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Women's Connectedness to Nature: An Ecofeminist Exploration

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WOMEN'S CONNECTEDNESS TO NATURE: AN ECOFEMINIST EXPLORATION

A thesis submitted to

Regis College

The Honors Program

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by

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We often forget that we are nature. Nature is not something separate from us. So when we say that we have lost our connection to nature, we've lost our connection to ourselves.

Andy Goldsworthy

Dualism and Domination: A Critique of the Traditionally Male Perception of Nature

“I’m surprised you even made it this far, princess.”

“Yeah, outdoor stuff is for men, not girls. Wouldn’t you rather be shopping?”

I’m at my summer camp, surrounded by a group of teenage boys who have decided to impose their knowledge of gender norms upon me. I was leading this particular hike, which meant I was at the front with all the faster campers, and, for the moment, there wasn’t another counselor in sight. The comments kept coming, and I felt immediately overwhelmed, wanting to defend myself, but not really knowing how, especially to a group of rowdy fifteen-year-olds. After a few deep breaths, I managed to respond: “Actually, if you think about it, if anything, women are probably more connected to nature. After all, we’re both sources of life.”

After that, most of the boys began to discuss how men are the rulers of the world, and that that is the natural order of things. But I did overhear one of my favorite campers, Benton, say to the boys next to him, “She’s kind of right, if you think about it.”

These were teenage boys, so I wasn’t about to take their feelings to heart, but the frustrating thing was that I felt like their words had touched some deeper insecurity. Although I profess to identify with the Ecofeminist community, often expressing the profound connectedness I imagine women to have with nature, there’s a part of me that feels unworthy of occupying this kind of space in the larger nature/human ontology. Speaking just from my own

experience, I think of how I pride myself in being great at starting and tending campfire, but how, in reality, this was something I only learned how to do from watching my friend Will. Or how, I love hiking and would love to go on an extended hiking trip alone, like my friend Matt did on the Pacific Crest Trail, but how, in reality, I could never really do this, for fear of my own safety. All the confidence I feel at my own ability to navigate natural spaces is tinged with something comparable to impostor syndrome that consistently makes me second guess myself. I feel like, ever since finding my passion for exploring the natural world, all I've done is admire and envy the men whose self-reliance and courage has made them more capable than me.

On a larger scale, all the great explorers of the natural world, at least all the ones we tend to talk about, have been men: Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, even Chris McCandless, for a more contemporary example. These are the kinds of people whose stories we tell when we want to talk about people's experiences within nature. I can't help but wonder what, when deprived of a more traditionally feminine perspective of the natural world, we are missing with our understanding of ourselves in relation to nature. And, in truth, questions of how humans relate to the natural world are far more pressing now than they ever were in Thoreau's day, faced as we are with the threat of environmental degradation and the irreversible changes our rapid development is having upon our world.

It seemed to me that the dominant male perspective we see in nature writing and literature is directly connected to the current state of our environment. These kinds of connections are directly related to the ideas found in ecofeminist philosophy. Therefore, I began to wonder what barriers women face when they try to connect to the natural world and what kinds of masculine traditions have created these barriers? And, through this ecofeminist lense, is

there a relationship between these kinds of barriers and limitations and our current relationship to the natural world? First, we'll begin by examining how the same kinds of oppressive dualistic and dominating structures are at work with both our perception of women and our perception of nature. Next, we will examine the different ways that patriarchy has traditionally viewed nature and why it is necessary to construct an alternative worldview. Finally, we will examine why the fields of nature writing and the environmentalist movements would benefit from a more ecofeminist approach.

Many literary and philosophical texts concerning nature have certain "cultural premises" which often take for granted the presence of themes of dualism and domination therewithin (Mallory 83). Therefore, it seems valuable to explore just what kinds of conclusions we might reach should we successfully put aside these kinds of dualistic, domination-centered assumptions. Many ecofeminist philosophers have worked to find the root of these structures of dualism and domination in order to discover the roots of the oppression of women and the oppression of the natural world and the connections between the two. There is a particular way that domination manifests itself, which is something we have seen both in the oppression of men over women and the oppression of humans over the environment. Victoria Davion attempts to explain the steps by which this process of domination occurs, reporting that:

These are (i) backgrounding, the oppressors' creation of a dependency on the oppressed while simultaneously denying that dependency; (ii) radical exclusion, constructing supposed differences between oppressors and the oppressed in terms of radical differences in order to justify subordination of the oppressed; (iii) incorporation, the

construction of the devalued side of a dualized pair as lacking morally relevant features associated with the other side; (iv) instrumentalism, the construction of groups seen as morally inferior, lacking any morally important independent interests; (v) homogenization, the denial of differences between those on the underside of dualized pairs (seeing all women or all slaves as the same). (Davion 235)

This process which Davion describes makes it clear how much acts of domination depend upon dualism. *Radical exclusion*, for example, relies upon the construction of overemphasizing differences between two groups, like *male and female* and *natural and cultural*, in order to justify the domination of one over the other. This kind of dualism is common in the patriarchal worldview which, historically and contemporarily, sees everything through the lense of division and hierarchy (Young 130).

Feminist theorists attempting to flatten these hierarchies and deconstruct these kinds of dualisms and hierarchies. Ecofeminism as a field is primarily concerned with these ideas of dualism and domination. Some feminists will do this on the grounds that differences like gender are socially constructed, and are therefore not grounds by which to create oppressive hierarchies. This idea can be traced back to the National Organization for Women towards the beginning of the Women's Liberation Movement in the 1960s. According to Nancy C. M. Hartsock, "[F]eminists implicitly held the the differences between women and men were not a sufficient base on which to construct Difference, that is, that differences of gender were superficial and insufficient ground on which to construct radical alterity, or 'Otherness'" (Hartsock 59). Others will maintain that these differences are significant and valuable, but that they are not grounds to create hierarchies based upon them. This second group wants less to do away with differences

altogether, insisting that differences are not inherently bad as long as we can avoid the kind of *incorporation* and *instrumentalism* that Davion explains can be harmful and oppressive. To borrow terminology from Hartsock, they are willing to embrace “specificity,” but reject the notion of “Difference.” (57). Hartsock is attempting to explain how one can conceptualize difference in a non-hierarchical framework. Lower-case *d* differences are those things about us that are dissimilar, like our sex, our skin color, our sexual preference, etc. Upper-case *D* Difference is, on the other hand, differences seen in a way that is *other-ing*. Difference is the patriarchal, hierarchical understanding of our differences. “Specificity,” on the other hand, is a way of conceptualizing our differences in a feminist manner. It acknowledges differences as positive and as a way of bringing one’s own identities and experiences to the table. Differences are socially constructed, while specificity are those differences between us that need not necessarily have any say on the way we live our lives.

Traditionally male perceptions of nature often rely upon constructing dualisms that are inherently hierarchical. Many primary ecofeminist principles are concerned very intentionally with domination. One of these is that “hierarchy justifies domination and must be resisted on all levels, including within ecofeminist political practice” (*Ecofeminist Natures* 67). Sturgeon continues, explaining that “dualistic thinking, particularly distinctions between culture and nature, supports all kind of domination” (*Ecofeminist Natures* 67). Her point is that patriarchy is inherently hierarchical and that examination of an issue or an entity, like nature, through a feminist lens necessitates seeing it as existing on the same plane as oneself, not as lesser. By this logic, it is impossible to consider something in a dualistic manner without resorting to this kind of hierarchical conception of these two things. Therefore, if we are looking at the world in a way

that is anti-patriarchal, we are forced to rid ourselves of these kinds of hierarchies. The relevance of these ideas to environmental writing is that, in reading primarily male accounts of men's experience in the natural world, we are only exposing ourselves to this other-ing understanding of nature, rather than a more feminist way of existing with the world in which the difference between nature and culture does not lead to culture's domination over nature. These kinds of dominating behaviors, of course, cannot be conceived of as a set of isolated incidents, but are, in fact, manifestations of what Iris Marion Young characterizes as "social structures" (52). In understanding domination and dualism in this way, we recognize that they are not the problem, but are rather indicative of the larger problems of patriarchy and anthropocentrism.

