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# WAR

in American Culture

CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS

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# WAR IN AMERICAN CULTURE

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## ECOFEMINISM: IS IT GOING TO END WARS?

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A conference on “War in American Culture” is an excellent opportunity to heighten our awareness that we live in an interdependent global village, and to discuss the possibilities of maintaining a sane status quo for our troubled Earth. In this context, the ecofeminist movement and ecofeminist visual arts that have been challenging the present world order, provide a new perspective to wars in all cultures, throughout history.

There is no question, we live in a culture based on domination, authority, and power. Wars are a direct outcome of this patriarchal culture, their inevitability being one of the unquestioned givens. This is so ever since recorded history began. According to ecofeminists, we are warrior cultures because, since historic times, the world has been viewed as inert matter and not a living organism. The starting point of ecofeminism, however, is the idea that the Earth is alive, a ~~single~~ living organism, and not inert matter, and that everything (human / non-human) is interconnected in this web of life. In order to bring about this shift in consciousness, ecofeminists rely on the ancient Goddess cultures, for, as recent archeological evidence indicates, prehistoric peoples were in close harmony with the living Earth, and their settlements were peaceful and harmonious. As compared to the last five thousand years of patriarchy, this period that lasted some thirty thousand years was alien to the idea of war.

There is a huge body of ecofeminist literature now based on the knowledge of this early period and the following patriarchy. According to ecofeminists, humanity’s detachment from the Goddess is the prime source of wars and all sorts of destruction because plundering the natural world and poisoning all organic life on it can not matter less for people who hold the view that the world is inert matter. According to ecofeminists, if a shift to an “earth-based spirituality” can be materialized, not only ecological crisis, but also wars will be removed from the Earth. In this sense, then, ecofeminists are primarily peace-makers. They have an

ardent belief that they can end the patriarchal obsessions of dominance, control, and wars through ecofeminism—a movement that has arisen from the convergence of the rising ecology movement and the re-emergence of the ancient Goddess cultures.

There is a growing ecology movement all around the globe. Ecology, “the study of interdependence and interconnectedness of all living systems” (Plant 155), is trying to establish the notion that there is no absolute divide between human nature and non-human nature. The ecology movement has been an inevitable consequence of rising problems like nuclear waste, global warming, the hole in the ozone layer, deforestation, water and air pollution, the extinction of animal species, etc. One confronts each one of these devastating problems awaiting urgent solution even at a quick glance at the newspaper and TV everyday, and can no longer remain indifferent to facts, a striking example of which is the 200,000 tons of nuclear waste produced all around the globe in the last 37 years. All these environmental problems threaten life on Earth.

But, perhaps, as documented in recent studies, the single most important threat to life on Earth is patriarchal militarism. Chris Cuomo, in his work, “War is not just an event: Reflections on the significance of everyday violence,” elaborates on the damage done to ecosystems through everyday military violence. With reference to William Thomas’ book *Scorched Earth: The Military’s Assault on the Environment*, Cuomo explains that “including peacetime activities as well as the immense destruction caused by combat, military institutions probably present the most dramatic threat to ecological well-being on the planet. The military is the largest generator of hazardous waste in the United States, creating nearly a ton of toxic pollution every minute” (Cuomo 43). Cuomo goes on to say that “The United States Department of Defense generates 500,000 tons of toxins annually, more than the world’s top five chemical companies combined. The military is the biggest single source of environmental pollution in the United States” (Cuomo 43). So, if this is 500,000 tons of toxins in the United States only, just think how huge this number is when we think of the toxins produced by the militaries all around the globe.

It is important to point out that military’s assault upon the environment is



not just an ecological issue; it is also a feminist issue, because, as ecofeminist writer Carolyn Merchant explains, women's "bodies, or the bodies of those with whom they have a caring relationship, are threatened by toxic or radioactive substances" (Merchant xviii).

