, Jewish, or Muslim), although some heretical beliefs from those traditions are treated as acceptable sites of appropriation;
- 2) the belief system includes Goddess worship, and/or the practice is woman-centric;
- 3) the belief system is oriented towards a sense of connection to the land, to plants and animals, to the cycles of the seasons, and asserts itself as a natural, true, older form of belief;
- 4) the belief system has many ritual practices and does not strictly require the specific exclusion of certain types of behavior, but rather encourages certain ways of thinking. (E.g., not the strict sexual prohibitions of Christianity or Islam, but sexual ritualism and/or an idea of sex as a healing and natural practice of embodiment, the creation of life, and an affirmation of gender roles.)

By *appropriation* I mean the use of cultural, spiritual, and historical frameworks, artifacts, beliefs, aesthetics, and practices by someone who a) is not from that culture; b) is from an intersectionally elevated position in relation to that culture; c) is acting out of ignorance, an acquisitive urge, and, most likely, good intentions. Appropriation is most easily distinguished from cultural exchange, which can be beautiful and aids in building solidarity, by asking a series of questions: Was the exchange initiated by the person who holds less social power? Does the outsider have a genuine and respectful interest in the culture based on real experiences and relationships with people from that culture and/or living in their area? Does the outsider take meaningful political and social action in solidarity with the people whose cultural practices they have adopted, or are they strictly interested in the low-commitment “fun parts”? This distinction is necessarily situational, flexible, and subjective to the participants.

My critiques are US-centric, although I discuss a Canadian example as well. This is not an attempt to localize the problem, but a reflection of my personal limits of understanding and the demands of space and time. White feminism is heavily complicit in the reactionary efforts against “the end of white Europe”, for example, efforts such as prohibiting migration into European countries on the premise of saving their “enlightened” cultures from “misogynist” ones... who are *coincidentally* often brown, Muslim, or otherwise outside the Western European mainstream. I am happy to see that some others are doing that critical work.<sup>b</sup>

### The White Goddess

And now at last it comes. You will give me the Ring freely! In place of the Dark Lord you will set up a Queen. And I shall not be dark, but beautiful and terrible as the Morning and the Night! Fair as the Sea and the Sun and the Snow upon the Mountain! Dreadful as the Storm and the Lightning! Stronger than the foundations of the earth. All shall love me and despair!

—fictional white proto-goddess Galadriel

#### *the spiritual*

The resurgence of the Goddess movement in the United States began over forty years ago; I have returned to its origin documents in this section to best understand its motives and self-image. I am aware that means I am somewhat “unfairly” analyzing these writings with the aid of forty years of theoretical development since they were published. Still, Foucault had published half his work by 1970, and was lecturing at the Collège de France about biopolitics during that decade; Audre Lorde was writing, speaking, and engaging as a queer person of color within the feminist community at this time; and bell hooks was writing *Ain't I A Woman?* as an undergraduate. I do not think it is so unfair to use the theoretical frameworks popularized by these writers to critique their peers. Moreover, while the white Goddess movement has surely evolved, the trends I find most problematic within it seem to have changed very little. I will illustrate them with a few examples from the anthology *Womanspirit Rising*, originally published in 1971.

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<sup>b</sup> Jasbir Puar’s *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*, a point of reference for this whole text, has a good overview of these critiques.

The white women's spirituality movement began as a revolution against the insidious way patriarchy affects Western values and perceptions. To live within a religion (or even to be surrounded by participants of that religion) that explicitly and implicitly describes women as lesser, subordinate, and *essentially* feminine is to suffer violence. This violence is not only psychological, but material—Silvia Federici has brilliantly demonstrated<sup>c</sup> the ways in which the exclusion of women from social and political life through the spread of Christianity and the invention of witchcraft as a means of othering powerful women was necessary to the material enclosure of Europe during the feudal stage; this process served as a prerequisite for capitalism. As part of the larger second wave of feminism, women in the 1970s sought to either abandon or to critique and reform Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. It is this we are concerned with—not the turn towards atheism, but the re/establishment of woman-centric religion.

As I wish to critique the ways in which this movement betrayed its own aims, I will review some of the goals listed in the introduction of this anthology of primary essays: to oppose a dualistic worldview (man/woman, natural/artificial;) to center *experience* rather than *immanence*, following the joyful and liberating experience many had in consciousness-raising groups; to center women's bodies and their material interactions with the world; to either reinvent the past through conscious revisionist history, or to create entirely new traditions; to relate to oneself and one's gender as a part of the natural world, and/or to seek freedom and self-determination apart from determining one's own “nature.”

There are obvious dialectical tensions between these goals, and I am not the first to have noticed them. As to the latter point, Christ and Plaskow's introduction asserts, “The sense of closeness to nature that some women experience in nature mysticism or in the cycles of their bodies, in menstruation, pregnancy, and birth have much to teach all women and men about the rootedness of the human condition in the natural order. ...But a focus on women's closeness to nature also has its dangers. In traditional theology and philosophy, women have been equated with nature and men with freedom and transcendence. The new focus on women and nature elevates that which traditional theology and culture have denigrated. But it does not always offer resources to understand those elements of freedom and transcendence of nature which are also part of the human condition in general and feminist experience”—such as, for example, the freedom to

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c See Federici's originary text *Caliban and the Witch*.

decide to not have children rather than to be bound to one's biology, the freedom to know oneself as not heterosexual—or, indeed, to know oneself as a woman at all.

I am interested in exploring this tension between nature and freedom, and the possibility of abolishing this and all other dualisms. I do not think women, or any people, must actually chose between nature and freedom—no one is outside nature. But when people use the word “nature”, it is often as a cloak for weaponized politics; and many feminists have asserted “feminine nature” at the great expense of human freedom. In Valerie Saiving's essay “The Human Situation: A Feminine View”, she asks, “Is there such a thing as an underlying feminine character structure which always and everywhere differs from the basic character structure of the male? Are not all distinctions between the sexes, except the purely biological ones, relative to a given culture?” She answers her question by returning to “objective facts” about human reproduction and human sexuality that are based in her own cultural biases and cis<sup>d</sup>-centrism, drawing psychological and social conclusions from the processes of puberty, menstruation, and sexuality. A sample: “The process of impregnation, pregnancy, childbirth and lactation are things which *happen* to a woman more than things she *does*. The sexual act, for example, has for her this basically passive quality... In the extreme case—rape—the passive structure of female sexuality unquestionably appears.” This essay does more to demonstrate the poverty of Saiving's experience than anything fundamental about gendered experience or female nature. She draws from these blandly stated “facts” conclusions such as “...masculinity is an endless process of *becoming*, while in femininity the emphasis is on *being*” and “Perhaps the goal we should set ourselves is to rear our daughters in the older way, without too much formal education... If we could do this, our daughters might be able to find secure fulfillment in a simple femininity. After all, the division of labor between the sexes worked fairly well for thousands of years, and we may only be asking for trouble by trying to modify that structure.”

Saiving's effort is in direct conflict with the previously stated goal of valuing experience over immanence; rather, it generalizes about women's experiences, places them as immanent (“being” as opposed to “becoming”), and creates a new standard by which to validate or deny women's lives. These sad and pathetic goals—or updated, “empowered” versions—are the sorts of conclusions we can expect from attempts to explore and define women's

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d Cis: to feel at home in one's gendered body; to not be transgender, genderqueer, intersex, or otherwise gender-divergent. That is, either a term that applies to very few people, or the majority of people, dependinmg upon your analysis.

essential nature. But there is a different feminist project: one that seeks to explore and question our material realities as a path towards total liberation. Its inquiries include questions like: how can we free people to transcend the socially constructed boundaries of gender, men as well as women? How can we definitively destroy what it means to be gendered in terms of how it imprisons us, does violence to us, defines us against our will? How do these forces operate in tandem with racism to most violently affect women of color?

There is also still the question of what this is all *for*, of what difference it makes beyond personal empowerment. Consciousness-raising groups used to be frequently cited as a place of political joy, of community empowerment for women. “Naming experience and recognizing that it is shared is liberating and energizing. Many women experience a kind of rebirth through consciousness-raising and feel that feminism has allowed them to live authentically for the first time in their lives. The feeling of release that comes from casting off men's definitions of women within a community of other women is the source of the early feminist slogan, 'Sisterhood is powerful!'”

But what does one do with that power? The civil rights victories won by first- and second-wave feminists have never been completed; structural misogyny in the form of the wage gap and access to career opportunities, not mention misogynist violence, still remains. While feminists aided in the gay liberation movement, the relationship between the two was and remains deeply problematic. The movement against domestic violence, started by women of color, was originally one of the most radical and patriarchy-challenging feminist struggles in the U.S. Sadly, it has become far removed from its roots in women making places of safety and protection from each other, so institutionalized that many women I worked with at a domestic violence shelter found it little better in terms of oppressive power structures than the situations from which they had escaped. For the well-off white cis women of America, the victory achieved by the consciousness-raising group is *its replacement by less overtly political forms*: careers, entertainment, and private forms of spirituality and personal empowerment. To feel liberated is to simply have greater access to privilege, thus implicitly oppressing others, unless you turn to help those further ensnared in chains. Today, the impulse towards solidarity with those most oppressed by patriarchy seems like a relic of a lost era.



This is particularly the case for white women when confronted by women whose experiences do not exactly correspond with their own. White feminists of that era (and certainly some continue to do this today) consistently made the embarrassing, racist mistake of contrasting and comparing all women with all people of color, as if women of color do not even exist.<sup>e</sup> Moreover, in their attempts to recognize the feminine Divine in the past, to rediscover witchcraft and nature-oriented spiritualities, they have frequently appropriated and tokenized the cultures and spiritualities of indigenous people of the present or imagined past. (Imagined, I would argue, even if they are justified with historical and anthropological narratives.) Frequently, these white feminists barely cite actual examples of women's lives or spiritual practices within particular cultures, but vaguely refer instead to the cultural imaginary of the Noble Savage. This tendency contains fairly fetishistic implications, even if it comes from simply seeking nature spirituality as the negation of Abrahamic religions. Through an anti-colonialist lens, it amounts to something like: first we murder and try to suppress you, devouring your resources and labor; later, we regurgitate your remains for a second digestion, trying to recreate your remnants for their pleasurable taste. When we level this critique, we are told that at least it is better than eliding women of color from history... as if those were the only choices. If white women (to use the falsely monolithic language of these feminists) claim some innocence from the first by virtue of their past exclusion from public life—an extremely dubious claim, as resistance and solidarity is practiced by those in the worst circumstances—they certainly cannot claim any innocence from the second.

These two aspects of racism occurring simultaneously within white feminism are no coincidence to me. White feminists who have come to consciousness about their oppression as women, but not about their participation in white supremacy, will make this “mistake” over and over again—their entitlement to the lives of others belies their understanding of how they themselves have been oppressed and their claims to solidarity on that basis. While there are endless examples of explicitly racist and colonialist appropriation and ignorance, white feminist silence around the experiences of women of color shows the problem even more clearly than accidentally-out-loud racist remarks uttered within polite society. This silence also manifests as inaction: third wave feminism, through the work of feminists of color, has done much to center race within feminist discourse, but there is a dearth of actual solidarity from white women these days; for example, the lack of white feminist projects addressing the oppression of incarcerated women of color

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e See bell hooks' pathopening work, *Ain't I A Woman*, for a thorough exploration of this phenomenon.

in the US. It is easier, apparently, to make your praxis at the intersection of race and gender to be about the imagined suffering of Muslim women under hijab, or of girls in other countries who undergo female circumcision/female genital mutilation, than it is to address the suffering for which you are directly responsible as a participant in your own community's white supremacy and misogyny.