Of course, some ecological philosophers might take issue with the argument that this socially constructed dualism is necessarily a bad thing. After all, many accounts of early environmental writing talk about nature with a great deal of reverence, and admiration, though they do maintain an objectifying view of the natural world. Thoreau, for example, maintained that nature was something "sacred and mysterious" (86). Some would certainly argue that it is preferable to portray nature as divine and unknowable, rather than an object of potential economic gain. Indeed, this seems like a less harmful way of experiencing nature. Still there is something decidedly other-ing about the experience, even if it stems from wonder, rather than domination. It seems that it could be harmful to our relationship to nature to idealize and romanticize the natural world. Nature is still being conceived as being that which is in opposition to the world that people inhabit. When we insist, as many early nature writers did, that civilization is wicked and that nature is virtuous, we are still constructing the kinds of dualisms that lead to harm and oppression, even if it appears at first that we are doing something less

problematic (Smith 71). Ecofeminists will take issue with the very idea of dualism, even when it doesn't seem to be perpetuating domination. According to Colleen Mack-Canty, "One of the main endeavors of ecofeminism, in its efforts to reweave the nature/culture duality, is to understand the ideology that perpetuates the domination of women, other humans, and nonhuman nature. There are many approaches taken by ecofeminists who are engaged in analyzing how the subjugation of women, other oppressed people and nature are interconnected" (171). Mack-Canty is insisting that the kinds of ideologies that promote dualism are the same ones which perpetuate oppression of whichever group that dualism labels as "other," even if this "other-ing" seems at first glance, to be placing the other in a higher position of some kind. Even when we say that culture, or, in Smith's words, civilization, is "wicked" and that nature is the source of that which is "good," we are still perpetuating these notions of patriarchal dualism. Perhaps it is less harmful to idealize nature than to attempt to conquer it, but it is still problematic in a similar way, because it still alienates it as something decidedly different from the self.

The kinds of problematic patriarchal perceptions of the natural world we are most interested are those perpetuated through the tradition of nature writing as well as in ecological and environmental movements. In order to understand the masculine tradition of nature writing, let us turn for a moment to Henry Nash Smith and the ideas he puts forward in *Virgin Land*. It explores particularly the American West in literature and imagination, examining particularly the way writers at the time conceptualized the natural world they inhabited. Smith explores the way men who felt disconnected from nature, in writing about lives spent in natural spaces, believed that they might recover some ancient understanding that had been lost to them as a result of their

living comfortable lives among other humans (Smith 77). He believes that some of these nature writers felt a certain separation from nature that they felt could be rectified by exploring the natural world in their writing. They hoped, according to Smith, that, through meditating upon the natural world, they could gain some unknown virtue and power, or some ancient connection to nature. Historically, nature writing has made certain assumptions of nature, portraying it as something that might be exploited to a human end. This is still the case, even if the human end is something grand, like the virtue that Smith is talking about.

Nature writing was established as a literary tradition in the 19th century, but another place where we have traditionally encountered a male-dominated perspective of nature, the environmentalist movement, is far younger, taking root in the 1960s. This suggests that it should have significantly more female contributions, but this is, unfortunately, only partly true. Around the 1970s, western women began to feel that the environmentalist movement would benefit from feminist analysis (Holloway 142). Noël Sturgeon writes about how, “[E]arly formation of an ‘ecofeminist’ position takes place in a historical context of real fear of ecological disaster disagreement among feminists about what feminism is, a gathering together of women from various movement locations--including movement of mixed gender--who wish to work together as women, and the use of a common rhetoric that depicts ‘male violence’ as a threat to women and the world” (*Ecofeminist Natures* 63). In essence Sturgeon is suggesting that ecofeminism came about as a result of real fear of ecological destruction and the desire for women to be able to construct a movement that represents their particular needs. When women began to see that movements like the environmental movement did not include their particular concerns, they branched off, creating their own subset of environmentalism that was actively concerned with the

positions women found themselves in. However, from the beginning, this separation placed them within a niche that made it easy for their viewpoints to be ignored by male environmentalist, who saw these women as distracting from the real issue of environmentalism. Ecofeminists, on the other hand, argued that any environmentalism that ignored the connections between the oppression of nature and that of women would not be a holistic approach to actually preventing environmental degradation.

Ultimately, what is at stake here is the ideologies at the very center of the environmentalist movement. When voices that are less often considered are given credence in these kinds of debates, the conversation transforms entirely. For example, mainstream environmentalism began to characterize our human relationship with nature in a less hierarchal way in the last few decades, certainly due in part to a more diverse group of people being invited into the discussion. It is only relatively recently that the very notion of human superiority was brought into question. Now, environmental rhetoric often pushes for humans to be a part of the biosphere, not to dominate it, but this has not always been the case (Vance 134). Even in the seventies, it was accepted that humans have a certain right to the world, by virtue of our ability to dominate other living creatures. It was believed that, although we should work to prevent large-scale environmental degradation, the world was, more or less, ours to do with what we chose (Vance 134). Certainly, part of the reason that this patriarchal assertion that humans have a right to dominate nature has largely fallen into the wayside is a result of feminist input on the subject. Indeed, patriarchal domination of the field of environmental writing has been detrimental. For one thing, it has caused harm to the field of environmentalism, since it has taken for granted patriarchal assumptions that perpetuate nature-domination. But, in addition to this,

this kind of one-sided approach to ecology has also been harmful to women, especially those who strongly identify with nature. Linda Vance writes about this, expressing her feelings of alienation from an environmentalism that was ruled by patriarchal assumptions of the human relationship to the natural world. She states how she felt “alienated from my own experience, my own reality, and bound to another’s” (Vance 124). The way she experiences nature and the way nature writers present their own experiences within nature are not in line with one another. She was disappointed by how unrelatable she found the writings of male nature writers, and wished that there were more women with whom she might compare her experience to through literature. To Vance, there seems to be a difference between what it means to be a woman in nature as opposed to a man. She feels as though she is not being represented, and that her way of being is not valued. This is hard for women like Vance who feel as though nature has some greater significance for them.

This, I think, is what was so troubling to me when I was confronted with a group of rowdy teenage boys who told me that I did not belong in the natural space that I felt such a deep affinity towards. This, I think, is what draws me so deeply to ecofeminism as a field of ecophilosophy. My identity as a person who cares deeply for the environment in a certain, feminine kind of way is what defines me as an environmentalist and as a woman. These two identities, for me, are not divisible. But, I cannot help but wonder if the special relationship I feel with *Mother Earth* is empowering, in a way that draws me to feel greater connectedness to the world around me, or just another way to promote sexist stereotypes and the systematic *other-ing* of women *and* nature.

