ECOFEMINISM AS A PEDAGOGICAL PROJECT:
WOMEN, NATURE, AND EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT. In this essay, Huey-li Li inquires into how ecofeminist analyses of the woman-nature affinity call for the rectification of polarized conceptions of “nature.” By attending to the interconnections between various forms of oppression, Li argues, ecofeminism sheds light on how gender ideology influences our worldview and the construction of educational institutions. Above all, she contends, ecofeminism as a pedagogical project emphasizes ethical activism within oppressive contexts. The recent development of ecofeminism, in particular, represents a collaborative feminist coalition aimed at redressing interrelated oppressive systems in patriarchal societies. The transformative potential of the praxis of ecofeminism, Li concludes, lies in its mobilization of both dominant groups and subordinate groups to undertake collective educational efforts to critically examine existing social norms and to explore the possibilities of establishing new ethical norms in the global community.

In 1974, French feminist Françoise d’Eaubonne, in suggesting that women have the potential to solve today’s ecological crises, coined the term “ecofeminism.”¹ Gradually, ecofeminism has come to refer to a variety of feminist modes of inquiry into the conceptual linkages between sexism and other forms of oppression, such as racism, class exploitation, militarism, and ecological destruction.² The naming of “ecofeminism” reflects ecofeminists’ intent to carve out an independent position within feminist and environmentalist communities. In effect, the theorizing of ecofeminism represents feminists’ efforts to address and redress interrelated forms of oppression. By emphasizing the interconnections among various forms of oppression, ecofeminism does not appear to privilege gender oppression. Instead, the praxis of ecofeminism underlines women’s active participation and leadership in integrating environmental movements, women’s movements, and democratic movements across cultural and national boundaries.³

In response to the worsening of ecological problems, many educators such as David Orr have made efforts to advocate that “all education is environmental education.”⁴ The call for an all-inclusive environmental education echoes the

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ecofeminist movement, which declines to compartmentalize today’s environmental problems as a specific form of social oppression. However, an all-inclusive environmental education movement does not deliberately inquire into the links between sexism and other forms of oppression, as delineated by ecofeminists. Likewise, the pedagogical implications of ecofeminism remain relatively unexplored. Consequently, while the ecofeminist and the environmental education movements are not mutually exclusive, the common ground between these two movements has yet to be fully explored.

The purpose of this essay is to appraise how ecofeminist analyses of today’s ecological problems could expand the scope of environmental education and engender more ecologically congenial pedagogical actions. Specifically, I first inquire into how ecofeminism sheds light on rethinking the concept of “nature” for promoting a more inclusive environmental education movement. Then I explore the underlying ethical principles of ecofeminism as a pedagogical project.

ECOFEMINIST RETHINKING OF THE CONCEPT OF NATURE

Although there are different strands of ecofeminism, ecofeminism is primarily a feminist discourse. Heidi Hartmann notes that the marriage of Marxism and feminism “has been like the marriage of husband and wife depicted in English common law: marxism and feminism are one, and that one is marxism.”5 In a parallel manner, ecofeminism also represents a marriage between feminism and environmentalism. But, “the one” in this marriage appears to be feminism. In other words, sex- and gender-based systems of oppression have served as the anchor for ecofeminists’ analyses of the conceptual, empirical, socioeconomic, linguistic, symbolic and literary, spiritual, religious, epistemological, political, and ethical interconnections between the domination of women and nature.6

One could argue that ideally, ecofeminism should serve as an encompassing political discourse that transforms and eventually integrates both the environmental and the women’s movements. However, despite ecofeminists’ efforts in the last three decades, ecofeminism remains a specialized yet marginalized theoretical discourse in the fields of women’s studies and environmental studies.7 Critics of ecofeminism point out that ecofeminist analyses oversimplify the conceptual roots of today’s ecological problems at the global level.8 Nevertheless, the sex/gender role system has been entrenched within the major social institutions, including modern

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schools, which in turn shape the interhuman and the human-earth relations. From this standpoint, it is critical to examine the relation between the gendering of modern schools and today's ecological problems.

Due to limited space, I will not undertake an in-depth and comprehensive examination of divergent ecofeminist perspectives in relation to the environmental education movement. Instead, in what follows, I focus on how ecofeminist analyses shed light on the conception of "nature" within the environmental education movement.