This tendency to simultaneously exclude and exoticize, to “other” and to want the Other (in whatever coded and veiled forms) is at the heart of white supremacy as well as misogyny. It is founded in essentialism, and it is this I feel white feminists are returning to in their well-meaning attempts to locate and worship the Goddess, or the feminine in nature, or the feminine nature. When the Goddess is white, how is She any less terrifying an image than a white God in a white supremacist society? To assert She must necessarily be a kinder, more loving, more naturally attuned Divine presence is to be out of touch with the ways in which women have hurt each other along lines of race, sex, and gender conformity. Because we have lived within a patriarchal society all our lives, it is tempting to believe that women are only victims—but to do so is itself misogynist. Women are no less capable of abusing power than men *in their essence*, as opposed to in our *shared material conditions*, which do tend to favor men—although the point at which any assertion becomes general is the point at which it is no longer true; any specific man might be more injured by our reality than any specific woman. The supposedly liberatory Goddess of white feminist creation is based in the imagined mythic rather than in the material experience of our lives—and how often has what people imagine the feminine to be materially hurt women? This is not creating an image of Divinity that reflects women's experiences, it is the simple replacement of the imaginary father with the imaginary mother, with equal authoritarian force no less abusive than its male-coded form.

In her essay “Motherearth and the Megamachine: A Theology of Liberation in a Feminine, Somatic and Ecological Perspective”, Rosemary Radford Butler almost immediately describes proto-fascist movement as the enemy of women: “The reaction against and suppression of the Woman's Liberation Movement has been closely tied to reactionary cultural and political movements, and the emancipated woman has been the chief target of elitism, fascism, and neoconservatism of all kinds. The romantic movement traumatized Europe's reaction to the French Revolution, reinstated the traditional view of women in idealized form, while the more virulent blood-and-soil reactionaries of the nineteenth century expressed a more naked misogyny.” I concur. But she fails to learn her own lesson: the main thrust of her essay is that we

should all return what anthropologists and historians portray as a nature-oriented, holistic spirituality. This is exactly what the Volkische ideologues who promoted blood-and-soil strife called for; the two differ only in their beliefs about the role of women in such a society.<sup>f</sup> Her work is interesting in that it indicts civilization as a whole for its destruction of the wild, enclosure, and misogyny, but falls dramatically short in addressing those issues in our present reality, calling instead for a return to the natural. It is hypocritical to decry the Nazis from one side of your mouth while echoing their views from the other, even if you have replaced “Aryan men” with racially-nonspecific—but, given your lack of specificity and personal placement, probably white—women as your “natural” subject.

I call for a turning away from these issues of nature, essence, and the search for validation in a reconstruction of the Divine. Instead, I celebrate the occasional return of feminism to the material: to real solidarity, to internationalism and to local struggle. While we may find our individual spiritualities helpful in struggle, the thing itself must not be based in a mythology of the Divine, but in our shared, diverse experiences. If “Sisterhood is powerful,” as people found in their early experiences of consciousness-raising groups, let us use that power not only for self-directed empowerment, or for dressing up in the rituals we have stolen from others, but for actual liberation. And while I use “we” aspirationally, to evoke the sort of solidarity and community we would all like to see among feminists, let me be clear: this is a call to white cis feminists in particular. Refuse to become the oppressors you have long resisted, no matter how good the bribe.

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<sup>f</sup> In fact, Nazis were not above promising gifts of empowerment to women who cooperated with them when times were desperate; Goebbels made such a pledge in his “Total War” speech.

## the political

In hopes of moving through and out of the negative aspects of feminism towards its potential for freedom, I will begin with betrayal, move to solidarity, and end with revolt.

### *betrayal*

Mary Daly is one of the pioneers of radical feminism; her writing has been incredibly influential to the movement, if also quite controversial. While I will not attempt to cover her work in depth, I wish to compare two aspects of her politics that I find contradictory—her avowed rejection of patriarchal spirituality, and her intense transphobia.

In her 1971 essay “After the Death of God the Father: Women's Liberation and the Transformation of Women's Consciousness”, Daly reviews the accomplishments of the women's liberation movement around spirituality and proposes future work. She suggests that feminists have made an incomplete critique of patriarchal elements within Christianity to understand its call towards transcendence, which uses the idea of God to “legitimate oppression, particularly that of women. These are irredeemably anti-feminine and therefore antihuman.” The end of women's oppression, far from being necessarily atheist, could mean a greater closeness between humans and the Divine: “The becoming of women may not only be the doorway to deliverance from the omnipotent Father in all his disguises—a deliverance which secular humanism has passionately fought for—but also a doorway to something; that is, the beginning for many of a more authentic search for transcendence; that is, for God.” She argues that Christianity has divided the sexes and sought to assign activity and sin to men, and passivity and virtue to women—thus simultaneously disenfranchising men from their ability to be passive and/or virtuous, and women from their abilities to actively liberate themselves. “This emphasis upon the passive virtues, of course, has not challenged exploitativeness but supported it. Part of the syndrome is the prevailing notion of sin as an offense against those in power, or against ‘God’ (the two are often equated.)” She calls not only for women to take up their power, but for men to seek to free themselves from the chains of gendered expectations—importantly, she calls also for an extension of these analyses beyond the lines of gender: “The consciousness raising which is beginning among women is evoking a qualitatively new understanding of the subtle mechanisms which produce and destroy “the other”, and a consequent empathy with all of the oppressed. This gives grounds for the hope that their

emergence can generate a counterforce to the exploitative mentality which is destroying persons and the environment... The work of fostering religious consciousness which is explicitly incompatible with sexism will require an extraordinary degree of creative rage, love, and hope. ”

I am largely in concurrence with this essay's critique of Christianity. I am pleased by how her analysis understands men to also be, however differently, entrapped by gender, and by how she calls for the extension of one's raised consciousness to include understanding, solidarity, and “creative rage” in the de/construction of society. That appreciation and sense of connection makes her later horrifying, hateful attacks on trans women that much more shocking. This intimate betrayal on the part of cis feminists is very common, but still not easy to bear.

Daly's 1978 work *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* is most notable for the style in which it is written—a dreamy mix of non-standard spellings and capitalizations, pagan imagery, and in-depth coverage of various misogynist horrors—which, not incidentally, she mostly cites as occurring within non-white cultures. Mixed in with her outrage about “African genital mutilation: the unspeakable atrocities”, foot binding, and *suttee*, Daly manages to call out “transsexualism” eight times. In example: “Dionysus sometimes assumed a girl-like form. The phenomenon of the drag queen dramatically demonstrates such boundary violations. Like whites playing “black face”, he incorporates the oppressed role without being incorporated in it. ” She continues, following noted transphobe Janice Raymond: “The majority of transsexuals are “male to female”, while transsexed females basically function as tokens, and are used by the rulers of the transsexual empire to hide the real nature of the game... The surgeons and hormone therapists of the transsexual kingdom, in their effort to give birth, can be said to produce feminine persons. They cannot produce women. ”

Just as Sandy Stone answered Janice Raymond's accusations about the “Transsexual Empire” in her important piece “The Empire Strikes Back”, the gender studies scholar Susan Stryker has brilliantly answered and transcended Mary Daly's accusations of monstrosity in her piece “Letter to Doctor Frankenstein...” I will not attempt to recreate their work, nor am I capable of doing so. I wish to only briefly highlight some of Daly's most flagrant betrayals of her own politics.

The impulse to guard the garden of oppression is a strange one. Having come together and shared stories of common pain, “conscious” people often turn inwards—and become vicious to one another. Sometimes this is legitimate—hearing someone reflect your own pain back at you, then hearing them betray you in the next breath is painful, and deserves critique. Often, however, it means recreating the same power dynamics you are in struggle against: this is what happened for American cis feminists vis à vis trans women in the great wars of the 1970s and 1980s. Daly, Raymond, and others regard trans women as male pretenders: “*Like whites playing “black face”, he incorporates the oppressed role without being incorporated in it.*” Besides its offensive and invisibilizing equation of racism and alleged misogyny, this statement reflects a willful ignorance of the violent oppression trans women face, a violence statistically much more deadly than it is for the average cis woman. Additionally, why would anyone *want* to steal the oppressed role? For someone to out herself as a potential target of misogyny when she “need not” experience it in the most direct of ways (although living closeted is its own particular hell), her experience of womanhood may be, if anything, be particularly necessary—particularly essential, if you must. Daly makes no attempt to reflect on this, preferring instead to police the boundaries of womanhood. In doing so, she joins the ranks of patriarchal oppression, allying herself with her supposed enemies. While in her earlier essay “God the Father”, she called for feminists to welcome the Other, and to see Othering as a fundamental part of women's oppression, she makes no attempt to do so herself here.

Daly claims an essential knowledge of womanhood in her statement that doctors cannot produce women. I do not even disagree with her on that particular, because I believe womanhood is not dependent on surgeries or vaginas or estrogen levels. I know this from my experience as a trans person, from my solidarity with and love for particular trans feminine people, and from my political understanding that we are all collections of constructions, identities, experiences, and bodies. I know that being a woman is dependent far more on one's identity as such than on one's body and material experience; that trans feminine bodies are women's bodies, no matter how their bodies are constituted; and that trans women often live the material reality of struggling to survive the cutting edge of misogynist violence. It is a massive failure on the part of cis feminists like Daly that they are part of inflicting, rather than opposing, this misogyny.

Her practical wrongness about the function of trans men as “tokens” is interesting; most queers will tell you that, these days, there are more visible trans masculine people than trans feminine people... and that we take up far

more space, replicating the patterns of patriarchy. In my view, trans men do this not only because of our reproduction of learned masculinity (which in this culture is already always enclosed by patriarchy) but also because, sometimes, trans men implicitly feel themselves to be the exception to the rule—that because they grew up being perceived as and perhaps socialized as female, they cannot now transgress against women, need not hold themselves to the same standards as cis men. This problem is similar to the mistake Daly is making: it is the unconsciously held belief that, having once come to consciousness about one's own oppression, one cannot in turn oppress others. (I think that this is also near the heart of white feminist racism.) Transphobia against trans men also comes from this logic: in Patrice Jones' book *Aftershock: Confronting Trauma in a Violent World*, she makes the following wild claim:

Between 1910 and 1920, over five hundred thousand people in the United States “passed” into whiteness by changing their self-designated race. Nowadays, more and more young women—having learned what happens to girls in today's world—are literally turning themselves into men to protect themselves from violation. And, of course, the majority of us side with the butcher rather than risk being made into meat.

While, as I said, I want to hold trans men as accountable for their alliances with patriarchy as I do cis men, the idea that trans men transition only to gain male privilege is an expression of the same sad tendency to guard the garden of oppression (in this case, judging from Jones' self-definition, probably the lesbian community) as Daly's hatred of trans women. It is especially shameful in a work that purports to be a tool for people who have experienced trauma.