Mother Nature: The Feminine and the Natural

Several months ago, I found myself exploring the forests and canyons of Red River Gorge with a group of friends. Finally, we reached our destination: the edge of a canyon that looked down upon a sea of tall, green trees. Tired from the long hike, I nestled into a sandy patch of earth between two rocks where my body fit perfectly. In that moment, it felt completely natural to think of my surroundings as being part of a benevolent entity who cared deeply for me: my *Mother Nature*. I was finding myself more and more drawn to this conception of the natural world. She reminded me of my own mother: the way I could go to her when I was feeling sad and restless; the way I felt that I myself was ever-changing, but, in entering into natural spaces, it seemed to me that I was entering into something resolute and timeless. The woods and the mountains seemed to offer some quiet understanding and comfort to me, the same way my mother does.

When we stopped for a break, one of my male friends remarked at what a fine day it was to spend in Mother Nature. Perhaps it was the fact that this particular friend had more traditional views in regards to gender roles, or maybe it was the way he said “Mother Nature” without a trace of reverence, but I found myself instantly agitated. I know he meant no harm, and was just making a comment on the loveliness of the day, but it felt as though, in some way, he had appropriated language that he did not fully understand. If nature is as closely connected to

femininity as our language suggests, it felt to me that “Mother Nature” means something different when it comes from myself or another woman than when it comes from a man. But of course, why should I know anything more about motherhood than a man, having never myself experienced it firsthand? Do I actually connect more with nature by virtue of my femininity, or is this a belief born of social conditioning? Do we consider nature female because of ancient mythlore of a sacred feminine earth goddess, or because of narratives of men conquering and dominating the natural world, the same way they have historically done so for women? In order to explore these questions, we’ll begin by examining “social” and “spiritual” ecofeminists and the differences in their beliefs about essential components of femininity. Then, we’ll examine the feminization of nature most clearly articulated in reference to “Mother Nature.” Finally, we will propose *reverence* as an alternative way of conceptualizing nature that allows for a feeling of connectedness that does not impose the human conception of nature upon the natural world.

The Feminine and the Natural

The principles behind ecofeminism are based around the fact that, in feminizing nature, and in natural-izing women, men are able more easily able to dominate both groups. In the words of Poranee Natadecha-Sponsel, ecofeminism suggests that “the domination of women by men reflects and reinforces the domination of the environment by society, and that the two are understood to be linked; patriarchal gender relations in society correspond to androcentric environmental ethics.” In other words, the domination of women and the domination of nature have a common root cause. There is, in fact, a connection between women and nature by virtue of the way they have historically been oppressed. However, some ecofeminists would suggest

that this connection is deeper than similarity of oppression and that this connection between women and the earth can be reclaimed in a way that is empowering. These feminists believe in a connection between women and nature, and that this connection does not necessarily have to be a source of oppression, while others will argue that the connection is entirely socially constructed and that we should resist any suggestion of inherent connection between women and nature (Roach 57).

There are parallels between the treatment of women and the treatment of the natural world and it is these connections which necessitated the construction of an environmental philosophy that takes these similarities into account. Noël Sturgeon in *Ecofeminist Natures: Race, Gender, Feminist Theory, and Political Action*, explores how the ecofeminist movement began and the issues that were most at the heart of its inception. This group of ecofeminist women wanted to establish clearly *why* environmentalism and feminism were so inherently linked to one another. According to Sturgeon:

Somehow the Women's Pentagon Action had to reflect our feminist principles and process. And we began to talk about what these principles were. We talked about connections between violence against women and the rape of the earth. We talked about racism and American imperialism. We heard from women about the effect of military spending on the human services upon which women depend. We connected the masculine mentality and nuclear bombs. Lesbian oppression and reproductive freedom were also issues that concerned us. We reflected on the election of Ronald Reagan and what that would mean to us. And we talked about how we might do our action with ritual politics and theatre and images...We were defining feminist resistance. (63)

Ecofeminism was created in the face of the threat of environmental destruction as well as the threat of masculine violence against the natural world and against women. The same things that are harmful to the environment have also been harmful to women. We cannot separate ecofeminist concerns from these contexts, which means that any sort of ideology we structure must have, at its forefront, a concern with avoiding ecological disaster (on the small scale as well as the large scale), and dismantling male violence towards women and nature.

Naturalizing Women

Does drawing connections between women and nature necessarily leads to oppression, or could it potentially be reclaimed in a way that could be liberating? On the one hand, certain feminists argue that this connection is entirely socially constructed, and that it's existence can do nothing but perpetuate oppression (Ortner 87). On the other hand, other feminists, sometimes referred to as "nature feminists," propose that women are inherently more connected to the natural world than their male counterparts and oppose the idea that, just because this relationship between women and nature has traditionally been used oppressively, doesn't mean that this is *necessarily* the case. These ecofeminists believe that "[W]omen are closer to nature but disagree that the association must be disempowering" (Roach 57). They believe that the fact that women and nature are the source of life enables them to connect more deeply to nature, and that women's bodies are more affected by the natural world than are men through things like the moon. This distinction between these two classes of ecofeminism has also been characterized as "spiritual ecofeminism" and "social ecofeminism." Social ecofeminists insist that any apparent connection between women and the natural world is purely the result of social construction.

Spiritual ecofeminists, on the other hand, insist that people are intrinsically connected to nature, and that this connection is most powerful for women (Wilson 342). Let's first examine this former group of ecofeminists. They believe that associating nature as mother and as feminine is harmful both to women and to the environmental movement. Indeed, the desire to dominate the wild woman that is nature was certainly used as a justification for all manner of environmental degradation in the past. Furthermore, if we insist on referring to nature as our mother, what might the consequences be for constructing such a relationship?

Here some ecofeminists might object to the claim that feminizing nature necessarily leads to environmentally harmful behaviors. For example, many indigenous people derive a sense of reverence towards nature that is based in an understanding of a divine, feminine nature. To Theresa, an Anishinabek elder, there is a deep connection between women and the natural world that is rooted primarily in the ability to bring forth life. She explains, "The Creator passed on the ability of giving life from Mother Earth to women" (Wilson 343). Basically, Theresa is suggesting that Mother Earth has a life-giving power which seems to call for a sense of reverence towards nature that is rooted in femininity. Therefore, while it is possible that conceptualizing nature as feminine *might* make us more comfortable taking advantage of the Earth's resources with little regard to its overall health, it also seems that, in some cultural traditions, it causes the exact opposite effect.

Feminization of Nature

In order to understand this, it is necessary to look seriously at just how we treat our mothers, which is certainly not uniform, and varies from culture to culture as well as from person

to person. This complex relationship is exactly what Catherine Roach sets out to do in "Loving Your Mother: On the Woman-Nature Relation." Here, Roach expresses that the way that even the most well-intentioned among us typically regard our mothers as existing *for* us, rather than as autonomous people in their own right. According to Roach, we conceptualize our mothers as the people we turn to when we need something, be it emotional support, good advice, etc. Mothers are often seen as being who give ceaselessly without expecting anything in return. The idealized, perfect mother-figure ask their children about their days, and, unlike most social interactions, it would not be unusual for the child to dominate the conversation. The mother/child relationship is often characterized by an imbalance of giving and receiving. Roach suggests that this is, in many ways, reminiscent of the way we regard our world. She writes, "[W]e act in the environment as if there were no cost attached to our use of natural resources, as if they existed purely for our use, and as if they would never be depleted" (55). Basically, she is saying that, in comparing the earth to our mothers, humans are creating a relationship in which we don't feel guilty about overusing the resources available. This causes one to imagine that the planet exists for our sake and we can, therefore, take advantage of what it has to offer. When we see nature as an infinitely-loving entity who will give to us ceaselessly, this certainly opens up the possibility for us to believe that we are entitled to take and take without consequence. When we conceptualize nature as our mother, we imagine that all of her resources are ours ready for the taking ("Communicating Care" 46). Roach believes that "[E]ngendering the Earth as female mother, given the meaning and function traditionally assigned to "mother" and "motherhood" in patriarchal culture, will not achieve the desired aim of making our behavior more environmentally sound, but will instead help to maintain the mutually supportive exploitative stance we take toward our mothers and

toward our environment” (Roach 52). In patriarchal culture, women are not viewed as being inherently valuable, but have value based on their capacities as mother. Their worth is directly related to their ability to produce new life. Therefore, when the earth is viewed in a motherly way, it means acknowledging that it has a value based on what it can produce rather than what it is.