Beginning with Sherry B. Ortner's controversial argument that the distinction between female and male is related to the more basic distinction between nature and culture, the feminization of nature has been a salient yet highly polemic theme in the ecofeminist literature. In line with psychoanalytic theory, Dorothy Dinnerstein claims that the feminization of nature can be traced to the human infant's inability to distinguish clearly between its mother and nature. Elizabeth Gray further argues that men's need to conquer women and feminized nature is the result of sexual differentiation in gender role development. In other words, the female infant's sense of oneness with her mother is sustained by her identification with her mother, whereas the male infant's gender development leads to rejection and denial of his dependence on and attachment to her. Gray argues that male ambivalence toward dependence upon the mother has enormous psychosexual repercussions on males' relations with women and with whatever is perceived within the culture as feminine, including nature. In order to ensure men's continuous independence from the mother and the female in general, it becomes essential for patriarchal culture to define the wife's role as submissive and inferior. According to Gray, the advancement of technology mainly aspires to "transform [men's] psychologically intolerable dependence upon a seemingly powerful and capricious 'Mother Nature' into a soothing and acceptable dependence upon a subordinated and non-threatening 'wife.'"  

Beyond psychoanalytic theory, Rosemary Ruether argues that both the human destruction of nature and women's oppression are legitimized and perpetuated by a hierarchical social structure that allows one group to dominate another. According to Ruether, this hierarchical social structure is rooted in a dualistic ideology, "transcendent dualism," which stresses separation, polarization, and detachment between sexes, classes, and human and nonhuman beings. In these binary

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oppositions, man/upper-class/white/human beings are considered superior to woman/lower-class/people of color/nature. “Woman as Mother” is a central theme of Ruether’s demystification of transcendent dualism. She asserts that the female capacity for human reproduction led women to an implicit acceptance of and identification with the cyclical ecology of death and rebirth in the woman-identified culture. In contrast, men’s inability to bear children eventually induced them to contrive a male deity who creates human beings and transcends finite bodily existence. Rooted in transcendent dualism, patriarchal religion seeks to pursue the infinitude of human existence. Following patriarchal religion, science and technology also seek to “realize infinite demand through infinite material ‘progress,’ impelling nature forward to infinite expansion of productive power. Infinite demand incarnate in finite nature, in the form of infinite exploitation of the earth’s resources for production, eventually results in ecological disaster.”

Corresponding to Ruether’s analysis, Carolyn Merchant claims “the ancient identity of nature as a nurturing mother links women’s history with the history of the environment and ecological change.” According to Merchant, the identification of nature with a nurturing mother prevented human destruction of nature in early history. However, nature can also be identified as a disorderly woman who called forth human control over nature in the scientific revolution. Merchant points out that early scientists such as Francis Bacon utilized the image of the disorderly woman to develop scientific objectives and methods. As a whole, the Baconian doctrine of domination over nature is correlated with the perception of disorder in a feminized nature. Merchant’s critique of mechanism complements Ruether’s demystification of transcendent dualism. It is this dualism that lays the foundation for a mechanistic worldview, and it is mechanism that eventually severed the organic relation between humans and nature.

Tellingly, Gray, Ruether, and Merchant employ “women” and “nature” as inclusive and universal categories. In view of the cross-cultural variation in gender construction and modes of conceptualizing “nature,” their analyses appear to be based on a circular, simplistic, and reductive argument. If there were no well-established sex/gender role system, the development of masculinity would not require a rejection of man’s early dependence upon his mother. Moreover, although the presence of a woman as the infant’s primary caretaker reduces the influence of male adults, especially the father, on the male infant’s development, “the total and exclusive exposure of mothers to their young children” seems to be a myth rather than reality. Insofar as men’s abrupt rejection of their mothers appears to be a mystification, women’s connection to nature also seems to be a reified cultural phenomenon. Val Plumwood further points out that “the reproductively related

features of masculinity and femininity...were (until recently at least) universal, but the alleged consequence, the transcendent apriority of the rational, is not a universal feature." To illustrate, the feminization of nature and the accompanying devaluation of nature are not cross-cultural phenomena. In non-Western societies such as China, nature as a whole has not been associated with woman. The traditional yin-yang cosmology in China, while revealing dyadic thinking, does not associate the yin (female) principle with the all-encompassing immanent nature. Yet the absence of transcendent dualism does not preclude the oppression of women. In actuality, ancient Chinese misogyny coexisted with an organic worldview, which has proven capable of sanctioning the massive transformation of natural environments.