Synchronic with the ecology movement, there is a growing interest in the pre-historic Goddess cultures. Archaeological discoveries of pre-historic cultures back up the ecologist in that, once, when Goddess was worshipped, people believed in the interconnectedness of all forms of life. The excavation of Neolithic sites such as Çatal Hüyük in Turkey reveals the peaceful lifestyles of pre-historic peoples (for there is no trace of weapons) and bears promise of an impact on the present warrior cultures.

The extensive amount of archaeological research particularly done by the feminist archaeologist Marija Gimbutas reveals that ancient cultures from 26000 BC to 3000 BC were "matrifocal, largely peace loving, and earth- and sea-bound" (Orenstein 1990b, 13). They revered nature and respected women as they carried and nurtured life. The divinity was a Goddess, a female deity, because of her agricultural fertility and seasonal cyclicality. It is important to point out that Goddess worship did not privilege women over men. Instead, it brought about complete egalitarianism, because it meant our oneness with all of nature. So, this knowledge about our past, that for thousands of years before the patriarchal take-over there was no war and that people believed in the interconnectedness of all forms of life, is converging with what the ecologists are trying to establish now.

Ecofeminism derives its power from both of these sources. In the words of the art historian, Elinor W. Gadon, it is "a new political philosophy bringing together feminism and ecology, a natural coalition focused on the web of life in which all humans are embedded" (Gadon 358).

Concerning the origins of the movement, Carolyn Merchant explains,

Ecofeminism, emerged in the 1970's with an increasing consciousness of the connections between women and nature. The term, "ecofeminisme," was coined by French

writer Francoise d'Eaubonne in 1974 who called upon women to lead an ecological revolution to save the planet... Developed by Ynestra King at the Institute for Social Ecology in Vermont about 1976, the concept became a movement in 1980 with a major conference on "Women and Life on Earth" held in Amherst, Massachusetts and the ensuing Women's Pentagon Action to protest anti-life nuclear war and weapons development. (Merchant 5)

Very much like the ecology movement, the ecofeminist movement attributes the damage done to the Earth to the patriarchal system. Ecofeminists think, militarism and the patriarchal warrior have played a large role in destroying life, and thus, they refuse to be a part of this deceased system. As Carol P. Christ maintains, "to engage in wars of conquest in order to exploit other people's labor and take the resources of their land is to forget that we are all connected in the web of life" (Christ 1990, 66). Ecofeminism is, then, in the words of one ecofeminist writer who envisions the earth as a living being, a new term for "ancient wisdom. Lost and now refound" (Russell 223). The revival of this "ancient wisdom," of the Goddess reverence, according to ecofeminists, can be the basis for resacralizing the Earth; it can be the basis for a peaceful world order.

The ecofeminist perspective also finds support in "The Gaia Hypothesis" of the scientist James Lovelock. Lovelock, who is an original member of the NASA team that developed the Moon and Mars space flights, explains his scientific theory in his books *Gaia: A new look at life on Earth*, *The Ages of Gaia, A Biography of Our Living Earth*, and *Gaia: The Practical Science of Planetary Medicine*. He repeatedly explains, that we should view Earth (or Gaia) as a living organism, not simply as inert rock. Indeed, as Riane Eisler points out, "what is most striking about the Gaia hypothesis is that in essence it is a scientific update of the belief system of Goddess-worshipping prehistoric societies" (Eisler 26).

There is an ever-increasing body of ecofeminist works now based on the knowledge of the ancient Goddess. The ecofeminist movement is gaining more

and more importance everyday with the publication of each new book. Carolyn Merchant, Charlene Spretnak, Starhawk, Susan Griffin, Irene Diamond, Gloria Feman Orenstein, Marti Kheel, Ynestra King, Riane Eisler, Judith Plant, and others, are all trying to create a new culture based on a reverence for the Earth. All of these writers have contributed to this movement with their works dedicated to subverting patriarchal forms of authority and healing our planet. Perhaps, Carol P. Christ, is one of the most influential names for the ecofeminist movement, for she is the one who maintains that we need a new symbol system to subvert the predominantly authoritarian male cultures, that a symbol for an immanent Goddess can lead to a transformation in consciousness. "Symbols," says Christ, "have both psychological and political effects, because they create the inner conditions (deep-seated attitudes and feelings) that lead people to feel comfortable with or to accept social and political arrangements that correspond to the symbol system" (Christ 1993, 701). According to Carol P. Christ, the symbolism of God the father legitimates "the political and social authority of fathers and sons in the institutions of society" (Christ 1993, 702). Thus, she proceeds to explain the significance of Goddess symbolism to subvert the domineering influence of the hidden structures embedded in patriarchal culture.