The way we think about the environment is directly connected to the way we think about women. In the context of our patriarchal society, thinking of the Earth as feminine means considering it inferior in some way. Specifically, it means that we regard nature as being less than “culture” or anything man-made. Many ecofeminists are concerned that inscribing the earth with motherly characteristics will continue to perpetuate harmful hierarchical thinking (Wilson 348). The term “mother nature” seems to suggest an entity easily taken advantage of and taken for granted. It might also call to mind images of helplessness, perhaps of a damsel in distress who is passively acted upon, either to be harmed or helped, but who has no real control or agency regarding her situation (Van Gelder).

But some ecofeminists suggest that viewing Earth as our mother will bring about more positive ecological behaviors (Swanson 85), while others, dispute that this kind of relationship leads us to take advantage of our earth’s resources. Bernice Marie-Daly, for example, believes that “We expect mother to be attentive to our every need; indeed, our life depends on her” (Marie-Daly 101-102). Is it possible for us to conceive of the natural world in a way that would consistently lead us towards more pro-environmental behaviors? Let’s begin by examining the way people tend to look at nature now. At present, nature is often viewed as something decidedly other than the self. The world is divided dualistically between cultural (man-made) and natural

(non-man-made). Other instances of dualisms that ecofeminists are concerned with include male/female, rational/emotional, mental/physical and mind/body. According to Val Plumwood, these dualisms are interconnected with one another (*Environmental Culture* 14–15). She suggests that there is a logical inconsistency with the way we conceptualize our relationship to the natural world. The larger population seems to exist as a mind that does not recognize the way its actions impact the body of which we are a part. Plumwood believes that, rather than being opposites, these concepts which we have set against each other are, in fact, parts of a larger whole. The distinction between man-made and non-man-made is completely arbitrary. There isn't a world of man-made things and a world of non-man-made things because it is all part of our larger experiential world and cannot be easily divided. Furthermore, Antoine C. Dussault states, “[H]uman/nature dualism...defines the natural in opposition to the *cultural* and the *artefactual*, and thus in principle places humans outside the natural realm” (1). Dussault is pointing out that we construct different dualisms which only have the meanings that we ascribe to them. Essentially, these dualisms are socially constructed.

However, is there any possibility to reclaim this feminized nature in a way that is not oppressive, perhaps even empowering? For example, we might ascribe femininity to nature based on her ability to bring forth life, which seems clearly to be a positive characteristic. However, were we to think along these lines, we would also be forced to acknowledge that mother nature is willing to end the lives of the creatures she produces without remorse. Does our image of mother nature change when we're caught in a blizzard or a landslide? In "Ecofeminism and the Politics of Reality," Vance shares her realization that nature is “No man's mother, or wife, or virgin, but merely a bad, and unruly broad” (132). The forces of nature are often not,

after all, always gentle and loving. Inclement weather, wild animals and natural disasters don't seem to fit the nurturing mother nature narrative that some have constructed.

Reverence

It is clear that our human relationship to the natural world is complicated and, upon further investigation, the dualistic assumptions that we operate under don't seem to paint a realistic view of reality. The dualistic understanding of nature and culture is complicated by the fact that we humans are capable of inhabiting both natural and cultural spaces. We interact both with the world around us, and the tools and objects we create with pieces from this natural world. If we belonged exclusively to the world of culture, then that would be the place where we feel the most comfortable and the most at ease. However, this often isn't the case. Many people experience a sense of ease within nature that they don't find in lives surrounded by man-made structures. Oftentimes, people seem as comfortable in natural spaces as in cultural spaces. Indeed, many people profess to feel a deep sense of wonder and mystery upon entering wilderness spaces (Thoreau 93). Therefore, nature doesn't seem to be easily reduced down to something that is merely instrumental, and useful to us.

The way we feel towards nature has a direct impact on the way we live our everyday lives. Our conception of nature is of great significance, because it has a direct effect on how we treat our environment, and to what extent we engage in environmentally conscious behaviors (Geng et al 3) . Indeed, it is certainly easier for us not to think about the way our actions impact the world we inhabit, therefore necessitating that we find the way of relating to the world which causes us to behave in the most conscious way. After all, the contexts around which ecofeminism

was created, as Noël Sturgeon describes, is “real fear of ecological disaster,” and “the use of a common rhetoric that depicts ‘male violence’ as a threat to women and the world” (63). We cannot separate ecofeminist concerns from these contexts, which means that any sort of ideology we structure must have, at its forefront, a concern with avoiding ecological disaster (on the small scale as well as the large scale), and dismantling male violence towards women and nature.

It seems necessary to construct a way for people to relate to nature, since we generally seem to require some kind of relationship with something in order to invest ourselves in it. But how can we develop a relationship with nature without engaging in the kinds of anthropomorphism that can be potentially harmful, like with the Mother Nature relation? Here we might turn to the writings of Henry David Thoreau. In “Ktaadn,” Thoreau describes a journey he and several of his companions are taking up Mount Ktaadn. At one point near the mountain's peak, Thoreau remarks, in a moment of fierce connectedness to and understanding of all that surrounds him:

Here was no man's garden, but the unhandselled globe. It was not lawn, nor pasture, nor mead, nor woodland, nor lea, nor arable, nor waste land. It was the fresh and natural surface of the planet Earth, as it was made forever and ever, - to be the dwelling of man, we say, - so Nature made it, and man may use it if he can. Man was not to be associated with it. It was Matter, vast, terrific, - not his Mother Earth that we have heard of, not for him to tread on, or to be buried in, - no, it were being too familiar even to let his bones lie there, - the home, this, of Necessity and Fate. There was clearly felt the presence of a force not bound to be kind to man. It was a place of heathenism and superstitious rites, - to be inhabited by men nearer of kin to the rocks and to wild animals than we. ... What is

it to be admitted to a museum, to see a myriad of particular things, compared with being shown some star's surface, some hard matter in its home! (94-95)

Here, Thoreau is explicitly rejecting the conceptualization of nature as Mother. He is entirely rejecting the idea that nature was made for humans. Nature is something that cannot be comprehended by humans. In spite of the way we have understood the natural world for most of human history, we, according to Thoreau, have no real claim to it, and were “not to be associated with it.” The earth is not our mother, and nature is something that we have no right to occupy. The way he understands it, nature is vast and mysterious and cannot be controlled or dominated by humans. We have constructed our world of culture which is separate from the natural world, and in doing so, closed ourselves off from ever engaging with it the way our ancient ancestors, those “nearer of kin to the rocks and to wild animals” might have. Is it possible that we might benefit from Thoreau's conception of nature?