From this cross-cultural perspective, women’s closeness to nature is neither biologically determined, nor is the perception of an affinity between women and nature an inherent feature of the human psyche. Instead, both the association of woman and nature and the human domination of nature result from a social construction. According to Kathy Ferguson, there are three types of feminist essentialism. The first type — namely, “essentialism per se” — attributes “women’s psychological and social experiences to fixed and unchanging traits resident in women’s physiology or in some larger order of things.” “Universalism,” the second type of essentialism, “takes the patterns visible in one’s time and place to be accurate for all.” The third type of essentialism is what she calls “the constitution of unified categories,” which “entails any constitution of a unified set of categories around the terms woman and man.” At first glance, ecofeminist analyses of the affinities between woman and nature appear to be based on an essentialist assumption that women’s presumably fixed biological and physiological traits entail the feminization of nature. By acknowledging cultural pluralism, one can easily cast doubt on essentialist arguments. One can also point to the fact that nature is neither fixed nor unchanging. For example, in the face of seemingly irreversible globalization and rapid urbanization, the recent announcement of “the end of nature” seems inevitable: “By changing the weather, we make every spot on earth man-made

19. Undoubtedly, the Confucian conception of t’ien or ch’ien was gendered. For instance, the Neo-Confucian scholar Chang Tsai stated that “Heaven is my father and Earth is mother, and even such a small creature as I finds an intimate place in their midst.” See Chang Tsai, “Chang-tzu cheng-meng chu, ed. Wang, 9/2a–4b,” in A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy, trans. Wing-tsit Chan (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1963). Still, it was clear that neither Heaven as father nor Earth as mother symbolizes nature in the Confucian cultural context.
and artificial. We have deprived nature of its independence, and that is fatal to its meaning. Nature’s independence is its meaning; without it there is nothing but us.”

However, Carol Bigwood cautions us not to go so far as to dismiss “nature as a cultural fiction” and assume that culture is solely responsible for constituting reality and all living beings. In line with ecofeminism, she argues that affirming women as women must be based on an effort to recognize the link between the female body and women’s way of being. To Bigwood, such a link is a focal point for us to inquire into all the binary oppositions, that is, the masculine versus the feminine, culture versus nature, mind versus body, and public versus private. In addition, it is also important to examine the feminization of nature as an imported idea that has been accepted and popularized in non-Western societies in the age of globalization. For instance, it has become common for Chinese people to employ the metaphor of “the rape of mother earth” to refer to human exploitation of nature even though they traditionally did not identify earth as a mother. While such a recent feminization of nature reflects Western cultural hegemony, it also reveals how the image of woman has been used as an available and powerful metaphor to describe and further prescribe the human perception of nature across cultural boundaries.

More specifically, in the process of metaphorization, the subject who utters the metaphor and the metaphoric vehicle usually represent two distinct groups, such as men and women. Eva Feder Kittay notes that women are persistently used as a metaphor for men’s activities and projects, while there are no equivalent metaphors using men as vehicles for women and women’s activities. Gerda Lerner further argues, “When humankind made a qualitative leap forward in its ability to conceptualize large symbol systems which explain the world and the universal, women were already so greatly disadvantaged that they were excluded from participation in this important cultural advance.” Men also hold a monopoly on cultural formation in Chinese society. The recent affiliation of woman and nature certainly reflects men’s privileged status in Chinese society where an elaborate sex/gender-role system is indispensable for sustaining such a patriarchal structure. Therefore, while the feminization of nature may not be the main contributing factor in today’s ecological destruction, it is still critical to attend to how male hegemony facilitates the successful transplantation of gender imagery across cultural boundaries. In short, although men’s psychosexual reaction against nature and women, as analyzed by Dinnerstein and Gray, may be unverifiable at the level

26. The following celebrated statement from the *Book of Rites* clearly indicates Chinese women’s subordinate status: “The woman follows and obeys the man: — in her youth, she follows her father and elder brother; when married she follows her husband; when her husband is dead, she follows her son.”
of the individual, the deployment of gender imagery has played a key role in shaping the historical and contemporary construction of political, economic, and social institutions.

Joan Wallach Scott points out, “The point of the new historical investigation is to disrupt the notion of fixity, to discover the nature of the debate or repression that leads to the appearance of timeless permanence in binary gender representation.”27 The affinity of women and nature appears to be “fixed,” “permanent,” or even “given” in Western cultural contexts. On the one hand, Ruether’s and Merchant’s historical analyses do not challenge the fixity of the age-old association of women and nature. On the other hand, their analyses reflect contemporary feminists’ efforts to unveil the hidden sexism informing the historical construction of dominant social institutions, including the construction of scientific knowledge.28 Christine Littleton points out that the efforts to reconstruct sexual equality should attend to “the difference gender makes” rather than “gender difference.”29 In analyzing this issue it is crucial to divulge the seemingly imperceptible differences gender makes. Marilyn Frye points out that “women’s experience is a background against which phallocratic reality is a foreground... It is essential to the maintenance of the foreground reality that nothing within it refer in any way to anything in the background, and yet it depends absolutely upon the existence of the background.”30 Like women, “nature” also serves as a background that obscures the foreground of human interventions, especially in the modern era. For that reason, ecofeminist analyses of the women-nature affinity do not reinforce sex/gender stereotypes of women/nature.31 Rather, ecofeminists recognize that the “back-grounding” of both women and nature is an invisible yet indispensable device for reifying the foreground reality, and they call for a radical reconstruction of reality along nonoppressive lines.

