

Cyber/Ecofeminism

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INTRODUCTION

Cyber/ecofeminism is a holistic concept that I have coined and adopted to approach the burning issues of information technology, women's studies, and the women's movement in the age of globalization. It serves as an ethno- and gender-sensitive compass towards eco-social sustainability in an era where technology has an increasing impact on all aspects of life. In order to resist the Master identity that women, along with men, risk embracing, as they get plugged, downloaded, and wired into the digital world, one needs to introduce alternatives to the models of "compulsory heteronormativity," dichotomous and hierarchical sex/gender systems, as well as dysfunctional, exploitative animal/human relations. The dominant worldview is a world of "bits" and pieces—fragmented, atomistic, and hierarchical. It echoes in this like the hidden gender contract with its binary structure, segregation and splitting of male rationality of production and female care and emotional labor. Cyber/ecofeminism is my method and approach also for exploring which of the schools—cyberfeminism OR ecofeminism—promises more hope for a woman-friendly, ecologically, economically, socially, and culturally stable and sustainable future.

ECOFEMINISM

Françoise d'Eaubonne first invented and used the term ecofeminism in *Le Féminisme ou la mort* (1989). Ecofeminism has since then been associated with the premise that in global patriarchal practices, women, animals and nature share a subordinate and instrumental relationship to hegemonic, mainstream, and dominant men. The s/exploitive attitude is rooted in the Western epistemic tendency to separate feelings and care work as the domain of the subordinate class (particularly women) from reason and productive "rationality," the domain of men and mostly

white elites. Denial of feeling-based knowledge and empathy enhances the ability to distance oneself from objects both of research and economic profit—a precondition for the kind of "rationality" that ignores the global ethics of care, belonging, and responsibility. Furthermore, underprivileged groups are subject to patterns, attitudes, and institutions of male domination and control that tend to also be gendered "feminine" as one of the means of that control in many parts of the world. Ecofeminists (for all their differences) see humans as integral components of the ecosystem, not separate or superior. Yet another key principle is the importance of non-hierarchical systems which follows from the holistic emphasis on interdependence and which leads to the complementarity and equal status of all parts of the ecosystem (Davies, 1988, p. 5; Merchant, 1992, pp. 76-78; Longenecker, 1997) argues that our notions of nature and ourselves change qualitatively if we imagine nature, not just humans, as subjects. It is much easier to exploit and abuse entities not perceived as having a soul, whatever "soul" or "spirit" evokes for modern people. A mechanistic interpretation of the surrounding cosmos is likely to lead to commodification of animals and vulnerable groups and serves ecologically short-term interests. Ancient pre-patriarchal gift economies in all their variety (Kailo, 2000, 2004a, 2005a, 2005b) were based on a worldview that was more conducive to mutually respectful and grateful human/animal relations because of the recognition of interspecies interdependency and the core value of life renewal rather than resource extraction: "In practical terms, hunter-gatherers would have to be the affluent societies par excellence. They are self-sufficient and thus genuinely autonomous. They have a stable interchange with their habitat, they use low-impact technologies—they work only a few hours a day, and give energies to social bonds, ceremony and art. Ecologists taking a lesson from Aboriginal cultures might discover how to devise low—demand, low-impact economies where sustainability and social equity

can go together ... (Salleh, 1997, p. 130). Western industrial and patriarchal cultures have much to learn from “pan-indian” ecologically sustainable philosophies and worldviews in all their diversity although individual members of Native nations do not always practice what their cultural traditions promote.

CYBERFEMINISM

One of the perceived strengths of cyberfeminism is that it presents women with an optimistic alternative to theoretical positions that relegate women to the status of victims or glorified mothers within a context of a vilified omnipresent patriarchy. By focusing on women’s abilities and contributions, cyberfeminist perspectives resist reproducing patriarchal constructions of women as technologically incompetent who cannot be wired into technology. Such views are influenced by post-modern theories, and owe much to the widely cited “Manifesto for Cyborgs” by Donna Haraway (1991). Haraway’s article is an effort to displace traditional dualisms that associate women with nature and men with culture and technology. She does this through the cyborg seen as providing a theoretical way out of common western gender relations and representations. The cyborg is presented as breaking down the division between the artificial and the natural because this distinction is no longer practical in modern technological society. For Haraway, woman is the representation, no longer of marginality, otherness, objecthood, but of the middle ground between humans and machines, the virtual hybrid creatures that everyone is supposedly becoming: “A cyborg is ... a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction” (Kemp, 1997, p. 480). One important route for reconstructing socialist-feminist politics is through theory and practice addressed to the social relations of science and technology, including crucially the systems of myth and meanings structuring our imaginations. She concludes the manifesto with her famous statement: “Although both are bound in the spiral dance, I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess” (Haraway in Kemp, 1997, p. 482). Perhaps the best-known ecofeminist, Vandana Shiva retorts to her in *Stolen Harvests. The Hijacking of the Global Food Supply* (2000, p.

75) “I would rather be a sacred cow than a mad cow,” underscoring the optimism of cyberfeminists, and referring to the downside of cyberprogress—its links with economic greed and the devastating manipulations of unsustainable agribusiness. Sadie Plant also believes that the Internet is triggering most promising debates about gender, race, ethnicity, and class because its users have new possibilities now to act without revealing these variables of identity. Finally, women’s condition as the other is becoming that of men: “To become the cyborg, to put on the seductive and dangerous cybernetic space like a garment, is to put on the female. If the male human is the only human, the female cyborg is the only cyborg” (Plant, in Kemp, 1997, p. 506). Plant shares in the optimism of a digital age where women so to speak come to their own as web spinners and spider women—arts needed to surf the waves of the digital age (Kailo, 2002a).

Gift circulating archaic societies honoring women, animals, and nature through ritual drama are some counter-patriarchal areas of ecofeminist research. Their “gift logic” valorizes meeting everyone’s social needs and creating the conditions of basic abundance for all. Cyberfeminisms focus more on the ways in which humans and machines are intertwined and the opportunities opened up by women’s integration into the technology-led information society. Although ecofeminists seek to extend an ethic of care and eco-social responsibility to boys and men, not glorifying girls and women as “the angels in the ecosystem” they have been accused of consolidating the stereotype of women’s closeness to women and animals. Cyberfeminists have been more motivated to sever this connection. They have not always considered that ecofeminists’ key point often is the failure of men to embrace the eco-social values labeled as “feminine.” They have been delegated as the duty and realm primarily of women—something feminists feel must be changed if the brave new information society is to become a just and healthy world for all.

COMBINING ECOFEMINISM AND CYBERFEMINISM

On the basis of my research regarding the eco-social impact of neo-liberal globalization, I have grown

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