Seeing nature as feminine and maternal has proven to be potentially problematic, especially when it leads to us taking advantage of natural resources without thinking of the cost. How, then, might we find a space between nature as instrumental, and nature as maternal and particularly concerned with our well-being? Here we can see the of women and the oppression of nature reflecting and reinforcing each other. Women have historically been conceived as being either instrumental or as being ethereal. They have not generally been widely regarded as individual, complex beings, the way men have. Women are reduced to one extremity or another. The kind of dualism which has been deeply harmful to women over the course of history has done the same sort of damage to the natural world. Piers H. G. Stephens states, “[I]t has primarily been in the modern era that a culture-nature dualism has joined other dualisms in

promoting an anthropocentric and strongly instrumentalist orientation to nature” (66). In this way, men and culture are allowed to exist in their complexity, whereas women and nature are reduced to being either dominated or idealized. We must call these kinds of socially constructed dualisms into question, and explore the way in which culture and nature interact with one another, and the way that masculinity and femininity need not be entirely mutually exclusive.

Ecofeminism suggests that we do away with hierarchies altogether but it seems that viewing nature with reverence, not idealization, might be a way of looking at nature with respect, not as being either below, or even above us on a hierarchical scale (N. Howell 233). If we saw nature as something that we have no right to exploit or even occupy, it seems that we might begin to treat it differently. Connectedness to nature might be a good thing, but reverence towards nature might be even more powerful than that. If we entered into natural spaces, knowing that we weren't really worthy of occupying them, we might be better about staying on trails, and not damaging the flora and fauna we encountered. If we could reclaim a sacred understanding of nature, we might be more gentle to the land on which we build our homes and produce our crops.

If we can begin to conceive of the natural world in a reverent way, we can understand ourselves as sharing a collective responsibility for the earth without needing to dominate it. A study by Annick Hedlund-de Witt interviewed nature-lovers, environmentalists, and spiritual practitioners of nature-based religions in order to better understand the spiritual dimensions of our experiences within nature and its relationship to environmental responsibility. Witt writes, “According to some participants, this sense of environmental responsibility is augmented precisely when these two pathways converge in an unmistakably spiritual experience of nature.

Other participants pointed out that it is the convergence of their love for nature and their senses of spirituality that compelled them to become environmentally active” (177). This suggests that developing a certain kind of spiritual reverence towards nature encourages a person to engage in more environmentally friendly practices. In a study that explored the effect of connectedness to nature and the relationship between mindfulness and engagement in pro-environmental behavior, Barbaro et al wrote, “[I]ndividual's who have a strong connection with nature are less likely to harm the environment because the self is embedded with nature, and thus, harmful behaviors would in essence be harming the self. Researchers have investigated the utility of connectedness to nature as a predictor of engagement in pro- environmental behavior and document this significant relationship in a number of studies” (138). This kind of connection and concern based on reverence allows for one to care about nature for more than its instrumental value. If we were able to alter the hierarchy in this way, we would no longer see ourselves as creatures who have a right to dominate the world, but who are fortunate to have the natural world to appreciate, and from which to gently receive life-sustaining resources from. It seems we ought to approach nature in the way which would be most beneficial to all living being, ourselves included, and it would appear that doing that would require us to possess a genuine sense of reverence for the earth as something beyond us, not as an anthropomorphized mother figure, but as something that exceeds our understanding.

In this way, we can begin to work against the objectifying, dualistic conception we have traditionally had of nature and move towards what ecofeminists, like Val Plumwood, propose as a more respectful, reverent view of our natural world. According to Plumwood, “[L]and ownership can be based on far more communal and narrative criteria that yield relationships that

are two-way and two-place, in which you belong to the land as much as the land belongs to you” (*Environmental Cultures* 229). She isn’t insisting that in making the shift towards understanding the land in a more subjective sense that we must also give up the notion of ownership altogether. What she is instead suggesting is that we ought to see land as something we have a reciprocal relationship with, not just something we exploit. Plumwood goes on to say, “[T]he land of belonging generally that is meaningful, filled with history, stories and the presence of ancestors” (*Environmental Cultures* 230). In this way, we might understand our relationship with the natural world to be something that is alive for us, and which we are able to have a deep connection with, beyond just what we might use it to produce. The ecofeminist understanding of our relationship to the world insists that it should not be something separate from the self.

We must, therefore, begin to move towards this radical reconception of our relationship to nature. Chaone Mallory agrees with this impulse, writing about the importance of maintaining “a harmonious nature/culture relationship” (63). Holding these kinds of patriarchal, hierarchal beliefs prove to be damaging both to nature and to women in similar kinds of ways. Men typically understand women as radically “other” from them, whereas feminists seek to understand these differences between the sexes in a productive manner, which help us better understand the way our gender impacts our identity. (Hartsock 58) In this same way, men have defined nature as radically “other” and separate from both themselves and from culture. What I wish to suggest, therefore, is that we begin to question our very understanding of “self” and “subjectivity” as radically separate from the natural world. It seems that we require a move towards seeing nature not as “other,” or possessing some great “Difference,” but rather as an

extension of the self or, at the very least, something possessing differences from the manmade world. But certainly not differences that would be significant ground for constructing hierarchy.

Connection to the Earth: Blurring the Lines Between Self and Nature

Of course, my own experiences are based on the particularities of my own identity. I grew up in suburbia, where nature was accessible to me, but not to the extent that I lived all the time in natural spaces. I'm able to find time in my schedule to go on hikes and explore new spaces, and I'm able-bodied, which allows me to freely engage in this kind of exploration. There are women who come from different backgrounds from my own, and therefore have a different perception on their relationship to nature. Even women with similar experiences to my own may still form drastically different opinions in regards to their sense of connectedness. These experiences are, of course, as important as my own, and our picture of ecofeminism would be incomplete without them.

How, then, are we to conceptualize the way ecofeminist women relate to nature if all of us are so different? After all, feminists appear everywhere on the spectrum of occupation, income, race, sexuality and a host of different identities (Hartsock 57). It seems necessary that we construct an ecofeminist space which is not dominated by wealthy, able-bodied, straight white women. We must open up the conversation to include as many different voices as possible. After all, the root of the kind of oppression we've been exploring is the socially constructed significance placed upon the kinds of differences that should not be allowed to define us. Hartsock maintains that "The discovery of the significance of socially constructed radical alterity

was directly connected to the discovery of the importance of power relations” (59). Feminism is rooted in the idea that our differences are something that should be acknowledged, but not something that should be allowed to construct “power relations.” Therefore, it seems that we ought to seek to construct a radically inclusive ecofeminism, which doesn’t place preference on individuals with certain identities. Ecofeminists further acknowledge that in the same way that women experience gender-based oppression, so too is our environment harmed by humans due to the fact that is perceived as separate from people and from our culture.

Certain identities are oppressed in distinct ways, and it is exactly this reality ecofeminists seek to address, which necessitates the construction of a movement that prioritizes marginalized voices. Noël Sturgeon argues that this idea that more privileged identities are often the ones that dominate these kinds of conversations. She explains “[W]hite middle-class ecofeminism, often in well-meaning ways, repeatedly appropriates the environmental activism of women of color and poor women” (“Privilege, Nonviolence and Security” 7). She goes on to explain that:

“[W]hite privilege...operate[s] to prevent those of us who are white feminist environmentalists from thoroughly understanding the ways in which environmentalism for non-dominant others is so deeply entwined with questions of economic justice. And I wanted to critique the tendency of some U.S. feminists to continuously and ruinously present "classism" as though it is a matter of personal prejudice rather than a structural foundation for other forms of inequality.” (“Privilege, Nonviolence and Security" 7)

The essence of her argument is that those engaged in ecofeminist conversations must be critical of more privileged identities dominating the conversation around ecofeminism. Because

ecofeminism is about exploring the intersection of sexism and anthropocentrism, it must make itself intersectional.