From this perspective, while the construction of modern schools as gendered institutions may not originate from men’s psychosexual reactions against their mothers and against feminized nature, it should be noted that the establishment of modern schools corresponds with the split between the private and the public spheres — that is, modern public schooling is mainly responsible for educating prospective citizens for their civic engagement in the public domain. As the divide between the private and the public spheres is correlated with sex/gender roles, modern schooling’s embracing of individual autonomy, human rationality, the

pursuit of progress, and contractual relations mainly derives from men’s experience in the public sphere while excluding women’s experience in the private sphere. In the meantime, modern schools as gendered institutions have also served as what Ivan Illich describes as “a social womb” in which we sever our ties with the earth in order to become “productive” citizens for development and progress. In the name of pursuing “progress,” the gendering of modern schooling inadvertently has contributed to the normalization of human domination of nature and has fostered what Edward O. Wilson calls “bio-phobia” (an aversion to nature).

To redress the worsening of ecological problems ensuing from industrialization and scientific advancement, diverse environmental education movements have focused on reestablishing the connections between human beings and the earth. In the nineteenth century, Nature Study and Outdoor Education, the fore-runners of today’s environmental education movement, not only echoed the “back-to-nature” movement but also promoted the belief that children’s experiences with nature play a key role in shaping their lifelong development. Friedrich Froebel, the founder of the modern kindergarten, advocated that the child “should early view and recognize the objects of nature in their true relations and original connections;...there shall draw upon him early...the great thought of the inner, continual, vivid connection of all things and phenomena in nature.”

However, the environmental education movement’s efforts to reclaim the connections between humans and nature do not include a critical inquiry into “the differences gender makes.” Kim Tolley points out that historians of education conventionally attributed the creation of the Nature Study movement to a few progressive male educators when documentary evidence clearly shows that women played an important role in the movement. At the same time, social critics of the Nature Study movement claimed that studying nature contributed to “feminizing” boys and characterized the movement as “romantic” or “sentimental.”

Granted, sexist ideology alone cannot fully explicate the decline of the Nature Study movement in the twentieth century. Yet, the technocentric mode of the


environmental education movement (for example, Conservation Education for development and rational Resource Management education programs) ensuing from the Nature Study movement endorses to a certain degree what Val Plumwood described as “the master category of reason” that “provides the unifying and defining contrast for the concept of nature.” Interestingly, “reason” as a Western cultural ideal has been defined as standing in opposition to the feminine, the natural, and the material. By emphasizing “rational” management of natural resources and ecological risks, the technocentric mode of the environmental education movement continues to reflect the ideology of human domination of nature.

In view of the interconnections of various forms of social oppression, ecofeminists realize that “women must see that there can be no liberation for them and no solution to the ecological crisis within a society whose fundamental model of relationship continues to be one of domination.” Advocates of environmental education and environmental ethicists also have commonly identified domination, grounded in dualism, as the critical conceptual root of today’s ecological problems without taking gender into consideration. For instance, deep ecologists such as Arne Naess consider anthropocentrism as the root of “domination.” But, in light of ecofeminist analyses, one must question whether anthropocentrism is androcentrism in disguise. After all, gender differentiation and male domination epitomize unequal social relations and imbalanced human-nature relations.

Drawing on ecofeminist analyses, it becomes critical to challenge the myth that environmental education is all about celebrating and preserving “nature.” Instead, an all-inclusive environmental movement must examine, critique, and rectify the unequal social relations embedded in contemporary society. Kathleen Weiler points out,

feminist theory...validates difference, challenges universal claims to truth and seeks to create social transformation in a world of shifting and uncertain meanings. In education, these profound shifts are evident on two levels: first, at the level of practice, as excluded and formerly silenced groups challenge dominant approaches to learning and to definitions of knowledge; and second, at the level of theory, as modernist claims to universal truth are called into question.

Likewise, advocates of an all-inclusive environmental education movement must unveil the complex dialectical intersections between the perceived “natural world” and the “social world.”