The comparison both authors make to racial boundary-crossing is concerning. It is no doubt an inheritance of the white feminist tendency to compare the struggles of women and people of color. I think it is a little worse than that, however, a kind of peculiar fascination with the transgression of boundaries, the unresolved horror at the heart of fearing the Other. Daly compares female genital mutilation/female circumcision to the genital surgery some trans women choose to have:

It is interesting to compare these attempts to feminize women [via FGM] with the feminization of male-to-constructed-female transsexuals. The latter, who consider themselves to be “women” (referring to “other” women as “native women”<sup>g</sup>) undergo operations which remove the

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<sup>g</sup> In my many years of experience within the trans community, I have never heard

testicles and penis and give them artificial vaginas, but no clitoris. Both of these mutilating attempts at feminization receive a large amount of legitimation by phallocracy.

What she means by “a large amount of legitimation by phallocracy” in the case of trans women, I can barely imagine—does the daily bread of murder, hatred and marginalization inflicted upon trans women count as legitimation in her eyes? In any case, her deployment of the white cis gaze upon genitals under the guise of pseudo-scientific “interest” is disturbing. She covers *suttee*, Chinese foot binding, and African female genital mutilation all with the same sort of horrified fascination she directs at American trans women. For Daly, the *essence* of being a woman seems to be scrutinizing other women for signs of abnormality while using herself as the standard.

### *solidarity*

Starhawk has been a member of Pagan and activist communities since the 1980s. She has written several influential books; I examined just one, *Dancing the Dark*. Starhawk's work is centered around the healing of self in conjunction with healing of the world. She believes that our society is sick and our earth is endangered because of harmful views we hold of ourselves, and that one can use Pagan magic and activism to change all three. Her work transcends several of my critiques of white feminist practioners of nature spiritualities, though not all of them.

Starhawk argues that our current social situation is one of *estrangement* (perhaps what Marx would call *alienation*) of people from the material world; her alternate proposal relies upon a rejection of duality. Under Christianity, “flesh, nature, woman, and sexuality [are] identified with the Devil and the forces of evil. God was envisioned as male—uncontaminated by the processes of birth, nurturing, growth, menstruation, and the decay of the flesh. He was removed from this world into a transcendent realm of spirit somewhere else.” More fundamentally, she sees “the good guys/girls against the bad guys/girls” as one of the basic frameworks of estrangement: “Light is idealized and dark is devalued in this story that permeates our culture. The war of dark and light is the metaphor that perpetuates racism... The light/dark metaphor was the underlying theme of Nazi propaganda... The same splitting of light and dark buttresses the splitting of spirit (light) and body (dark), of male and female, of culture and nature. The split becomes the metaphor of hierarchy... it supports power-over. Beware of organizations

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such a thing, and am inclined to think Daly invented it.



that proclaim their devotion to the light without embracing, bowing to the dark; for when they idealize half the world they must devalue the rest.” She is expressing a fundamentally anti-essentialist perspective here: essentialism relies upon duality, the splitting process by which othering is made possible.

Starhawk envisions a healthy Pagan spiritual understanding as one that unites the spiritual and the physical and defies gendered understandings of corresponding concepts. This framework would oppose the dualist estrangement that enables domination and othering, drawing instead upon a unified identity and worldview. “We are most familiar with power-over, with structures of domination and control that derive ultimately from a worldview that removes sacred value from the earth and from the cycles of birth and death. In this book, I identify a different sort of power I call power-from-within, akin to the root meaning of power as *ability*, and derived from the recognition that each of us has immanent sacred value.” This definition of immanence amounts more to an argument for personal autonomy in Starhawk's work than as an essentialist call for refusing action and transformation, as it did in Rosemary Butler's work.

Starhawk uses gendered and personified symbols of worship, Goddess and God, and feels that this gendering is important as an answer to patriarchy: “The female image of divinity does not... provide a justification for the oppression of men. The female, who gives birth to the male, includes the male in a way that male divinities cannot include the female.” This “giving birth” metaphor is, sadly, is body-dependent. However, she explicitly rejects the worst possibilities of Goddess worship: “...I recognize that there is a danger in the use of any symbol—that people will forget the principles it represents. The Goddess could be taken as an object of external worship in a context no less hierarchical and oppressive than that of any religion of patriarchy. Let us be clear that when I say *Goddess* I am not talking about a being somewhere outside of this world, nor am I proposing a new belief system. I am talking about choosing an attitude: choosing to take this living world, the people and creatures on it, as the ultimate meaning and purpose of life, to see the world, the earth, and our lives as sacred.” While she continues to rely on gendered and body-dependent metaphors throughout her book, she tends to complicate or differently slant them, as when she describes how, in her view, worshipping a Maternal force necessarily means supporting access to abortions. Importantly, she critiques the family as the smallest unit of oppression, rather than uncritically drawing on it as a site of feminine exaltation, as did Valerie Saiving.

Starhawk falls occasionally into what might be considered Noble Savage rhetoric: “The room in which I sit... is different from a house belonging to one of the Dogon people in Africa, where every space has a ritual, symbolic meaning as part of a human body, and different from a tepee of the Plains Indians, built to be transported as part of the cycles of migration. This room is an object in a world of separate, isolated objects. The Dogon house and the tepee are sets of relationships in a world of interwoven processes.” Although social understandings do, obviously, shape our material environment, and capitalism is dependent on alienation, from a worker's perspective the modern American home is just as much a “set of relationships in a world of interwoven processes”, not fundamentally different from these other structures—just existing within an atmosphere of outright coercion. Starhawk is here lazily relying upon the liberal assumption that non-white or non-capitalist lifestyles are fundamentally superior. For the most part, though, I feel that she pays respectful attention rather than appropriates in her references to indigenous cultures, although my judgment, as a non-indigenous person, is necessarily limited.

Rather ominously, Starhawk notes that “In Europe, the old cultures rise again... The empires come apart at the seams.” She makes positive reference to a series of pre-Empire white cultures, with seemingly no idea of the last time older white cultures were evoked in Europe in terms of resisting Empire—this after just, pages earlier, describing her actual San Francisco neighborhood with pleasure in its diversity, which I find a more inspiring and useful reference point. She continues: “In the Southwest of the United States, in the Black Hills, the Indian tribes still fight to survive. Perhaps it is time for all of us to *reconsider our loyalties, to consider what might further human survival.* [emphasis mine] Our work is not just sawing the legs off the ladders, but building the structures that replace them.” Probably what she means here is supporting indigenous sovereignty, rather than anything more like fascism, but she does so fairly uncritically. Still, I think Starhawk is speaking in good faith, if foolishly.

Starhawk's model of a ritual circle begins with all of the participants focusing on their goals for changing their lives and the world for the better, and ends with everyone voicing a step they will take for advancing their goals. This is already more oriented towards action than most of what we have previously considered; also, it means that each religious practice is more constituted of the needs and experiences of its participants than of attendance to a pre-agreed set of principles. In this way it resembles a reflective meeting to accomplish individual and community goals more than a religious duty. Furthermore, Starhawk's spirituality and life approach is in general one of political action. She describes doing various rituals as means of practicing conflict against various forces, largely

nuclear bases. She speaks of this through Goddess metaphor:

In this action we became Persephone, as we were dragged off by the forces of patriarchy to do our time in the underworld and then emerge again. We became Demeter, who sits at the gate, who rends her clothes and says, “This cannot go on!” “It is categories in the mind and guns in their hands that keep us enslaved.” Somehow, facing the guns in their hands makes clear to us which categories in our minds are their agents...

...I have grown used to thinking of policemen as my friends. Here, however, it is very clear that the powers of the police, the courts, and the military are at one with the nuclear power industry, with all the forms of power that threaten to poison these oaks, this ocean, our living human bodies. That is obvious when the police have dragged me away and locked me up—oblivious to my sore wrists and skinned knees. Not that I mind having skinned knees—it adds to that sense of being a child again, even though the stakes here are not playful, but too real.

...here, frustration is gone. I feel like a victim released by a vampire—my blood is my own again. What has freed me is action. I have acted with my body, using not just words, but my whole being I have become fully a part of this community of resistance, putting forth effort and taking risks. To be present with skills and patience I have for listening, for evoking feelings, for soothing hurts, for saying the right thing, and for knowing when to shut up is healing; *it is the only spiritual discipline that makes sense to me in a nuclear age.* [emphasis mine]

Starhawk intertwines her spiritual, political, and personal action such that each supports the other; conflictual action is not left out of the equation, as it so often is by the privileged. She is aware of her privilege, also. She describes dancing naked with two hundred women in jail from a protest, and the uneasy mix of exhilaration and fear she experiences around deliberately performing such an act while in jail. She reflects:

...we dance, knowing that we are allowed this as a privilege, as so much of what has been good in our lives is a privilege; knowing that women who are in jail alone, who are not white, who do not have a movement and a legal team behind them, whose stories are not of interest to the newspapers, cannot dance, cannot go naked, may be raped and brutalized—not smiled at—by the guards. Yet we dance, because this is, after all, what we are fighting for: this life, these bodies, breasts, wombs, this smell of flesh; this joy; this

freedom—that it continue, that it prevail.

Although I am not aware of specific work Starhawk has done in solidarity with prisoners, this is, at least, acknowledgement of their struggle. While I think Starhawk's framework, understanding, and impulse towards action are all stronger than those I have previously reviewed, I can only hope that her understanding contributes to a real widening of solidarity, one that destroys borders of privilege between people more than it strengthens them through the use of identity.

### *revolt*

One last white feminist who evokes the Goddess: Monique Wittig. She was foundational to French materialist feminism, and was publically anti-essentialist before that critique entered mainstream feminist discourse. She joins these two lines of thought by arguing that gender is a social construction, but one reinforced by material oppression that tends to fall along gendered lines—although those lines are fluid. She joined many other less academic feminists in critiquing essentialism in her essay “One is Not Born A Woman”, a title drawn from Simone de Beauvoir's originary work *The Second Sex*. Famously, she says that a heterosexist society is necessary for the maintenance of gender, since the idea of “woman” as a deviation from the idea of “man” flows from this created oppressive duality; she argues that lesbians are not, therefore, properly “women.”<sup>h</sup> She therefore suggests the radical abolition of traditional gendered understanding.

What does “feminist” mean? Feminist is formed with the word “femme”, “woman”, and means: someone who fights for women. For many of us it means someone who fights for women as a class and for the disappearance of this class. For many others it means someone who fights for woman and her defense—for the myth, then, and its re-enforcement.

She observes that essentialism is also necessary for the production of race in our society:

...what we take for the cause or origin of oppression is in fact only the *mark* imposed by the oppressor: the “myth of woman, plus its material effects and manifestations in the appropriated consciousness and bodies of women. Thus, this mark does not predate oppression: Collette Guillaumin has shown

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<sup>h</sup> Puar would no doubt argue that, while this was the case for a time, white lesbians who have agreed to participate in capitalist America have now been welcomed into heterosexist society.

that before the socioeconomic reality of black slavery, the concept of race did not exist, at least not in its modern meaning, since it was applied to the lineage of families. However, now, race, exactly like sex, is taken as an “immediate given”, a “sensible given”, “physical features,” belonging to a natural order. But what we believe to be a physical and direct perception is only a sophisticated and mythic construction, an “imaginary formation”, which reinterprets physical features (in themselves as neutral as any others but marked by the social system) through the network of relationships in which they are perceived. (They are seen as *black*, therefore they *are* black; they are seen as *women*, therefore they *are* women. But before being *seen* that way, they first had to be *made* that way.)

Here Wittig does not quite fall into the classic white feminist trap of invisibilizing black women by comparing black and female experience, as if the two could not be shared by the same person, but she skates perilously close by not explicitly acknowledging it. Knowing that the rationale for power acting upon bodies is a socially constructed one is not enough to prevent one from doing the same. Still, her highlighting of constructed difference is useful.