The intersectionality inherent in ecofeminism is exactly what makes it so powerful a movement. Personal experiences of domination allow women to feel this deeper level of sympathy towards the natural world and nonhuman entities (Vance 139). Keeping in mind the significance of our differences in altering our world view, let us now turn our attention to whatever element of femininity draws some ecofeminists to profess a deeper connection of women to nature than their male counterparts. We will begin by examining the idea of connectedness to nature, and how this connection has traditionally been expressed differently for men and women. And from there, we will turn our attention to the way our conception of our relationship to the natural world informs our behaviors.

Connectedness

Because men cannot as easily connect to the kind of domination inflicted upon the land as can their female counterparts, their capacity to feel an empathetic sense of connection to the natural world is limited. For example, even men who are committed to environmentalism, like Aldo Leopold, creator of the Land Ethic, have been guilty of operating under certain patriarchal assumptions when it comes to nature. Chaone Mallory offers a certain critique of Aldo Leopold, who created the environmental philosophy known as the Land Ethic. Leopold calls for a reconfiguring of humans' relationship to the land, and the animals and plants which make it up. He desires a shift from our anthropocentric view of the natural world towards one which is more ecocentric. Most feminists will agree with Leopold on these points, but will argue that the land

ethic is not sufficiently holistic, and that it ignored the kinds of ways domination permeates our culture in a number of interconnected ways beyond just that of men over the natural world (Mallory 62). These tensions are all well known and considered in the discourse that surrounds environmental philosophy, but where Mallory makes this conversation decidedly more interesting is in pointing out Leopold's fondness for hunting. According to Mallory, hunting is entirely contradictory to environmental ethics. Mallory writes, "Furthermore, and most damaging to the cause of environmental ethics, a conclusion must be reached that the animal is somehow "lower" or "lesser" than oneself in order to justify sacrificing its (vital) needs to one's own (nonvital) wants" (66). Basically, Mallory is saying that partaking in hunting relies entirely on placing yourself in a position above your animal prey. If one were to participate in hunting as a means of survival, it would be a different matter entirely; but Leopold engaged in hunting for sport. To the ecofeminist, it is clear that there is a contradiction in pushing for an ecocentric understanding of the world while also choosing to hunt purely for the thrill of it or, even, as a way of feeling that one is dominating the natural world. Because Leopold is operating under certain patriarchal ideas of domination and masculinity, he, having always been the predator in such situations, is unable to empathetically understand how problematic it is to create these kinds of predator/prey dichotomies.

In general, there appears to be a fundamental difference between a patriarchal understanding of what it would really look like to relate to other being and entities in a way that is strictly non-hierarchical and the way a feminist might understand such an organization. After all, the patriarchal society in which we find ourselves relies fundamentally on hierarchy, and the idea that differences necessitate domination (Eisenstein 202). Ecofeminists insist to the contrary that

one is able to possess power without that power being expressed over another human or non-human being. To shift our way of thinking towards a more flattened relationality that rejects hierarchy need not necessarily strip us of our power and agency as autonomous beings. It only insists that this power must not express itself in a dominating way (Hartsock 62). Instead, many ecofeminists will insist that the very idea of a hierarchy becomes senseless when we understand the intense connectedness that joins us to the natural world that surrounds us. In the words of John Seed, “‘I am protecting the rain forest’ becomes ‘I am part of the rain forest protecting myself. I am that part of the rain forest recently emerged into thinking’” (2) When we eliminate the hierarchical understanding of our relationship to nature, this interconnectedness becomes clear. Even in the less abstract sense, it is easy enough to imagine one’s very survival being wrapped up in the survival of the rainforest. After all, we require plants to produce oxygen to allow us to breathe. But in the more abstract sense, it seems possible to conceive of ourselves as being smaller parts in the larger picture of life, or, of all living beings having some fundamental connection that allows (or perhaps, forces) ourselves to be concerned for one another.

For many people, being in natural spaces allows one to more deeply feel this sense of connection to the nature around them, but it’s difficult to assess what this might actually mean in the context of a human/nature connection. By examining the contradictions in Leopold’s body of work, we can determine that the connectedness he felt with the natural world during a hunting trip is not the kind of connection we are looking for. An ecofeminist connection with the earth would necessitate feeling a non-hierarchical sense of connectedness to the natural world. Hunting relies upon hierarchies, so what might it look like to connect to earth in a less instrumental, dominating way? This kind of connection is well-articulated in certain writings by

Henry David Thoreau. He urges his readers to “Think of our life in nature,-daily to be shown matter, to come in contact with it,-rocks, trees, wind on our cheeks! The solid earth! The actual world! The common sense! Contact! Contact! Who are we? Where are we?” (Thoreau 95). Thoreau wants us to observe the parts of the natural world that we generally take for granted. To experience “matter” is so basic a thing that we don’t generally think of it with an attitude of wonder or reverence. The same is true for “rocks, trees, wind on our cheeks.” These are all things we can come into contact with without even thinking about it. But, to Thoreau, our ability to experience “the actual world” is not something that should be taken for granted. When Thoreau writes about “the actual world,” he is referring to the world as it really is beyond the human value we place upon it. To have the kind of contact that, for Thoreau, is worth exclaiming about is no small thing. Rocks and trees are not just random objects that litter our world, but are, instead, the basis for contact with something greater: something beyond ourselves which prompts us to ask the kinds of existential questions that Thoreau arrives at by the end of the passage. He is explaining what it feels like when we have these moments of intense connectedness. It seems possible that there might be certain experiences that open our eyes to the wonder of the natural world which surrounds us, especially those of us whose lives don’t largely consist of time spent outdoors and amidst the natural world.

Think, perhaps, of a time when you have gone on an extraordinarily long hike, and you are utterly exhausted. But then something happens: the sun rises, or you reach the peak of a mountain, and you seem to feel overwhelmed, in much the same way Thoreau does in this passage. Or perhaps you are exploring a part of nature unlike anything you have experienced before. Maybe you have never before explored the depths of a cavern, or seen a large, expansive

canyon in person. There are certain moments in our exploration of nature when, for whatever reason, we seem to feel overwhelmed with what we are experiencing, feeling filled with awe or gratitude or wonder. And don't these sorts of remarkable moments seem to impact us in a way that draws us to wonder at who and where we are, in the way that Thoreau describes? Are these experiences, in some way universal, or does the natural world evoke this kind of response in only certain people? We might also consider whether these moments of intense connection are experienced differently for women who identify as ecofeminists. It does seem that relating to nature in a patriarchal way prevents one from experiencing this kind of connection.

Where we find the challenge, however, is in how one might actively and consciously go about altering their worldview to allow for an ideology which looks at nature with neither domination or idealization, but instead a more humble sort of connected reverence. Even Val Plumwood, an ecofeminist philosopher who is well-versed in the problems at hand, does not generally offer us concrete solutions to move towards (Stephens 60). What we can do is examine what it might look like should we be able to embody this kind of reverence, and begin imperfect practices of this kind of behavior. Ivone Gerbara suggests that:

We experience a broader oneness with the life processes that are beyond our own boundaries. We praise ourselves; we praise the earth; we praise all being as we raise our voices in praise of the Trinity, using the symbolic language that is most dear to us. We include ourselves in the celebration. It is not just something apart from us; it starts with our own existential experience, in our communion with all forms of life and all cosmic energies (406)

The key here is the “oneness” that Gerbara refers to. When we “praise the earth” in a way that is directly connected to praising ourselves, we can do so in a way that isn’t in danger of becoming idealization. We recognize ourselves as an essential component of the larger natural world to which we are inextricably connected. Our recognition of nature in this particular reverent way is mediated by our understanding of ourselves as being connected to the natural world. This is significant for our philosophical understanding of our individual and collective relationship to the world around us in addition to having concrete, positive impacts on our pro-environmental behavior.