39. Ruether, New Woman, New Earth, 204.
To Ulrich Beck, ecological problems are indeed the social problems of the inner world of society rather than the problem of the environment or our surrounding world. It follows that presumably “natural” or “ecological” questions must center on “fabricated uncertainty within our civilization: risk, danger, side effects, insurability, individualization and globalization.”44 While such a sociological analysis of ecological problems acknowledges the inseparability of the “natural” and the “cultural,” it also reflects a current trend toward defining “nature” as “an artifact of language” or a project of “social construction.”45 This trend presents an insightful critique of an essentialist and monolithic conception of “nature.” As human beings are capable of undertaking massive transformations of both “natural” and “cultural” environments, environmental education certainly cannot solely focus on constructing, disseminating, and transmitting objective scientific knowledge about flora, fauna, coal, water, metals, and forests, as suggested by the early proponents of Nature Study. Instead, a more comprehensive understanding of the cultural aspects of today’s ecological problems is crucial to the reorientation of our ecologically exploitative practices.

At the same time, we must also be aware of the problems associated with a radical constructivist conception of “nature” that reduces “nature” to a variety of discursive ideas or socially constructed artifacts. Specifically, from the vantage point of radical constructivism, nature as “a singular and unified living material/physical world” does not exist.46 Instead, there are different genres of “nature” — or “natures” — constructed by a range of cultural institutions. However, such constructivist accounts of pluralistic “natures” can be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, the constructivist standpoint is helpful for exposing anti-urban biases. On the other hand, there are neither epistemological bases nor ethical grounds to invalidate any discourses on “nature,” despite potentially dreadful empirical consequences. It is often noted that divergent perspectives on global warming, to a certain degree, have paralyzed the international community’s efforts to reach consensus and to take responsive collective actions. Clearly, such radical constructivism can “assimilate nature to an exclusive anthropocentric ‘reality.’ And it should be seen as expressing long-term industrialist tendencies to separate the ‘human’ and the ‘natural’ realms and to assimilate the latter to the former.”47

In view of the debates concerning the nature of “nature,” including the feminization of nature, it has become clear that an inclusive conception of environmental

46. Undoubtedly, constructivism is a complicated and contested concept. Because I do not have space to elaborate on divergent constructivist perspectives, my analysis focuses on constructivists’ argument against the independent existence of a physical “natural” realm.
education must rectify the polarized conceptions of “nature.” Accordingly, it is essential to raise awareness of the changing nature of “nature” and of the changing cultural contexts in which “nature” exists and changes occur. In other words, the “natural” realm does not necessarily preclude the occurrence of “changes,” which include industrialization and urbanization. Therefore, instead of sustaining the polarization between essentialism and constructivism, the ecofeminist movement especially underlines the interactive intersections of the “natural” realm and the “human” realm, which can be seen as the vicissitudes of both the “natural” order and the “cultural/social” order. The recognition of the interaction of the “natural” and the “cultural/social,” then, calls for a more prudent collective inquiry into why, how, and what kind of “natural” and “cultural” knowledge should be constructed and disseminated across generational lines. In this next section, I will explore how ethical activism embedded in the global ecofeminist movement can expand the scope of environmental education and engender ecologically congenial pedagogical practices.

ECOFEMINISM AS A PEDAGOGICAL PROJECT

While the social movements for peace, ecology, human rights, and women’s rights are based upon grass-roots participation, the convergence of these local activities tends to transcend geographical and cultural boundaries. Emerging out of these interrelated grassroots social movements, ecofeminists, in general, appear to be more concerned about undertaking political actions rather than engaging in rigorous theorizing. In the early days, the primacy of gender analyses by academic ecofeminists seemed to suggest a political move to reposition women at the center of the environmental movements, challenging their traditional relegation to the periphery. In recent times, however, the ecofeminist movement has placed greater emphasis on women’s ethical and political agency in promoting multilayered social movements that contest interrelated forms of oppression at the global level. In other words, the contemporary ecofeminist movement has made a noticeable shift from prosecuting the double domination of women and nature to redressing interrelated ecological, economic, and social problems ensuing from capitalistic globalization.