Wittig’s novel *Les Guérillères*, published in 1969, is a revolutionary and romantic call to erase our predicates... and has been greatly misunderstood as a text that affirms essentialism. It is the disconnected story of a violent war against patriarchy by—from the view of the English translation—women. It takes the form of dreamy prose, lists of women’s names mixed with paragraphs that convey information in the form “The women say...” However, here at this very fundamental level, lies an important translation error. Wittig intentionally wrote her book with the French pronoun “elles”, a gender-neutral pronoun for which the closest English equivalent is “they”; she strongly objected to the translator’s use of “the women” instead.<sup>i</sup> From Wittig’s essay “The Mark of Gender”:

When *elles* is turned into the women the process of universalization is destroyed. All of a sudden, *elles* stopped being mankind. ...Not only was my undertaking with the collective pronoun *elles* lost, but another word was introduced, the word women appearing obsessively throughout the text, and it is one of those gender-marked words mentioned earlier which I never use in French. For me it is the equivalent of slave, and in fact, I have actively opposed its use whenever possible.

While her equation of “woman” and “slave” is, again, problematic, Wittig is

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i Nevertheless, I have abided by the English translation’s use of “the women” in my quotations.

doing something important here. It is not just that she was trying to convey that men as well as women were rebelling against patriarchy; she specifically describes a few instances of such gender treachery:

A woman sings... At a given moment, interrupting her song, she falls down, she writhes about, she is racked by sob. At once other cries other sobs are heard. Behind the trees they discover a young man, prostrate, trembling in every limb, cheeks salt with tears, full of grace and beauty. Taking him in their arms, the women bear him to the side of the young weeping woman, applauding when they recognize each other and embrace. Then they express their satisfaction. They inform the young man that he is the first to have joined them in their struggle. They all embrace him. One of the women brings him a rifle, saying that she will teach him to handle it after the celebration they prepare in his honor.

But Wittig's larger point is that this is a rebellion of people against patriarchy, all people, and therefore means the abolition of gender, which is always a marker of difference—the line that perpetuates an ongoing war.

The women address the young men in these terms, now that you understand we have been fighting as much for you as for ourselves. In this war, which was also yours, you have taken part. Today, together, let us repeat as our slogan that all traces of violence must disappear from this earth, then the sun will be honey-colored and music good to hear. The young men applaud and shout with all their might. They have brought their arms. The women bury them at the same time as their own saying, let there be erased from human memory the longest most murderous war it has ever known, the last possible war in history. They wish the survivors, both male and female, love strength youth, so that they may form a lasting alliance that no future dispute can compromise. One of the women begin to sing, Like unto ourselves/men who open their mouths to speak/a thousand thanks to those who have understood our language/and not having found it excessive/have joined with us to transform the world.

The people invoke the names of several goddesses of war, from different cultures—Amaterasu, Cihuacoatl, Eristikos, Minerva—as they prepare to fight. In example: “They say, how to decide that an event is worthy of remembrance? Must Amaretasu herself advance on the forecourt of the temple, her face shining, blinding the eyes of those who, prostrate, put their foreheads to the ground and dare not lift their heads? ...Must the rays from her slanting mirror set fire to the ground beneath the feet of the women who have come to pay homage to the sun goddess, the greatest of the goddesses? Must her anger be

exemplary?” This kind of gnomic, prophetic repetition is typical of the book's style and topic: a fantastical war set in a long-ago-and-far-away. For me, this fictionalization, this blatant construction, makes these references to archetypal goddesses not only acceptable but moving. The mythology is all of one part; goddesses have not here been appropriated to prop up someone's thesis, or for an individual's personal identity. Rather, they are invoked as part of a common, presently-created, mythology of rebellion.

The people in Wittig's novel also frequently discuss “female” anatomy, and use it as a reference point for their experiences and struggle. While this is far from my favorite rhetorical device, the following passage shows their collective movement through and away from such references, and towards a generalization of struggle.

The women say, the men have kept you at a distance, they have supported you, they have put you on a pedestal, constructed with an essential difference. They say, men in their way have adored you like a goddess or else burned you at their stakes or else relegated you to service in their backyards. They say, in doing so they have always in their speech dragged you in the dirt. They say, in speaking they have possessed violated taken subdued humiliate you to their hearts' content. They say, oddly enough what they have exalted in their words as an essential difference is a biological variation. They say, they have described you as they described the races they called inferior. They say, yes, these are the same domineering oppressors, the same masters who have said that negroes and women do not have a heart spleen liver in the same place as their own, that difference of sex difference of colour signify inferiority, their own right to domination and appropriation. They say, yes, these are the same domineering oppressors who have written of negroes and women that they are universally cheats hypocrites tricksters liars shallow greedy faint-hearted, that their thinking is intuitive and illogical, that nature is what speaks most loudly in them, et cetera. They say, yes, these are the same domineering oppressors who sleep crouched over their money bags to protect their wealth and who tremble with fear when night comes.

This passage points out that the war on patriarchy is a war on essentialism—that essentialism is directed primarily along gendered and raced lines. Feminists who fearfully guard the garden of oppression fail to see that their opponents—when their opponents are pointing out their racism and transphobia, anyway—are only calling them further down their shared political trajectory; not invaders, not occupiers, not appropriators, but comrades asking for camaraderie in turn. Wittig's novel, a lyrical ode to what it might mean to revolt, illustrates that it is better to consciously make things up than to appeal to such broken kinds of authenticity.

## Part II. Difference and Sameness in Relationship to Land

“The field of readings in tension with each other is also part of the point. Eco-feminism and the non-violent direct action movement have been based on struggles over differences, not on identity. There is hardly a need for affinity groups and their endless process if sameness prevailed.”

—Donna Haraway

Derrick Jensen calls for us to “listen to the land” in the title of his collected essays and interviews about ecological devastation and struggle. Despite its apparent benevolence, I find this a problematic call. Using the natural landscape to justify one’s philosophy imposes human concepts and interpretations (most often from the dominant culture) onto that landscape. This tends to reinforce misanthropic and dualistic viewpoints, decentering the idea that humans and our creations are components of and participants within ecology. In justifying their interpretations, people like Derrick Jensen, Lierre Kieth, and others also tend to use (anthropologists’ ideas about) indigenous people’s lifeways as both a model and a justification for their own politics: the brown Other becomes a filter for the white relationship to nature. This is no less a continuation of colonialism than the green capitalism these radicals revile. Deep ecologist methodology also tends to reinforce problematic ideas of historicity, anti-modernism, place, and ethnicity as sites of veridiction and authenticity. As many Leftists—as well as white nationalists—become interested in “going back to the land” in projects which run the gamut from eco-tourism to homesteading to white-only land projects, it becomes vital for us to question the role of whiteness in such projects. We must ask what a realistic, and anti-essentialist relationship to land may look like, and find our way towards a practice of solidarity with human and non-human struggles alike. For white people, who have inherited a cultural legacy of enforcing their own dominance through land seizure, genocide, and environmental devastation, this may prove a challenge—but, luckily, there is no *essential* relationship between the past and the present, only the weight of history.

Towards this project, Donna Haraway calls for a reorientation: to form, following Trinh, an “in/appropriate” relationship to nature, to emphasize our degrees of difference and relation as parts of an ecosystem. Sara Ahmed’s work around queer phenomenology is also relevant to this question. In thinking through what it means to live on land, whether urban or rural, I want to find a way that is ethically rich and oriented towards struggle, and yet avoids crypto-fascist mystification. I propose components of Bookchin’s



philosophy of social ecology, practices of indigenous solidarity, Anna Tsing's analysis of *contaminated diversity*, and the prioritization of ecological relationship in our analysis. I want a struggle in relationship with the whole world, one that exists within a historical and ecological context... but which defies those bounds as part of its own movement towards liberation. There are other worlds than these.

*deep ecology and eco-feminism*

Deep ecology is the child of social ecology, which we shall investigate later. It is called so to highlight its opposition to “shallow” ecology, which focuses on stewardship and conservation of “natural resources” for human use. Instead, deep ecology asks us to value the wild for its sake. It prioritizes the interconnectedness of all things—not just humans, but also not just living things—all things that are not man-made. It places higher importance on this overall system than on the individuals that inhabit it, and urges those individuals to identify with the whole over the parts; “the world is your body.” Deep ecologists are critical of civilization, which they describe as the source of the current wholesale destruction of the natural environment; sometimes this critique extends all the way back to the beginnings of agriculture. They often also describe patriarchy (or even masculinity) as root problems in both ecological destruction and human social violence.

While I appreciate the deep ecologist emphasis on life for its own sake, as opposed to the human use for it, I find most other elements in this approach disturbing. For one, the emphasis on the wild—I do not think it is easy to say that any part of the world is truly wild, undisturbed by human (or even specifically Western) influences, uncontaminated by chemicals, etc. The sorts of ecologists who tend to dichotomize purity and wilderness with contamination and civilization often adopt the most problematic manifestations of essentialism. For example, Jane Caputi, whose work deals primarily with the exploitation of the “female body” by advertisers, serial killers, and surgeons, says that “[w]hat is acted out on the female body parallels larger practices of domination, fragmentation, and conquest against the earth body, which is being polluted, strip-mined, deforested, and cut up into parcels of private property.” She sees this as a manifestation of the Western tendency to Other, and she has a point. Usefully, she discusses the ways in which the working class (and people of color, I would add) are depicted as “closer to nature” to make them yet another resource to be exploited.

But Caputi, like many deep ecologists, does not refrain from embracing the idea of *the natural as the feminine*. Her work calls for women to identify themselves with nature, to see their oppression as the oppression of the earth, and to disavow civilization as well as patriarchy as their enemies on this basis. While this is probably intended as reclamation, I do not see how accepting the tendency of Western patriarchy to dichotomize and equate men with civilization and women with nature is a gesture of resistance. Rather, I see it furthering violence against women, particularly women who are Othered in multiple ways at once—queer women, women of color, and trans women. It is used to caricature these women as even *more* natural, producing images of the Latina woman who is in touch with amorphously invoked ancient traditions of motherhood, sexuality and earthliness; the lesbian who is conducting ancient Sapphic rites of matriarchy; the trans woman who is made acceptable only via calling upon indigenous traditions about Two Spirit people. Or, they are *excluded* from nature: the black inner-city woman who is too “urban” and trivial to be taken seriously as part of an ecology; the lesbian who is an aberrant symptom of modernity, who would not exist in a Social Darwinist world; the trans woman who might choose to modify her body with the aid of medical intervention not previously available is either a technological monster to be feared, or a traitorous man only masquerading as a woman, intent on doing “real women” harm. This analysis also commonly confuses men or masculinity with patriarchy, a distinction that should remain clear—or is half of the population utterly doomed, unable to resist cooperating with the social force that also oppresses them? This equation, and all others so general, do us nothing but harm.