Impacts of the Self/Nature Relationship

Ecofeminists maintain that there is a connection between the oppression of women and the oppression of nature, but these kinds of ideas about connection seem to suggest that if humans can believe, or, perhaps, imagine that there is a connection between ourselves and nature, that we might become better environmentalists, seeing so concretely that the natural world is a part of us. It seems, then, that a relationship between ecofeminist women and the natural world that comes from a place of genuine connection rather than just a shared experience of oppression could, in fact, draw us to be better feminists and environmentalists. Indeed, the relationship does, in fact, flow both ways. A study conducted by Holloway et al examined a graduate class filled with women who, as part of their class, spent time together within nature, going on different hiking and camping trips. These women, who routinely spent significant amounts of time within nature, experienced this kind of deep connection we have been exploring and have attested to the fact that this connection to the natural world allowed them to better

cultivate relationships to other women in their lives, specifically, their mothers (Holloway et al 148-149). For all the problematic language that surrounds conceptualizing the earth as feminine, this seems, perhaps, to be a manifestation of a good thing that can come of this. If one realizes that they can connect to our earth in this particular, feminist way, then it would undoubtedly lead to stronger, deeper relationships to the people around oneself, particularly the women in one's life.

Because of studies like the one conducted by Holloway, it is evident that whether or not we feel connected to nature has an impact on the way we live our lives. But how, exactly does someone change as the result of this deeper sense of connectedness? In what way does one's identity as an ecofeminist inform the way they live their lives and inform their experiences within nature and promote a greater sense of environmental activism? In what ways is being with nature transformative? What are the larger implications of the renewal and revitalization I feel when I enter into natural spaces?

Women's Lived Experiences within Nature: Testimonies of Connectedness

One Saturday morning, I woke up to find myself feeling out of sorts. I felt strange and restless, but couldn't think of what the source of these feelings might be. This strange mood persisted all morning and so, in the early afternoon, I grabbed my hiking boots and climbed into my car. After a fifteen minute drive, I arrived at a familiar hiking trail. The path paralleled a narrow river and, as I walked along it, I felt as though the uncomfortable knot within me was slowly loosening and unwinding. I felt as though I was pulling individual threads from this knot that had been steadily building up inside of me. It was as though a weight was lifted from me, and I was able to breathe deeply once more. I came upon a part in the river where the smooth flow turned into rapids. I walked along several half submerged rocks and put my feet in the cold water where it was flowing most rapidly. Everything I'd been carrying around with me for the past several weeks came to the surface, where I could examine and process it before I let it wash away with the rushing water. When, at last, I stood up, finished my hike and returned home, I felt as though I had undergone a healing process that I didn't even know I needed. It is these strange mysterious experiences that draw me to wonder at our relationship to the natural world and what happens when we enter into it. I wonder at the ways in which men and women are conditioned to move through the world differently, and I imagine that this kind of socialization must impact, not only the way we inhabit our cultural world, but also our natural world. Reflecting upon the way that I feel similarly oppressed and dominated to the natural world around me, I can't help but marvel at

the connection I feel to the natural world. It is for this reason that I want to explore more fully the specific experiences that people, especially women, report upon meditation of their relationship to natural spaces.

The Nature Connection

Many women who identify as ecofeminists conceptualize their relationship with the natural world in ways that emphasize a connection to nature by virtue of a shared sense of domination oppression. However, there are, of course, a number of different identifications that impact the way different feminists relate to and conceptualize nature and culture. Indeed, Linda Vance argues “Many, if not most, liberal feminists have rejected nature altogether, throwing in their lot with culture; after all, that’s where the power is” (125). Indeed, many feminists want to reject the suggestion that there is an inherent connection between women and nature, because this connection has historically been a source of oppression. Therefore, many feminists would prefer to state that women are as much a part of culture as are their male counterparts.

However, there are other feminists who believe deeply in a feminine capacity to connect with the deep mysteries of the universe through such natural things as the stars, the sea, wind, rain and mountains (Gerbara 404). Gerbara believes that we are a part of the natural world and that, when we are able to remember this, that we are able to understand ourselves and nature coexisting (Gerbara 406). Living and nonliving members of the natural world cease to be something beyond ourselves and becomes instead part of a larger picture of which we are also a part. Gerbara is offering an ecofeminist view which promotes the belief that we can exist in “communion with all forms of life and cosmic energies” (406). The kind of mystical

understanding of the natural world that Gerbara is drawing our attention to is not limited to natural religions, but is, in fact, present in many faith traditions. Karen Baker-Fletcher explores the sacred Earth found in the book of Genesis. She states, “Out of mutual, loving, creative activity, all that we call life came into being. By the creative power of spirit ecosystems emerged in which special creatures, earth creatures (*Adam*) could live. A wildness, a free natural growth, is therefore part of all that lives” (Baker-Fletcher 430). The language we encounter here is not unlike what we might expect to read when exploring stories in more nature-centered religious practices, like the “creative power of spirit” that moves through all life. In almost all religious practices, we could find instances in which parts of nature were used as a sort of mediation between humans and the divine.

Belief in a human capacity to connect with nature on a deeper level is not limited to the more spiritual, emotional realm. In fact, many scientific studies have attempted to make sense of the human experience within nature. Andrew Howell et al, explained that feelings of connectedness to nature increases one’s sense of “vitality,” or “feeling alive,” which, in turn, leads to feelings of living meaningfully (A. Howell 1682). Howell et al writes, “[A] connection with nature is related to our search for both meaning and happiness. Therefore, to the extent that nature provides us with feelings and experiences of self-transcendence, connectedness, and continuity in an unstable world, affiliating with nature can enhance our sense of meaning in life, and ultimately lead to increased happiness and well-being” (Howell et al 1682-1683). His point is that feeling a connection to the natural world makes our lives feel more meaningful and joyful. There is something about being in natural spaces that makes us feel that there is something larger than our isolated human experience and that we are connected to this larger *something*. This

sense of connectedness to nature and to other beings with whom we share the earth brings joy and meaning to our lives.

Women's Lived Experiences within Nature

In order to better understand what it might look like to live out this sense of connectedness, let us examine a group of women whose identity inherently relies upon a sense of connection to the world around them. Kathi Wilson conducted a series of in-depth interviews with a population of aboriginal Anishinabek women in Canada. Wilson is interested, not only in the human/nature connection, but, more specifically, in the woman/nature connection that we are interested in exploring. She suggests that, “[L]istening to and learning from the contemporary voices of Aboriginal peoples provides us with the opportunity to create richer understandings of gender-nature connections” (Wilson 351). One of the women Wilson interviewed, an elder named Theresa, explained that her connection to nature was based on her understanding that “the Creator” provided the gift of life-giving to nature and to women (Wilson 343). For women like Theresa, connectedness to nature goes beyond A. Howell’s explanation of “vitality,” but is, in fact, an inextricable part of her spiritual practices as well as her identity as a woman. Wilson states, “The interviews revealed a common theme among all of the individuals that I interviewed; Anishinabek consider the land to be a female entity and a provider of all things necessary to sustain life and refer to her as Shkagamik-Kwe (Mother Earth)” (342). For this population of people, the sacred, feminine aspect of the earth is vital to their understanding of their relationship to the natural world. That the earth provides everything they need to survive leads them not to want to take advantage of it, but rather to express love and gratitude for the resources it provides.