To illustrate, growth-oriented development continues to “sustain” the ecological crisis and economic distress for people of color in many so-called developing countries where industrialization was often subsidized without responsive environmental regulation and labor protection. In addition to the aforementioned


49. Ruether, Integrating Ecofeminism, Globalization and World Religions.

ecological and economic oppression, women of color in these countries also experience gender oppression. As a result, while women of color are the bona fide victims of the ongoing capitalist globalization, their victimization may bestow upon them a special stake as participants and leaders in grassroots environmental movements.\(^{51}\) For instance, Maria Fernanda Espinosa, in working with the Indigenous Organization of the Ecuadorian Amazon [CONFENIAE], came to realize that Amazonian indigenous women as “local leaders with scarce political experience and often very little formal education” play a key role in the local environmental movement and show a strong commitment to collaborating with other nonelite indigenous women in strategizing about how to address their respective local environmental issues.\(^{52}\) Without participating in the theorizing of ecofeminism, these women environmental activists have committed themselves to healing the alienation between humanity and nature and, eventually, to solving today’s environmental problems. Indigenous women environmental activists acknowledge through their practice the critical fact that no one is exempt from today’s global ecological problems. In the meantime, by incorporating the ideas and actions of these grassroots women environmental activists into its theorizing, “ecofeminism has been an important international political location at the intersection of environmentalism and feminism, which has become a globalized space for political demands by women in many countries who might not otherwise have had a voice or an opportunity to create coalitions.”\(^{53}\) In short, women-led grassroots environmental movements in the developing countries have been a salient feature of ecofeminist discourse. Thus, although Euro-American ecofeminists such as Karen Warren acknowledge that their version of ecofeminism is grounded in Western cultural and academic traditions, in their work they continue to celebrate the Chipko movement [a grassroots movement to call Indian villagers to “hug the trees” in order to stop lumber companies from clear-cutting mountain slopes] as a primordial example of women-led movements.

By attending to the leadership role of Third World women, ecofeminist discourse has shifted its focus from the “feminization of nature” to the “capitalization of nature,” which entails “colonial and capitalist practices, and the so-called development schemes sponsored by international organizations like the World Bank.”\(^{54}\) Gradually, ecofeminism has evolved into a feminist intervention focused on replacing the mainstream development discourse with international and interdisciplinary discourses on women in development [WID], gender and development

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\(^{53}\) Sturgeon, *Ecofeminist Natures*.

Gendered development studies do not regard Third World rural women as scapegoats for population growth, a serious problem within mainstream development studies. Instead, WID, GAD, and WED advocate that women should be the beneficiaries of the pursuit of ecologically congenial development. Beyond WID, GAD, and WED, the establishment of Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN) offers judicious critiques of the "Western development model" that fails to empower women as policy makers.55

On the whole, grassroots ecofeminist movements adopt a more inclusive approach to address interrelated environmental problems associated with the ongoing "capitalization of nature." Beyond the typical environmental concerns (such as antipollution and conservation of natural resources), grassroots women environmentalists make concerted efforts to attend to the interconnections among militarism, capitalism, and neocolonialism. For instance, the preamble of "Women's Action Agenda 21," a document outlining the key issues addressed in the World Women’s Congress for a Healthy Planet in November 1991, asserts that "a healthy and sustainable environment is contingent upon world peace, respect for human rights, participatory democracy, the self-determination of peoples, respect for indigenous peoples and their lands, cultures, and traditions, and the protection of all species." The interconnections among world peace, human rights, participatory democracy, indigenous peoples' rights, and the protection of endangered species are based on the assumption that "as long as Nature and women are abused by a so-called ‘free-market’ ideology and wrong concepts of ‘economic growth,’ there can be no environmental security."56

I would argue that in light of the praxis of ecofeminism in building coalitions among international environmental activists, it is vital to situate an all-inclusive environmental education movement in the context of capitalist globalization. First and foremost, the pursuit of global economic justice should play a key role in reshaping curriculum development and in fostering international environmental activism. More specifically, parallel to feminist educators’ efforts to recruit more women into science and to make women scientists more visible, the theorizing of ecofeminism embraces key women scientists’ inclination to construct ecologically congenial scientific knowledge. In the eyes of ecofeminists, Rachel Carson and Ellen Swallow are exemplars for women scientists in their construction of alternative scientific knowledge that is not based on a perceived "masculine" desire to control feminized nature.57 Beyond challenging the binary gender

56. See Sturgeon, Ecofeminist Natures, 158.
representation in science, it is also critical to unveil hidden assumptions in the various fields of science.\textsuperscript{58} For instance, science education is known for excluding personal lived experiences. In line with the second wave of the women’s movement, feminist science educators endeavor to “center” lived experience and revise science accordingly.\textsuperscript{59} Advocates of feminist science make special efforts to attend to other marginalized peoples’ experiences of modern science because “the experience and lives of marginalized peoples, as they understand them, provide particularly significant problems to be explained, or research agendas.”\textsuperscript{60} For that reason, the voices of Third World women have gained a special recognition when ecofeminists such as Vandana Shiva envision “new intellectual ecological paradigms”:

In contemporary times, Third World women, whose minds have not yet been disposed or colonized, are in a privileged position to make visible the invisible oppositional categories that they are the custodians of. It is not only as victims, but also as leaders in creating new intellectual ecological paradigms, that women are central to arresting and overcoming ecological crises... Marginalization has thus become a source for healing the diseased mainstream patriarchal development. Those facing the biggest threat offer the best promise for survival because they have two kinds of knowledge that are not accessible to dominant and privileged groups. First, they have the knowledge of what it means to be the victims of progress, to be the ones who bear the cost and burdens. Second, they have the holistic and ecological knowledge of what the production and protection of life is about.\textsuperscript{61}

Shiva’s viewpoint represents a “post-victimology” study of ongoing capitalist globalization.\textsuperscript{62} In view of the dynamic and interactive nature of cultural formation in the age of capitalist globalization, one cannot help but point to the disappearance or assimilation of Third World women endowed with “holistic and ecological knowledge.” Still, Shiva’s argument pinpoints that educational reform cannot simply focus on recruiting women and ethnic minorities into the fields of scientific studies and making women scientists visible. Rather, it is essential to attend to the “invisible” burden on subaltern groups and to explore ecologically congenial epistemological traditions.

Perhaps most important, ecofeminism as a political and pedagogical project can play a key role in promoting moral agency in oppressive contexts. In modern liberal states, one must become a “speaking subject” in order to take formal or informal political action. However, as nature itself cannot function as a speaking subject, it is not surprising that most educators more or less exclude wounded yet silent “nature” from critical educational discourse. The historical Western affinity between woman and nature might place ecofeminists in a particularly favorable


\textsuperscript{59} Angela Calabrese Barton, \textit{Feminist Science Education} (New York: Teachers College Press, 1998).


\textsuperscript{61} Shiva, \textit{Staying Alive}, 46–47 [emphasis added].

position to “speak for nature.” Yet, as the essence of ecofeminism is to question the existing social structure, one can also question the imperative of becoming a “speaking subject” in order to make a political speech. For example, post-structuralists’ remarkable efforts to destabilize varied human identities especially question the existence of the singular and unified “subject.” While subalterns may lament their destabilized “subjectivity,” their presumably “problematic” subjectivities have not prevented them from undertaking discursive practices, either to reassert or to further negotiate identities. It seems that questionable subjectivities have no bearing on regulating discursive practices concerning individual human actions and political coalitions. In the same vein, concerned educators need not assume a specific subjectivity in order to address ecological risk.

Poststructuralism and postcolonialism have argued strongly that the “universalizing” of “women” ignores the differences among “women.” Similarly, the emergence of bioregionalism as a movement to counter capitalist globalization also pinpoints the risks of “totalizing” nature and instigating a global environmental movement. From this standpoint, “women” as a universal category is problematic because the universalizing of women not only eradicates vital differences among women but also “essentializes” women. Still, must we in consequence abandon the use of universal categories such as “women” and “nature”?

Judith Butler points out that “no subject is its own point of departure.” Although it is essential to demystify “women” as a unified and monolithic group in culturally pluralistic societies, overemphasizing differences among women can lead to fragmentation of the women’s movement. In response to the critics of essentialism, Diana Fuss points out that the deployment of more specific subcategories of “woman” — such as “French bourgeois woman” or “Anglo-American lesbian” — is not less essentialist. To a certain degree, these subcategories “re-inscribe an essentialist logic at the very level of historicism.” In the same vein, Maria Nzomo points out “while postmodernist discourse would emphasize difference and diversity among women, African feminists are emphasizing unity in diversity as a necessary strategy for strengthening the women’s movement, their solidarity and their empowerment.” In line with Susan Bordo, Nzomo, and Fuss, Noël Sturgeon believes that we ought to “de-essentialize our understanding of essentialism: to differentiate what kinds of essentialism we are objecting to, and pay attention to the consequences.”

68. Sturgeon, Ecofeminist Natures, 9.
According to her, the “universalizing” and “essentializing” of women and nature by ecofeminist activists can be justified because of their actions. Embracing such a strategic essentialism leads to an ecofeminist theorizing that is pragmatic rather than essentialist. Sturgeon states, “ecofeminism’ as a term, indicates a double political intervention; of environmentalism into feminism and feminism into environmentalism, that is as politically important as the designations ‘socialist feminism’ and ‘black feminism’ were previously.”

The pragmatic outlook of the ecofeminist movement, as a radical democratic movement, appears to embrace unstable or even problematic political subjectivities. Instead of “essentializing” women and nature, the identification of woman as nature or nature as woman appears to signify a playful queering of identity politics. By disrupting essentialized identities, the affinity of women and nature also makes clear that ecological problems are basically human problems. Just as Andrew Bard Schmookler points out that power over nature is a human problem and “the problem of man’s power over nature can be solved only by solving first the problem of power among people,” ecofeminists argue that in order to solve ecological problems we must attend to how gender shapes the power relations among all people across cultural and national boundaries.