Indeed, this is the point where ecofeminist artists gain importance since their goal is to establish a new symbol system to be rid of the on-going warrior cultures. We have suggested that the ecofeminist movement bears promise of healing our planet. And, yet, ecofeminist arts are an indispensable part of this movement. Gloria Feman Orenstein, in her work "Artists as Healers: Envisioning Life-Giving Culture," points at the power of ecofeminist arts in substantiating the claims of ecofeminist literature. She says,

In the creation of new cultures that neither pit humans against nature nor set them above it, but rather situate us within the cycles of the cosmos and celebrate the interconnectedness of all things, the arts have begun to play a major transformational part. This, in itself, makes



ecofeminism a different kind of political movement, for instead of viewing the arts as adjuncts to political activity or as distractions from political activism, ecofeminism considers the arts to be essential catalysts of change. (Orenstein 1990a, 279)

Ecofeminist artists argue that if the patriarchal symbol systems are responsible for people's conception of the world as inert matter, now a new symbol system is needed to tell us it is not. To secure this transformation in consciousness, they know that they first need an image of the alternative culture they want to create. The Goddess iconography meets the demands of the artists as the Goddess has become "a metaphor for the earth as a living organism" (Gadon xv). Starhawk, a leader in the ecofeminist movement, declares, "it is an old magical secret that the way we define reality shapes reality. Name a thing and you invoke it. If we call the world nonliving, we will surely kill her. But when we name the world alive, we begin to bring her back to life" (Starhawk 8). Indeed, all ecofeminist arts with the Goddess iconography (and women's body associated with the living Earth) are attempts "to bring her back to life," and to resacralize the Earth so that this, in turn, can pave the way for a peaceful world order.

A close look at what Gloria Feman Orenstein calls "The feminist matristic arts" tells us ecofeminist artists are too numerous to mention in this limited space. Nevertheless, a sampling of their otherwise diverse interests under several headings may illuminate their contribution to the ecofeminist movement and, more importantly, to the world peace. The theme of the interconnectedness of all forms of life, of the integration of the ancient Goddess with the theme of the rebirth of Goddess, of the suppression of the Goddess, and of conveying the whole Earth image, all leading to a holistic ethos, find expression in the works of each one of the ecofeminist artists, whether mentioned in this paper, or not.

In connection with the theme of the interconnectedness of all forms of life, and of spirit embodied in the material world, ecofeminist artists make extensive use of the associations between women's body and the Earth. One important name in this context, one of the earliest artists to identify nature with women's



body is Georgia O'Keeffe. Indeed, her paintings, such as *Purple Hills Near Abiquiu* (1935), and numerous others, in which landscape evokes a female body, gives expression to the idea that the Earth is the Great Mother from which all life emerges. Judy Chicago's *Earth Birth* (1963), from her well-known *Birth Project* is another powerful example for the connection between women and nature. The depiction of the female body extending over the landscape, merged in the contours of the landscape, tells us humans are a part of the living organism that is the Earth. Frida Kahlo's work, entitled, *Roots* (1943), in which Frida "linked her very body with the chain of life" (Herrera 315), is perhaps an early source of inspiration for Chicago's *Earth Birth*. The painting depicting Frida's body extending over the landscape and "nourishing" nature "by giving birth to a vine" (Herrera 315) reminds us of the web of life in which all is all and one. The works of Judy Baca and Betty LaDuke, and the performance art of Ana Mendieta, further point at the profound connections in the web of life. They all express the artists' wish to become deeply embedded in the Earth.