Nature conceptualized in a spiritual sense is certainly part of the spiritual ecofeminist's conception of the feminine experience of nature. The women interviewed by Wilson consider nature to be a deeply important part of their spiritual experience. Women from diverse racial and ethnic background practice spiritualities and religions that are rooted in understanding of nature as sacred. Even women whose religious practices are not rooted in nature directly can still find that the natural world helps them to connect more readily to the divine (Witt 166).

Thinking of nature in a reverent or divine sort of way has a direct impact on the way people live their lives. There is evidence that suggests that the degree to which one feels a connection to nature can be a reliable predictor of whether or not they engage in environmentally conscious decisions. According to Geng et al, "[C]onnection with nature is a strong predictor of deliberate environmental behaviors" (6). Since a feeling of connectedness to nature is a strong predictor of pro-environmental behaviors, this kind of connectedness which we are exploring has practical significance beyond the philosophical considerations (Geng et al 3). Basically, when one feels that one is connected to the natural world, they internalize the idea that damage done to the earth is damage done to oneself. In this way, we begin to learn to empathise with the natural world and, in the same way that we don't wish damage upon ourselves, so too are we hesitant to let damage be done to the world around us. The question of women's connection to the natural world, therefore, is significant beyond her individual, abstract experience because it will impact whether or not she engages in environmentally friendly activities. Geng et al further determined that this kind of connection results not only in deliberate, intentional environmentally-conscious actions, but also "spontaneous environmental behavior" (7). This suggests that the connection

felt between self and nature is not purely mental and intellectual, but is also part of something more internalized and emotional.

For other women, the value they gain from spending time with nature and connecting with the natural world is more personal than practical. Judith A. Holloway et al reported the way in which women in a nature-centered graduate class conceptualized their relationship to women and the natural world before and after spending extended time in wilderness spaces with the other women in their class. These women reported a shift from overvaluing eurocentric industry and technology to an understanding that recognized the significance of older, more traditional practices that put greater emphasis upon nature. This was especially meaningful for women with significant generational differences between themselves and older members of their families. For example, one American-born woman of Chinese origin shared how her time spent in nature helped her place greater value in older cultural practices, which significantly affected her relationship with her Chinese-born immigrant mother (Hollway et al 149). In this case, her sense of connectedness to nature had a very real impact on her relationship to the people in her life.

Our worldview is significantly altered when we attempt to feel a connection the natural world. When we internalize this kind of connection, we are better able to conceptualize parts of nature as being inherently valuable beyond the use we gain from them. Linda Vance writes, “[W]e do not fight for the preservation and protection of wild rivers just so that present and future generations of affluent tourists can raft them, but also because their wildness resonated so deeply with our own, because we know ourselves what a joy it is to follow one’s own course” (136). In other words, she believes that when we feel this kind of connection, we have the capacity to regard things like rivers as good in themselves. Beyond human use, we are able to

recognize the significance of a river, because we can connect to the importance of “follow[ing] one’s own course.” Humans have the capacity to connect with other nonhuman creatures and things like forests and reefs (“The Wilderness Idea Revisited” 351). Nancy Howell maintains that, “[R]eforming the way that nature is valued should transform human relationships with nature” (234). Basically, she is saying that, if we can adopt an ecofeminist view of the natural world that emphasises connection, than our entire conception of nature will be altered. This shift is a necessary component if we want to begin to treat the earth with greater reverence and respect.

This sense of deep respect and reverence is at the heart of what we must accomplish if we wish to create a transformative, feminist environmental ethic. Indeed, Linda Vance states, “[E]cological history, despite its insistence on considering how the land and human consciousness interact, is still reductionist, still leaves no room for magic” (129). For many ecofeminists, this idea of “magic,” though initially it might sound a bit strange, is deeply important. Nature seems to offer something wondrous and mystical that we don’t often encounter in our culture-centered world. These spiritual ecofeminists want to embrace a magical, non-rational connection between women and nature (Wilson 334). They want to celebrate the magic of the earth and the magic of the connection between the earth and the feminine.

From here, we might ask what sort of worldview might emerge from the concepts we have explored so far. What does it mean if our environment is something truly mysterious and sacred that we are only able to connect to in ways that we cannot fully explain? Throw into the mix that our survival as a species relies upon our ability to strike a balance between needing to use certain of the Earth’s resources, and avoiding irreparable harm in the process. According to

Lori Swanson, this reality leads us to what Nel Noddings referred to as “An ethic built on caring.” According to Noddings, such an ethic is “characteristically and essentially feminine—which is not to say, of course, that it cannot be shared by men” (Noddings 8) (Swanson 87). Commitment to this kind of ethic would doubtless prove essential in working towards the ecofeminist project of reclaiming and reconstructing a reality that is not limited to male experiences, but instead demands incorporation of women’s perspectives (Vance 134).

Because the cultural and social realities are so indelibly linked, we must tackle both sides of this cyclical problem simultaneously (Ortner 87). Lindsay Van Gelder argues that, “When you see what the roots of the ecological crisis are, you realize that you can't save the planet without radically transforming the economy and creating social liberation at every level. Feminism is absolutely central to that, since it's made the most advanced critique of social domination. The only solutions at this point ultimately are radical” (Van Gelder 2002). Basically, she is saying that preventing ecological degradation requires drastic, radical changes to our many social structures. According to Van Gelder, the only way we can experience actual change is by embracing an ideology that resists domination on every level. We can accomplish this rejection of domination by embracing a connectedness which allows us to invest ourselves in nature through empathy rather than seeing it merely as a means to our human ends.

Final Thoughts

I'll conclude with a final story from my own experience within nature. I once went hiking in Estes park with my brother and my cousin. The closer we got to the peak, the more spectacular the view became. Finally, very near the top, there is a place where you can perch right at the

edge of a rocky outcropping and see for miles and miles of forests and mountains. I wanted to stop here and gaze at the earth beneath me for a while, feeling the way such a position makes you feel so small and yet so connected. My brother and cousin, on the other hand, insisted that we had to reach the top. On a previous trip, I'd seen the very top of the mountain, but it's so heavily forested that you can't experience the view the way you can at the place where I wanted to stop. I stayed where I was, while the two men insisted that they needed to reach the top. For them, hiking in the mountains necessitated reaching the peak as a mark of having accomplished something and proved their mastery over nature. At that moment, reflecting on my hike and, at this moment now, having reached the end of my thesis and returning to this memory, I find myself reflecting on the journey I have taken. I'm thinking about how we teach boys to dominate and that we teach girls that they are dominable. I'm thinking about the price I and other women pay to be relate more deeply to the natural world. We feel the pain of resources being stripped from nature because we've felt used and disregarded. We feel the pain done to our planet because we know what it means to have violence done against our bodies. But, of course, I also know women who would have insisted upon reaching the top of that mountain, and I'm friends with men who would have been content to sit with me without having reached the top. We shouldn't raise anyone to dominate or to be dominated. We don't need domination or hierarchy. Instead, we need connection, now more than ever. We live in a world that wants us to think of our differences and what divides us rather than the powerful link that connects us all together. We need to look of the cliff face and realize that we are only a very small being perched on a mountain and discover the wonder of contact that we have forgotten.

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