Even if some points about the dualistic eco-feminist critique feel useful, they are too often generalized. Dr. Huey-Li Li, in her essay “A Cross-Cultural Critique of Ecofeminism”, points out that most Western eco-feminists assume that their analyses of Western civilization apply to all civilization. In asserting that the oppressions of women and nature are linked by patriarchy’s tendency to exploit, dominate and consume, Western eco-feminists ignore the fact that, in traditional Chinese culture, both misogyny and respect for nature are common. “Consider, for example, the puzzling fact that the absence of transcendent dualism in Chinese society does not preclude women’s being oppressed. There are no parallels between Chinese people’s respectful attitude towards nature and the inferior social position of women. The association of women and nature is not a cross-cultural phenomenon, since nature as a whole is not identified with women in Chinese society.” Li says that the modern Chinese exploitation of nature is rooted in recent economic pressures—an analysis that could be easily applied to Western

environmental destruction, as well—while misogyny has deeper roots. As Chinese civilization is quite old, one might continue to argue that misogyny and civilization are necessarily linked while keeping China in mind, but its example rather neatly disproves the necessity of environmental destruction to the civilization/patriarchy paradigm. One might more easily argue that the economic pressures of expansion and imperialism facilitate both women's oppression as reproducers of the working and fighting class and eco-destruction as wilderness is razed and built over by warfare and settlement... but such Marxist analysis is usually rejected by deep ecologists. The reactionary eco-feminist analysis that accepts the woman/nature patriarchy/civilization dualism propagated by those in power is therefore not only self-defeating, but an example of hegemonic colonialism.

The Western eco-feminist viewpoint often, Li points out, relies on the idea of a prior matriarchal culture of natural harmony against which men are rebelling, and claims that this woman/nature/before trope is the key to solving both misogyny and environmental destruction. It bears mentioning that there is no record of a global matriarchal society preceding patriarchy. The reality is more complicated—there are currently extant matriarchal societies, like the Mosuo and the Minangkabau; there are indigenous practices that seem misogynist to white Western viewers; there are ancient traditions of patriarchy that continue to inform Western society today—and so on. It is counterproductive to evoke the imaginary of the peaceful garden where women and “female values” reigned supreme before the Fall, and its counterpoint of the modern, entirely male-dominated society in which women are the first and only victims, never complicit in enforcing gendered oppression. Such imaginaries are deeply rooted in patriarchal Abrahamic traditions. Moreover, the fascist movements we have discussed in previous sections serve as a warning against glorifying the past and seeking its resurrection in the bodies of the living.

Nor is the problem of eco-destruction rooted in gendered biology, as some would have it. Li observes that “men’s inability to gestate[sic] does not universally lead to the pursuit of transcendence.” Therefore, eco-destruction and patriarchy must not be solely based in a meta-Freudian resentment of the womb, or anything similar. The fact that men have historically had more power than women in dominant societies, and therefore have performed more acts of environmental destruction and warfare, does not make those acts essentially impossible for women—in the metapatriarchy we live under today, women often participate in both. That does not erase the history of patriarchy that haunts us, it merely means its manifestations are more

complex than most eco-feminists acknowledge. And, even when eco-feminists coming from the sort of analysis Li is critiquing are doing their best to be polite about gendered difference, they tend to fail. Although Caputi includes trans people as token members of nature in her defense of the gendered concept “Mother Earth”, she does not hesitate to multiply cite the famous transphobe Mary Daly. These sorts of well-intentioned blind spots give the lie to her thesis—you cannot simply say you are not intending to offend anyone when the allies you call upon to support your truth-claims are partisans of oppression.

Deep ecologists who equate masculinity with patriarchy and patriarchy with civilization indict all women who willingly participate in civilization as gender traitors, and all men, whether civilization has made them net victors or victims in ways beyond their gender status, as the root enemy. Lierré Keith:

The very creation myth of Western civilization tells men to dominate, to conquer, to go forth and multiply. No hunter-gatherer is told by god to wilfully overshoot the landbase, and no marginally rational person would listen to such a god. But that is what we are up against. This is a culture of profound entitlement, based on a masculine violation imperative. That imperative includes violating the sexual boundaries of women and children; the biological boundaries of rivers and forests; the genetic boundaries of other species; and ultimately, the physical boundaries of the atom itself.

The ruling religion of this planet is called patriarchy. We will not save life on this earth until we dismantle masculinity. You will be punished for saying that out loud.

Here, by the subtle art of semiotic transmutation, Keith has equated Western civilization to patriarchy, patriarchy to masculinity, masculinity to sexual violence, sexual violence to environmental destruction, environmental destruction to biology and physics—and she links those back to Western civilization and masculinity. This overly simplistic equation does us harm. How can we instead practically combat the destructive realities of the present, and acknowledge our own varied levels of responsibility and guilt in its creation, with respect to historical reality, material context, and lived intention/self-knowledge? How can we use science and technology to restore the environment, and dismantle patriarchy in the service of people of all genders? What is the revolutionary struggle for freedom that does not rely on an appeal to mythological constructs of the natural?

In a reduction that may still serve as a useful contrast with Keith's reduction:

...Bookchin mentions an exhibit on the environment at the New York Museum of Natural History in the seventies that showed different types of pollution. The last exhibit, labeled “The Most Dangerous Animal on Earth”, consisted simply of a mirror. Bookchin remembers a school teacher trying to explain the meaning of this particular feature of the exhibit to a black child who was standing in front of the mirror. It is irritating and irresponsible, Bookchin says, to blame that black child for the earth's pollution.

*social ecology*

Murray Bookchin was among the first white Americans to take environmental destruction seriously; his book about the issue was published just months before Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, which met with far more popular success. An anarchist who came from a background of class and anti-fascist struggle, Bookchin saw eco-destruction as rooted in the social structures of hierarchy and domination: not stemming from civilization, as deep ecologists would have it, but traveling in company throughout history with patriarchy, racism, the state, capitalism, and homophobia. Where one exists, the others tend to develop; while this often happens within various civilizations, it is not limited to them. While Bookchin was highly critical of our current society and all of its destructive actions, he did not see the solution as the abolition of civilization, or a return to hunter-gatherer practices. Instead, he proposed the foundation of a new society based in the principles of anarchism: ecological and social equality through mutual aid. He called this philosophy *social ecology*.

Deep ecology departed from social ecology, and Bookchin had no tolerance for these disobedient children. He remained a lifelong fierce critic of deep ecologists, arguing that their tendency to blame civilization for all ills was both a willful blindness to types of societies that do not tend to create harm and a distraction from the actual forces at play. Never one to shy from social conflict, he routinely tangled with his colleagues in both environmental and anarchist circles, pointing out both their occasional tendencies towards fascism and frequent excursions into mysticism, which he found enragingly counterproductive. Nevertheless, Bookchin was the first to propose many of their shared basic tenets—for example, that the separation of humans from nature, and the subjugation of nature, led directly to the subjugation of some humans by others. As Janet Biehl, another social ecologist, puts it, in

a society oriented around the principles of social ecology, “humanity would cease to be divided against the nonhuman world—and against itself. Indeed, in free nature, human society would be nonhierarchical and cooperative. Society’s ‘completeness’ would be based in the ‘completeness’ of humans in their self-fulfillment as rational, free, and self-conscious beings.”

Bookchin also defended technology as a basically neutral tool, arguing that its destructive uses are a manifestation of the social forces in power, rather than something essential to technology itself. While he believed we ought to dramatically change our use of technology to live in ecological harmony, he thought technology was as potentially useful for liberation as it is for destruction and oppression. Indeed, Bookchin argued that modern technology has perhaps given humans a new advantage in practicing social ecology—in a technologically-enabled post-scarcity society, in which resources are distributed equally and according to need without the sorting system of capitalism and hierarchies, we will have more time for pro-social practices than ever before, liberated from the need to toil endlessly, yet able to live in structures other than hunter-gatherer societies. Bookchin tends to ignore the non-neutrality of currently-existing technologies, developed for capitalist interests and at best subverted for liberatory ends—but his point about the value of technologies developed by free societies stands, in my opinion. What could happen—what does happen, in salvage and ecologically-centered communities of exchange—when technology is developed from the standpoint of community provision and respect for other forms of life, rather than capitalist gain and resource exploitation?

Bookchin’s position stems directly from anarchism. He argues that environmental destruction—while it is certainly facilitated by disrespect for non-human life—is rooted in economic demands, rather than in the pathology of western civilization that deep ecologists so passionately evoke. Certainly, living under the demands of capitalism, assimilating its hierarchies and the demands of power into our brains and hearts from the time we are small, might be described as a kind of pathology, one it might be impossible to recover from in one or many lifetimes. The same must be said of patriarchy, racism, and many other manifestations of essentialism that serve power. But Bookchin’s analysis calls for us to change our social structures from where we stand today—in a way that realistically grapples with the needs of seven billion people—rather than urging us to “return to the wild”: that is, for white Americans who can afford it to appropriate the lifeways of indigenous people who have already been murdered, colonized, and oppressed on a daily basis by a capitalist, racist society. He also speaks to the exciting possibilities

offered by urban societies where people of many cultural backgrounds intermingle: possibilities which are dear to my heart, but are apparently worse than meaningless to those who desire a return to the wild... presumably “naturally” segregated by location and lack of transportation. Both Bookchin and his opponents ignore the many centuries of indigenous movement and cultural exchange on several continents, a phenomena inconveniently neither urban nor misanthropic enough to suit either party.

Biehl takes an explicitly anti-essentialist stance in her critique of eco-feminism: “In reality, as distinguished from patriarchal mystifications, men and women are not ontological ‘opposites.’ They are, in fact, *differentiations* in humanity’s potentiality to achieve a rich variegated whole.” This standpoint points towards a celebration of multitudinous gendered difference, rather than the policing of gendered lines often found within deep ecology. Nor is it without a material-historical context: “If it is true that ‘men make their own history, but they do not make it... under circumstances of their own choosing’, as Marx once said, neither do women... We need the best faculties we have—our knowledge of nature, and the understanding of what we should be—rather than regressive myths of ‘oneness’ that carry us back to a past we should have long outgrown.” Here, Biehl rejects the eco-feminist notion that the mythic past *should* unite us, thus homogenizing us and erasing difference, even if it *can*. “Admitting ‘woman = nature’ social structures that enforce patricentricity into a movement that calls itself feminist is a Trojan horse.” She also offers a critique of consensus and an argument for democracy, as large-scale consensus often relies upon pre-existing power structures, unspoken coercion and the erasure of difference. Those who demand consensus, she says, create a “quasi-authoritarian imperative” that is certain to work against diversity and the preservation of dissent. This feeling is familiar to many of us who have participated in groups that use the consensus model, and is an important caution to those who advocate consensus as more than a tactic, as liberation itself. However, I do not find it a justification for the *explicit* tyranny of the majority under democracy.

While I feel far more affinity for social ecology’s proposals than for those of the deep ecologists, it is not without problems. Bookchin and Biehl are both heavily nostalgic for the Athenian commons, the “birthplace of democracy.” Neither offers an explicit critical analysis of that society’s reliance in misogyny and slavery, although it perhaps underlies their belief that technology is necessary to give everyone the possibility of practicing democracy. Still, if so, it is a foundation that tends to legitimize misogyny and slavery as a necessity of the times, rather than portraying it as always unacceptable. Bookchin

and Biehl only rarely draw upon non-European societies for inspiration or examples of positive practices, and rely upon a progressivist idea of society, one that implies we are “evolving” out of animality and towards our fullest humanity—an unhelpfully linear conceptualization that, as voiced by white people living in twentieth-century America, is necessarily founded in racist colonization. Their very conception of politics as the most important human project tends to separate humans from the rest of the world—which itself serves to reactionarily *create* the “nature” called upon by deep ecologists, by contrast. This is despite their own critique of how the (usually gendered) separation of the private and public spheres of life—usually along gendered lines—was necessitated by the evolution of the Other, the stranger who could not be dealt with as family. They tend to argue that we must preserve democracy as the healthiest way of dealing with strangers, rather than abolishing strangeness by abolishing the opposite repressive structure: the family. As Biehl says, “...paradoxically, ‘caring’ is remarkably compatible with hierarchy. An ethic of motherly care thus does not by *itself* pose a threat to hierarchy and domination.” With no strangers, no family, only people, how much harm in the world would disappear?