Furthermore, as discussed earlier, the theorizing of ecofeminism emphasizes the integration of ecofeminists’ academic inquiry and the environmental activism of grassroots women. In fact, ecofeminism as a pragmatic undertaking more or less invites academic ecofeminists from the North and the South to regard the actions of women environmental activists as an ecofeminist testimony. For instance, it is common for academic ecofeminists to depict Linda Wallace Campbell’s leadership in African Americans’ struggle against toxic waste in Alabama and Wangari Maathai’s leading the Kenyan Green Belt Movement as ecofeminist actions even though these two distinguished women do not identify themselves as ecofeminists. Although academic ecofeminists’ appropriation of the actions of grassroots women activists in the name of strategic essentialism is indeed problematic, it makes clear that ecofeminist theorizing embraces environmental activism over theoretical coherence.

Above all, ecofeminism appears to center on transforming women as victims of ecological destruction into political activists and moral agents. Claudia Card argues that feminist ethics originates from a need to identify opportunities for the oppressed to reclaim their agency in oppressive contexts. More specifically, ecofeminism not only generates feminist critiques of patriarchal cultural values, but it also calls for timely educational and social reforms for articulating ecologically congenial cultural practices. In other words, ecofeminism as a pedagogical project

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69. Ibid., 168.
offers an inclusive framework that addresses interrelated oppressive systems and endorses strategic essentialism in order to foster environmental activism at a global level. Within this inclusive framework, active ecofeminists do not consider gender as a superordinate category that organizes hierarchal and oppressive social relations across cultures. Instead, gender serves as a starting point from which women undertake the educational task of transforming ecologically uncongenial cultural practices. The women-led indigenous grassroots environmental movements in the Third World especially assume this educational task without any reservations. Shiva points out that these indigenous grassroots movements “are creating a feminist ideology that transcends gender and a political practice that is humanly inclusive.” In particular, “the perspective of poor and oppressed women provides a unique and powerful vantage point from which we can examine the effects of development programmes and strategies.” At the same time, as Mitu Hirshman cautions, this strain of ecofeminism reminds us of the primacy of the proletariat’s standpoint within the Marxist framework. She contends that it is essential to challenge the production-reproduction grid within the development discourse. In other words, it is not apt to regard the poorest Third World women as universal “laborers” for production and reproduction.

In their search for alternative development models, erudite academic feminists and environmentalists must inquire into the dialectical interplay between the pursuit of unity endorsed by strategic essentialism and the recognition of cultural pluralism. The international ecofeminist movement not only validates the possibility of instituting collaboration among diverse women, but it also underscores the need to integrate theoretical discourse on political identities with political activism. In view of the complementary relation between the universalistic and the particularistic social reform movements, the inclusive framework of ecofeminism reaffirms a common humanity through interactive and dialogical actions that reconstruct human-nature relations in the age of capitalist globalization. Hence, ecofeminism is not an exclusive feminist discourse on the oppression of women. Rather, the ethical praxis of ecofeminism as a pedagogical project lies in engendering international environmental coalitions among academic theorists and grassroots activists.

**CONCLUSION**

As gender has emerged as a legitimate category of analysis in the academy, it is not uncommon for many women to proclaim that they were born feminists. Since women as existential subjects have long been concerned about what differences sex/gender should make, the claim that there has always been a women’s movement is not absurd. The underlying assumption is that women are aware of

76. Here, I am extending the major theme addressed in Dale Spender, *There’s Always Been a Women’s Movement This Century* (Boston: Pandora Press, 1983).
how the sex/gender role differentiation sustains patriarchy. At the same time, as feminists are inclined to exonerate women from the creation of patriarchy, they also believe that women have been colonized within their own cultural traditions. Instead of dwelling on women as the victims of patriarchy, the recent development of ecofeminism represents a collaborative feminist coalition aimed at redressing interrelated oppressive systems in patriarchal societies. While the woman-nature affinity is not a cross-cultural phenomenon, ecofeminists’ analysis of the interconnections between various forms of oppression shed light on how gender ideology influences our worldview and the construction of educational institutions.

Above all, ecofeminism as a pedagogical project emphasizes ethical activism within oppressive contexts. As victimization does not justify moral apathy, both dominant groups and subordinate groups ought to make collective educational efforts to critically examine the existing social norms and to explore the possibilities of establishing new ethical norms in the global community.

77. Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy*.