Furthermore, Bookchin’s suggestion that we might be able to gradually evolve towards a free society via the practice of “libertarian municipalism” (a concept he developed late in his career) has been heavily attacked by other anarchists; anarchists tend not to believe in the possibility of gradual transformation, and often point to the betrayal of the Soviet state, which did anything but “fade away.” Bookchin, at his worst, is longing for a return to a different kind of garden—not the Edenic matriarchal society of Derrick Jensen’s fantasies, but the Athenian *polis*, without regard for the Athenian *oikos*—the household.

If we, as anarchists, are against the state and all forms of economy, we must destroy them both. We want neither enforced domestic labor without rights or recognition, nor citizenship, the human community meeting to debate while our society is held up by living caryatids. We demand something entirely different, something dirtier and more joyful.



**misanthropic identification with nature  
vs. the joy of the in/appropriate Other<sup>j</sup>**

“Nature is for me, and I venture for many of us who are planetary foetuses gestating in the amniotic effluvia of terminal industrialism and militarism, one of those impossible things characterized... as that which we cannot desire.”

—Donna Haraway

In a strange twist, the deep ecologist Lierre Keith famously argued that transgender people are impossible and offensive... from an anti-essentialist perspective.

Gender is no different [from race]. It is a class condition created by a brutal arrangement of power. I can't fathom how mutilating people's bodies to fit an oppressive power arrangement is frankly anything but a human rights violation. And men insisting that they are women is insulting and absurd.

There is no such thing as 'woman' or 'man' outside of patriarchal social relations. These are not biological conditions—they are socially created, by violence in the end. If I can't be a rich person born in a poor person's body, then I can't be a woman born in a man's body. Not unless you are going to argue that man and woman are biological or essential conditions. The whole point of feminism is that they are neither; gender is social to the roots, and those roots are soaked in women's blood.

So if Keith agrees that gender is a social construction, why can't it be fluid? Why must we be so married to the conditions we choose to resist—isn't class mobility faintly possible, and isn't class struggle a reality? Some trans people (often in the attempt to gain greater access to medical services and civil rights through appealing to the idea of transness as a medical condition) do frame things in biological terms—but they are outnumbered by those who see gender as a social construction, while biological essentialism is far more often a tool of transphobic cisfeminists. Keith is framing her transphobia as anti-essentialist only as a tactical gesture; by positing the strawman of biological gender as the basis of trans solidarity, she disallows for anti-essentialist trans-allied understandings. The organization with which Keith is affiliated, Deep Green Resistance, has the corresponding, possibly more offensive position

<sup>j</sup> The concept of the “in/appropriated other” is borrowed from Trinh Minh-ha's work *She, The Inappropriated Other*, via Haraway.

on their website:

We are not “transphobic.” We do, however, have a disagreement about what gender is. Genderists think that gender is natural, a product of biology. Radical feminists think gender is social, a product of male supremacy. Genderists think gender is an identity, an internal set of feelings people might have. Radical feminists think gender is a caste system, a set of material conditions into which one is born. Genderists think gender is a binary. Radical feminists think gender is a hierarchy, with men on top. Some genderists claim that gender is “fluid.” Radical feminists point out that there is nothing fluid about having your husband sell your kidney. So, yes, we have some big disagreements... Radical feminists also believe that women have the right to define their boundaries and decide who is allowed in their space. We believe all oppressed groups have that right. We have been called transphobic because the women of DGR do not want men—people born male and socialized into masculinity—in women-only spaces. DGR stands with women in that decision.

Other parts of this statement also compare race and gender, arguing that as people cannot be transrace, they cannot be transgender. While I agree that race and gender are social constructions, the equation of the two is deeply offensive; as Rachel Dolezal has recently illustrated, there is a difference between being a welcome white person amidst a community of color and being a white person who pretends to be black. The abolition of raced difference in terms of social power relations is not the same as “being transracial.” Those dynamics, as many trans people of color might speak to, work differently than those of gender; the two cannot be equated, and trying to draw parallels in this way is simply offensive. The point of oppressive social constructions is that the rules inherent within them may be disobeyed, are not necessarily followed by all those they are applied to. Few trans people with any sort of left political background would claim that gender fluidity means that we do not exist within patriarchy.

While Keith and her organization quickly lost currency in the radical environmentalist movement once their intense transphobia became evident, their essentialist ideas that simultaneously disregard and solidify aspects of difference continue to hold sway over many, even those who would not see themselves as transphobic. In particular, deep ecology’s intentional de-emphasis of the individual and specific, in favor of generalizations about who bears blame and the interrelatedness of life, has paved the way for some fairly horrific extrapolations.

In assessing the damage humans have wrought upon the planet, some deep ecologists feel that it would be no great tragedy were humans to disappear, or for our numbers to be greatly reduced; they expect the earth to take steps to shed itself of its “excess” load of humans. This intentional, political misanthropy not only anthropomorphizes the earth, but tends to ignore the social and political implications of *which* humans will actually suffer from environmental collapse. It seems obvious that it will most affect the poor, brown, and disenfranchised... because of the overlapping social oppression co-created by the CEOs and politicians who are also wreaking environmental destruction. Those most directly responsible for such a collapse will most likely be safely ensconced in shelters and hideaways, and are in any case probably one of the numerically smallest populations in the world. This is the problem with taking notions of justice, responsibility, and humanity out of your politics—nature functions without human ethics, and when one centers nature's workings rather than one's own constructed ethics, one's politics become inhumane. Take this quote from National Park Service research biologist David Graeber:<sup>k</sup>

I know social scientists who remind me that people are a part of nature, but it isn't true. Somewhere along the line—at about a billion years ago, maybe half of that—we quit the contract and became a cancer. We have become a plague upon ourselves and upon the Earth. It is cosmically unlikely that the developed world will choose to end its consumption of fossil-energy consumption, and the Third World its suicidal consumption of landscape. Until such time as *Homo sapiens* should decide to rejoin nature, some of us can only hope for the right virus to come along.

Infamously, an article was once published in the *Earth First! Journal* arguing that AIDS was such a virus. Murray Bookchin took a stand against this:

Not surprisingly, *Earth First!*, whose editor professes to be an enthusiastic deep ecologist, carried an article entitled "Population and AIDS" that advanced the obscene argument that AIDS is desirable as a means of population control. This was no spoof. It was carefully worked out, fully reasoned in a Paleolithic sort of way, and earnestly argued. Not only will AIDS claim large numbers of lives, asserts the author (who hides behind the pseudonym "Miss Ann Thropy," a form of black humor that could also pass as an example of macho-male arrogance), but it "may cause a breakdown in technology [read: human food supply] and its export which could also decrease human population" (May 1, 1987). These

<sup>k</sup> He bears no relationship to the anthropologist David Graeber.

people feed on human disasters, suffering, and misery, preferably in Third World countries where AIDS is by far a more monstrous problem than elsewhere.

Bookchin's point is well-taken—privileged Americans are most comfortable with mass death when it affects those with whom they do not emotionally relate, distanced by color, location, or sexual orientation. AIDS, by and by large, does not impact those who are most at fault for environmental destruction. While this article was intensely disclaimed by the majority of deep ecologists after Bookchin's critique (Bookchin also met with a huge pushback from the ecological movement, which hastened his departure from radical politics), it cannot be written off as a one-time aberration. This is one of the ways that eco-fascism begins: the naturalistic justification of death is not different from ethnic cleansing, from social Darwinism, from any of it. Rather than seeing humans, our society, our technology, and our destructive impact upon the rest of the world as something that is happening within nature—still something that should be stopped and opposed, for our sakes as much as for the sake of everything else—we are made alien from it, we are Othered, made a disease that must be eradicated by another disease. This line of thought must be stopped; and the idea of making the planet healthier by our absence or “return” to some *before* is obviously similar to Volkische ideology. Misanthropy and crypto-fascism are no solution.

A basic assumption of deep ecologists at play in these misanthropic deindividualizations is that our alienation can be solved via a disclaiming of human creations and a (re)identification with the natural. “An increase in identification with other beings correspondingly involves a decrease in alienation from them. Identification with other beings also means the process of defining one's needs as their needs, one's interests as their interests... It means, Naess says, assuming solidarity with beings other than oneself in an ever-widening circle.” In contrast, Donna Haraway would argue that an increase in identification means an increase in alienation because it relies upon a false mystification to be like yourself. While Bookchin offers a practical-political alternative to deep ecology, I feel that Haraway offers a superior—and magical, delightful, engaging—theoretical-political perspective.

A scientist in the field of primatology as well as a feminist and sci-fi enthusiast, Haraway is best known for her work “The Cyborg Manifesto”, which presents the metaphor of the cyborg as a way to understand our constructed, irreverent, perverse selves. But her project is larger than that; Haraway describes “queering nature” as her “categorical imperative.” At

stake for all of us, she says, is finding or creating “*inhabitable* narratives about science and nature.” To do this in a way that does not reinforce oppressive narratives, we must put aside our traditional, reactionary perceptions of difference for greater nuance:

I do not know of any other time in history when there was greater need for political unity to confront effectively the dominations of “race”, “gender”, “sexuality”, and “class.” I also do not know of any other time when the kind of unity we might help build could have been possible. None of “us” have any longer the symbolic or material capability of dictating the shape of reality to “them.” Or at least “we” cannot claim innocence from practicing such dominations. White women, including socialist feminists, discovered (i.e., were forced kicking and screaming to notice) the non-innocence of the category “woman.” That consciousness changes the geography of all previous categories; it denatures them as heat denatures a fragile protein. Cyborg feminists have to argue that “we” do not want any more natural matrix of unity and that no construction is whole. Innocence, and the corollary insistence on victimhood as the only ground for insight, has done enough damage. But the constructed revolutionary subject must give late-twentieth-century people pause as well. In the fraying of identities and in the reflexive strategies for constructing them, the possibility opens up for weaving something other than a shroud for the day after the apocalypse that so prophetically ends salvation history.

Haraway's project is not one of misanthropic, apocalyptic doom, nor of reforming society into something healthier—i.e., something more *functionally* and less *discernibly* oppressive. Rather, she argues that, far from the simplistic identification Naess calls for, we must learn to do empathy—and solidarity—without identification. Once we admit that we are all aliens to each other, quite apart from the distance created by social constructs like raced and gendered difference, we can begin to grow true empathy. The very idea of Nature produces alienation, let alone the argument that humans and our civilizations exist outside it. Following Edward Said: “The separate, objective world—non-social nature—is a career. Nature legitimates the scientist's career, as the Orient justifies the representational practices of the Orientalist, even as precisely “Nature” and “the Orient” are the *products* of the constitutive practice of scientists and orientalists.”

Haraway calls for empathetic communication based on the acknowledgment of difference not only between humans, but also between humans and animals. Once we understand our difference, we can begin to communicate in ways other than violence. “Disarmed of the fantasy of climbing into heads, one's own or others', to get the full story from the inside, we can make some multispecies semiotic progress. To claim not to be able to communicate with and to know one another and other critters, however imperfectly, is a denial of mortal entanglements (the open) for which we are responsible and in which we respond.” Haraway's approach stands in stark contrast to the anthropomorphized naturalization of “the wild” and our place in it performed by so many deep ecologists. Instead, she calls for the introduction of “dissensus” via the character of the “in/appropriated other” —the one who is not placed and given belonging in community by their acknowledgment of difference, but who cannot pretend comfort or naturalness anywhere, ever, much less defend the boundaries of that (eventually inevitable) terrible community. The “productive conflict” of the insider-outsider perspective—double consciousness—can give us more helpful perspective in our decision-making about how to relate to each other and to our world than any kind of assertions of authenticity, naturalness, and belonging. Rather than being “originally fixed by difference”, such a perspective helps us map where the “effects of difference appear.”

Haraway mixes the ideas of Trinh Minh-ha, Chela Sandoval, and many other theorists of color who have worked with concepts of Otherness and oppositional consciousness with her particular blend of science fiction, Marxism, and feminism. She playfully/seriously suggests that we can seize the means of production even when the product in question is ourselves. In example:

Sally Hacker... suggested the term “pornotechnics” to refer to the embodiment of perverse power relations in the artifactual body. Hacker insisted that the heart of pornotechnics is the military as an institution, with its deep roots and wide reach into science, technology, and erotics.... Technics and erotics are the cross hairs in the focusing device for scanning fields of skill and desire... Drawing from Hacker's work, I believe that control over technics is the enabling practice for class, race, and gender supremacy. Realigning the join of technics and erotics must be at the heart of anti-racist feminist practice.

This is the kind of argument levied by the science fiction writers she admires, such as Octavia Butler and Samuel Delany, who are seen within the academy

as non-serious theoreticians by virtue of both their creative work and status as people of color. Haraway, herself not given the due her academic peers receive, dares to take their suggestions around the possibilities of redemptive technology seriously. In fact, Haraway sees science fiction as “concerned with the interpenetration of boundaries between problematic selves and unexpected others” —useful for precisely the project of complication she desires. She calls for us to *write the world*, to reject the material/semiotic divide around bodies and see our lived experience as a semiotic process. “Objects like bodies do not pre-exist as such. Similarly, 'nature' cannot pre-exist as such, but neither is its existence ideological. Nature is a commonplace and a powerful discursive construction, effected in the interactions among material-semiotic actors, human and not.”

Haraway defines “nature” as both a topic and as a trope; that is, a fictional construction used by humans to sort and define meaning, both in commonplace and existential questions. Therefore, the “technological decontextualization” (alienation) that affects humans and the rest of the world emotionally/physically is not a disaffection from nature, as the deep ecologists would have it, but a “*particular production of nature*,” commodity production. She argues that, rather than affirming “nature” as a non-constructed artifact—which can only serve to underline and reinforce its exploitation in an exploitative social context—we ought to deconstruct the alleged rationality of science, the sameness of transcendental naturalism, and “refigure the actors in the ethnospecific categories of nature *and* culture.”

Later in the same essay, Haraway explores a particular problematic use of these ethnospecific categories by a capitalist interest. She analyzes a poster produced by Gulf Oil, which shows an image of the clasped hands of a chimp and Jane Goodall, a white British primatologist. The text of the poster called for increasing human understanding of nature... which serves both to conceal the eco-destruction caused by Gulf and its confederates, and to blame it on human alienation from nature rather than on economic interests. Haraway observes that the image Gulf chose for this poster *erases* non-white interactions with animals and rest of the world while *affirming* a positive image of the destroyers of those people and that world. The existence of black Africans living in Tanzania, where Goodall was studying chimps, was completely erased, and the white relationship to “nature” was renewed, affirmed, and sanctioned as if by a Saturday’s trip to the zoo—all as part of the project of cleansing Gulf Oil’s image. Haraway: “The white hand will be the instrument for saving nature—and in the process be saved from a rupture with nature. Closing great gaps, the transcendentals of nature and society meet here in the metonymic figure of

softly embracing hands from two worlds, whose innocent touch depends upon the absence of the ‘other world’, the ‘third world’, where the drama actually transpires.”

Haraway is celebrated by transhumanists and ignored by most others; no doubt the deep ecologists and radical feminists she antagonizes are making the wisest choice they can in pretending that she isn't speaking. But she refuses to be categorized as an irrelevant post-structuralist, or as a scientist who does not really care for the earth, or as a feminist who is not interested in the “hard” sciences: “I am neither a naturalist, nor a social constructionist. Neither-nor. This is not social constructionism, and it is not technoscientific, or biological determinism. It is not nature. It is not culture. It is truly about a serious historic effort to get elsewhere”—not merely to survive via the exhausted tropes of essentialist or the “routinized gestures” of identity politics. Haraway says that her purpose is to “write theory: i.e., to produce a patterned vision of how to move and what to fear in the topography of an impossible but all-too-real present, in order to find an absent, but perhaps possible, other present.” Grebowicz and Merrick expand this to mean, via science fiction, “attempts to imagine—within the nexus of Western militarized technoscience (the “belly of the monster”, Haraway says)—different ways to “do gender, sexuality, and race that do not entail a “return to the garden” or the evocation of noninnocent origins.”

Moreover, her relationship to technology and the future is utterly different from that of the Italian Futurists, who encouraged misogyny and disdain for the world in the name of futurity and speed. Haraway instead encourages us to sink into our relationship to the world as it currently exists, to think with care of our futures, but to reject the sort of hubris that envisions utopia in the past or future. Far from seeking to identify and elevate the *Urbemensch*, her project is fundamentally opposed to hierarchies of all kinds. Just as deep ecology mirrors the *Volkische* fascination with blood and land, the technohumanists of today tend to mirror the Futurist glorification of ever-increasing speed through inherently violent exploitations of humans and our environments. Donna Haraway offers an important anti-fascist alternative.

Haraway's colleague Anna Tsing studied the matsutake mushroom and the people who pick it as a case study of our hidden realities now and future possibilities. Tsing's project took place in what she calls “the limit spaces of capitalism, neither properly inside nor outside, where the inability of capitalist discipline to fully capture the world is especially obvious.” These limit spaces occurred amidst “ruined” landscapes, and involved a non-native fungus and often displaced or migrant humans. Her goal is deceptively simple: “In this



time of diminished expectations, I look for *disturbance-based ecologies in which many species sometimes live together without either harmony or conquest.*”

Tsing found that some habitats, such as those in which matsutake grow, need human disturbance—something more chaotic and diverse than Western management practices. She describes the Japanese satoyama woodlands as such an environment: “To restore woodlands for matsutake encourages a suite of other living things: pines and oaks, understory herbs, insects, birds. Restoration requires disturbance—but disturbance to enhance diversity and the healthy function of ecosystems. Some kinds of ecosystems, advocates argue, flourish with human activities.” This gives the lie to the essentialist mysticism that sees humans as the always-destroyers, the disturbers and wreckers of nature, always outside invaders. Though many of our activities certainly function that way, we are not separate from nature, but always part of its conversation. Moreover, the matsutake pickers are a diverse array of humans both emerging from and living in non-ideal conditions for a vast series of social reasons. Tsing says we can learn from this: “[I]f we want to know what makes places livable we should we should be studying polyphonic assemblages, gatherings of ways of being.” She also argues that we should be studying the abilities of forests to come back, stronger than ever. “In the contemporary world, we know how to block resurgence. But this hardly seems a good enough reason to stop noticing its possibilities.”

We need to understand these ways of living because we exist in a constant state of *precarity*. “Precarity is the condition of being vulnerable to others. Unpredictable encounters transform us; we are not in control, even of ourselves. Unable to rely on a stable structure of community, we are thrown into shifting assemblages, which remake us as well as our others... Indeterminacy, the unplanned nature of time, is frightening, but thinking through precarity makes it evident that indeterminacy also makes life possible.” Fascism might be defined as *the political solution offered by anxiety to a sense of precarity*—so if we are anti-fascists, and yet live in the same world as everyone else, we must find new, less artificially-deadening, solutions to our physical, emotional, and social survival.

“Freedom is the negotiation of ghosts on a haunted landscape; it does not exorcise the haunting but works to survive and negotiate it with flair.” By this, Tsing means the ghosts of pickers who have died, of Native Americans murdered for land; but also the ghostly functions of power haunting the picking environment. “If pickers have trouble sorting out which kinds of land are off-limits, they are not alone in their confusion. The difference between the two kinds of confusion is instructive. The Forest Service is asked to uphold *property*,

even if it means neglecting the *public*. The pickers do their best to hold property in abeyance as they pursue a commons haunted by the possibility of their own exclusion.” Or the ghosts come with the pickers themselves: “When pickers talk about what shaped their lives, including their mushroom picking, most talk about surviving war. They are willing to brave the considerable dangers of the matsutake forest because it extends their living survival of war, a form of haunted freedom that goes everywhere with them.” Within pickers who are white veterans of the U.S.-Indochina War, there is a “distinct mixture of resentment and patriotism, trauma and threat. War memories are simultaneously disturbing and productive in forming this niche. War is damaging, they tell us, but it also makes men. Freedom can be found in war as well as against war.” Contrariwise, for the Cambodian and Hmong pickers who have experienced war, the forest can become a place of peace, healing, and community.

It is economic thinking, Tsing argues, that has made the assumption of self-containment possible. The fact that it cannot possibly be true in practice—that no individual can be a standard unit, that social relationships are not scalable—has produced the environmental collapse we see and the fear we feel of collaboration, of contamination. But since complex diversity is all around us, Tsing asks, “Why don’t we use these stories in how we know the world? One reason is that contaminated diversity is complicated, often ugly, and humbling. Contaminated diversity implicates survivors in histories of greed, violence, and environmental destruction. The tangled landscape grown up from corporate logging reminds us of the irreplaceable graceful giants that came before. The survivors of war remind us of the bodies they climbed over—or shot—to get to us. We don’t know whether to love or hate these survivors. Simple moral judgments don’t come to hand.” Tsing poses this tactical question: “Can we keep sight of the continuing hegemony of scalability projects while immersing ourselves in the forms and tactics of precarity?” How can we fight and live and love in a world that is not a situation comedy?

And so Tsing argues that we ought to acknowledge the contamination, collaboration, and precarity around us, the complex, particular, and shifting assemblages of interaction that compose life and death. This is simply more realistic, according to many scientists, who have invented the term “symbiopoiesis” to refer to the co-evolution of species, arguing that nature selects surviving *relationships* rather than individuals. Tsing’s focus on the dialogue between scientific and cultural explanations of the landscape, contradictions intact, challenges the idea of a “monolithic science that digests all practices into a single agenda. Instead,” she says, “I offer stories built through layers of disparate practices of knowing and being.” It is not the most secure means of understanding the world, but it may be the most useful.

## problems of space, time, and material-semiotic struggle

“...the lurking dilemma in all of these tales is comprehensive homelessness, the lack of a common place, and the devastation of public culture.”

—Donna Haraway

Lierre Keith argues that the Wandervogel of pre-Nazi Germany were nearly identical to the hippies of the 1960s United States. The problem, she says, is that both were alternative rather than oppositional cultures. “The differences between an alternative and an oppositional culture have been present for centuries. It’s a split to the root between the Romantics and the resistance. Both start with a rejection of some part of the social order, but they identify their enemy differently, and from there they head in opposite directions.” But her critique of the Wandervogel is more specific than acknowledging their status as an alternative, non-oppositional movement: “The Romantic Movement and the Wandervogel created an image of The Peasant as an authentic, antirational symbol, as people close to nature. This is where we get the peasant blouses, which are still with us. The Wandervogel’s idea of a peasant had nothing to do with actual peasants, who did exist in Germany at the time and could have used some solidarity.”

I am not sure how one could study, as Keith seems to have done, the Wandervogel or the German Romantic movement without learning about their clear, documented, indisputable ties to proto-fascism<sup>1</sup>, to which she never refers, not even to disclaim them. I would hate to accuse even such a transphobe of being a crypto-fascist, so I would like to assume she simply did not read very deeply. However, Keith’s critique of the Wandervogel for failing to show solidarity to the German peasantry is a rather shockingly explicit nod to their successors, “the resistance”, who did found their politics around “solidarity to the German peasantry”—the National Socialist party. The Nazi line was theorized forward from the Volkische ideology, founded in German Romanticism and practiced within the Wandervogel and associated movements, that believed in the essential connection between the German peasant and their countryside; the parasitism of the moneylending Jew upon the German peasant; and the necessity of cleansing Germany of both the Jew and the urban modernity that, they argued, threatened this precious German peasant. While they were not explicitly fascist, or always anti-Semitic, this conversation

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<sup>1</sup> The Wandervogel preceded the rise of the National Socialist party by around 30 years. While some chapters contained Jewish members and led to Zionist youth clubs, German nationalism and anti-Semitism were prevailing attitudes. They evolved into the German youth movement, which in turn fostered many Nazi officials, and later the Hitler Youth.

and cultural practice was the stage upon which the evolution of German fascism took place. In this light, whatever ineffectual benign wandering and alternative lifestyles the Wandervogel pursued rather than showing “solidarity with the German peasantry” is entirely to their credit! Keith is here playing a very dangerous and disturbing game.

However, she is not alone; Keith is simply more honest than her companions, or possibly not clever enough to cloak her fascist tendencies in layers of mystification. The call to source one's authenticity through tropes similar to the German peasant—in the U.S., the white small farmer preferred by the right, or the “Noble Savage” caricature of Native Americans favored by the Left—is felt strongly by many. We form narratives of ourselves and our right to exist where and when we are vis-à-vis an Other, and must legitimate them by asserting our ancestral ties to a place, our inherent superiority as a race or a gender, and/or the historicity of our spirituality, ideology, or lifeway. This is a particularly strong imperative for those whose “right” *seems* supported by society, but is lowkey always-already in question: insecure white people whose ancestors obviously did not originate upon the North American continent, people of color who live in a globalized society away from their points of origin and whose legitimacy is constantly interrogated by society, and so on. These narratives do not necessarily lead to fascism, and are often found among those who tend to become its victims. However, I believe these narratives are necessary to fascism—that it is nearly impossible, perhaps completely impossible, to fight for the fascist ideal without founding your belief in your right to existence on historical imaginaries that tend to negate the belonging of others. This is why I feel critical of even underdog narratives of historicity, identity and belonging, though they will never be as dangerous as those recited by the ones who hold the power of veridiction.

Bookchin deals with this problem largely by ignoring it; he is so privileged because his philosophy, mindset, and lifeways are drawn from the white, Western tradition he benefits from, lionizes in his writing, and yet intends, however uncritically, to rebel against. Keith and Jensen validate their struggle by referring again and again to the lifeways of various indigenous peoples; though they are both (as far as I know) not indigenous, they seem to feel little shame or concern about appropriation in doing so. Haraway speaks of it often, as in the quote that opens this section, but lightly, as a part of her general quest to queer our relationship to our surroundings, to challenge the tropes we allow to dominate our lives. I will turn to Sara Ahmed for another angle on how we might reject the urge to draw lines of descent for legitimacy, and instead queer our relationship to the land, to our pasts, and to tropes like the right to belong.

In her book *Queer Phenomenology*, Ahmed takes seriously the use of the word “orientation” within the term “sexual orientation.” How are we oriented in our relationships to our physical surroundings, as well as to our lovers? Things that are “straight” are “in line”, aligned with other lines. Remembering the older use of the word “queer” to mean “odd, off-kilter, out of place, or suspicious,” queer orientations are those that do not correspond to other lines, that veer off into unexpected territory. Queerness is, at once, an identity, an attribute, and a feature of a body—not necessarily the product of a “malfunctioning” gene or odd mix of hormones in the womb, but still a lived, bodily experience. It is also, to continue with the idea of lines, a trajectory. One can be gay, bisexual, or transgender and not live with queer intentionality, and the queer realm is not limited to those who are “authentically” gay, bisexual, or trans. Just as we can *queer*, in the verb form—to make strange, suspicious, unexpected—our relationships to others, so we may queer our relationship to the rest of the world. If we use narratives of authenticity and place to find a sense of belonging, familiarity, and comfort—to orient ourselves—we can also choose to *disorient* ourselves, to take the power and danger of precarity into our own hands.

Ahmed’s guiding metaphor, following Heidegger and many others, is that of a table: a physical table, perhaps a dining room table. I am intrigued by her use of a Hannah Arendt quote: “To live together in the world means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common, as a table is located between those who sit around it.” This relates to us in a three-fold manner: as those who share a world of things that are dying (due to ecological collapse and other social ills); as those whom, I hope, are interested in holding it in common, in living *together* in the world; and as anti-fascists, as Arendt was in her lifetime and work. We relate to each other by and through things, as one does across a table; to do so, we must first turn them into things in our mind. Arendt, and Bookchin with her, might only imagine humans at the table; the deep ecologists would want to seat animals, plants, and other living things; and Haraway would perhaps wonder why we are limiting ourselves, and invite technological and fantastical beings into the mix as well. So be it: we are at a table consisting of *whatever is not seated around it*, according to our guiding biases. How do we queer our relationship to the table?

Ahmed remarks on the tendency to privilege heterosexual couples and lines of descent around the family table. Beginning here with humans, then, I propose queering our relationships to each other: honoring the happy tangled mess of child-parent relationships when a wide set of adults care for them; celebrating the overlapping multiplicity of friendship rather than the duality of partnership;

coming together in affinity, built upon the celebration of difference, rather than in enforced and assumed sameness. Next, we will invite the guests of the deep ecologists, but (my table, my rules) we will play by Haraway's guidelines: we will begin to learn about animals, plants, and others by first acknowledging that we are as completely different from them as we are from each other. We will not assert the primacy of nature or any other human tropes, and we will deliberately undo those tropes each time we encounter them in ourselves, with great intention. Finally, we will invite the tropes and the technologies themselves to sit down, and we will relate to them in as unexpected and suspicious a way as we know how.

By the end of this process, there are no things; there is no table. We no longer are relating to each other through *things* (in capitalist terms) or even through the *ideas of things*. We are a set of relationships, an ecology, but also individual and particular points of joy. If we can see each other, the living things around us, and even our ideas directly, in cheerful acknowledgement of the impossibility of seeing clearly without altering what we look at with the lens of our gaze, we will be so busy delightedly trying to understand that we will simply not have time to re-adhere to narratives of who belongs where, and why. We will be playing the game of being alive as if we had never learned about power.

But this line of thought is impossibly utopian... where the "impossible" is understood as that which cannot be solidly categorized as real, but is experienced accidentally in fragments. Power permeates our lives. To materially queer our relationship to the land is deeply necessary; while I believe in the value of these discussions to our material struggle, they could never replace it. The semiotic must inform the material, and vice versa, and immediately so. For example, as someone who experiences white privilege in the United States, who lives on occupied territory whether in the city, the country or "the wilderness", it is necessary for me to take indigenous struggle seriously. This necessity is not founded in a desire to legitimate my existence here as a guest of Native Americans; nor to affirm the narrative of Native American closeness to nature; nor to ease my guilt about the horrifying history of the last 500 years on this continent; nor to learn indigenous "natural" lifeways. Rather, it is founded in a desire for solidarity based on affinity through difference to respond to our current bloody realities.

Speaking of the wilderness, Haraway reminds us that "[o]nly after the dense indigenous populations—numbering from six to twelve million in 1492—had been sickened, enslaved, killed, and otherwise displaced from along the rivers could Europeans represent Amazonia as "empty" of culture, as

“nature,” or, in later terms, as a purely “biological” entity.” The creation of nature is bloody, and it is taking place today in the same and nearby regions (as well as many others) at the expense of the surviving descendants of the original bloodbath. The development takes place along a spectrum from oil extraction—a brutal, obvious, polluting, land-clearing and home-evicting process—to eco-tourism, the kinder and gentler intervention that still evicts families, destroys traditional ways of life, and disrupts local ecologies. Green capitalism: two for the price of one.

While struggles against these forces accept help from outsiders, they are deeply engaged in their own project; more visitors are probably not the solution. However, white occupation and indigenous struggle are real in every area; even if one’s locale is no longer the bleeding edge of development, there are still indigenous communities in most areas who accept solidarity, and they evoke immediate questions. How does recognizing the primacy of indigenous sovereignty interact with the overlapping oppressions and privileges of occupiers? How does this question relate to the anti-essentialist postmodern proposals of which I am fond? How does one avoid becoming Derrick Jensen, or doing nothing at all? I think that remembering Haraway’s lesson about building real relationships through the acknowledgement and celebration of difference, and the firm rejection of essentialism, will serve those embarked in the project of indigenous solidarity, among many other projects of liberations, better than the philosophies advocated by deep ecologists. Primarily, as always, we will learn through practice.

### **different presents**

We live in a time in which many white Americans want to return to the land. It is also a time in which the indigenous peoples of Mesoamerica, along with people in many other regions of the world, are being forced out of their homes and lifeways by state repression serving the capitalist interests who suck profit out of that landscape... to profit, directly or via third-hand consumption, the white Americans who want to go back to the land. How is the white liberal desire to return to the land, to retreat from the heterogeneity of the city and the possibilities of transformation and cross-pollination there, similar to the fascist desire for return? What role does whiteness play in each, and what do these movements mean for those of us who are not white—what will they do to us this time? How can we generate livable futures rather dwell in fantasies of return that ignore (or celebrate, in the case of fascists) their own dependency on death? How do we access Haraway’s “other present” for more than a moment?

Capitalism and the state, hierarchy and domination are the roots of all these forces. To learn how to combat them within our hearts and within our lives, and to show solidarity to others doing the same, is the project. First steps include destroying the idea of the Other, of sameness, of return, and of an essential relationship to place; celebrating difference and precarity, trying with delight to communicate across distance; and, most of all, staying in motion and *becoming*, rejecting the paranoia of stasis and the false security of being.

Haraway, in a material-semiotic approach answer to naturalism, talks about how contact zones between humans and other animals are difficult spaces, and therefore zones of responsibility; if done correctly, with attention and great responsibility, the human participant exits not wholly human, not wholly themselves. The heterogeneity of the other keeps all positioning subject to revision. This is the basis of the ethics of companionship: it is because the other becomes the stranger over and over that negotiation is necessary. There is an impossibility of deciding between difference and sameness before each event of contact—and that is good, because it makes us see our degrees of difference as degrees of relation rather than otherness. This is the project between humans and animals, and humans and humans, I wish to see in the world. This is the lesson I want to learn from listening to the land. This is the cyborg I would rather be than any goddess.





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