Among the artists that evoke the ancient Goddess, indicating Her re-birth in our times, perhaps, the performance artist and sculptor Vijali is one of the most prominent names. The site sculptors that she carves in rocks of the Goddess is her way of saying the Earth is alive. Her works such as, *She Who Opens the Doors of the Earth* (1982), connects us to the ancient Earth Mother of Laussel (ca. 20.000—18.000 B.C.E.) carved in rock at the entrance of a cave in France, symbolizing sacred female and sacred Earth. Nancy Spero's *Rebirth of Venus* (1984) informs us of the arrival of a new age after 5000 years of patriarchy. The nude woman in the work emerging out of the headless pre-historic Goddess resembles the headless Goddess figurine found at Çatal Hüyük in Turkey, a site that reveals great evidence of Goddess-worshipping peoples in the Neolithic era. The work, entitled, *Second Encounter with the Great Goddess* (1982), by Hélène de Beauvoir, again features a contemporary nude woman facing a pre-historic Cretan Goddess. Both Spero's *Rebirth of Venus* and Beauvoir's *Second Encounter with the Great Goddess* serve to teach the women in our times the necessity to abandon male definitions of power and to repossess their powers via

the forgotten goddesses of the past. The performance artist Betsy Damon, too, with her performance piece, *The 7000 year old woman* (1977), connects us to the ancient goddess, in this case to Artemis of Ephesus, the many breasted Goddess of Nature. Betsy Damon, in the ritual garment of Artemis, chooses to evoke a fertility goddess, for she sees wars as a threat to the fertility of the Earth and women. What she wants to say is that in Gloria Orenstein's words, "If we are not mindful of the Earth's fertility, we will be plunged into a nightmare world from which all fertility, human and nonhuman, will be totally erased" (1990b, 14).

In connection with the theme of the suppression of the Goddess, a number of ecofeminist artists portray the devastating effects of abusive power in the absence of the matriarchal principles. In Judy Chicago's *The Fall* from her latest installation *The Holocaust Project* (1993) the female forms connected to the Earth are threatened by male warrior forms who are depicted as being separate from nature. The land itself, depicted in female form, is wounded by the weapons of male forms.

Jim Ann Howard's *Reunion* (1988), depicting female form below sea waters, expresses female creative power, her holistic vision, driven underground by patriarchy. Sacred land beyond the edge of the sea has become desolate, as represented in the lifeless tree, by the suppression of the Goddess in the depths of the sea. As Elinor Gadon reveals, "Jim Ann Howard's Goddess correctly assesses the current state of things. She has not yet fully reestablished her territory. We have to face the death of old values before the healing can begin" (Gadon 255). Susan Maberry's performance piece *Revelations of the Flesh* (1985), also features the destruction of the sacred land by the patriarchal system. Susan Maberry, posing nude on desolate land, on the day after the Nuclear Holocaust as the Earth Mother of Willendorf (ca. 25000 B.C.E.), tells us that we would not have had Hiroshima and Nagasaki if Willendorf had not been suppressed, and, thus, she is reconnecting us to this ancient Goddess to remind us of the sacredness of the Earth.

Finally, a number of ecofeminist artists, as an expression of their concerns for global peace, depict a whole Earth image from outer space since "From this

transcendent perspective the Earth seems one unit and the political borders over which so much blood is spilt illusory” (Garb 275). Asungi’s *Odduda—Mother of the Universe* (1982), Charleen Touchette’s *Deer Mother Vision* (1988), John Fadden’s *Iakonkwe* (1981) are some of the works featuring the Earth from a “transcendent perspective.” In each one of these works, the Earth is shown next to, or superimposed on, Goddesses or women’s bodies indicative of their transmitting their healing energies onto the Earth so that the peaceful world order of the Goddess may replace the diseased one of patriarchy. Such concerns for bringing about global peace also surface in the performance art of Vijali and Helene Aylon who both use the entire globe. Vijali’s *World Wheel*, a series of environmental sculptures and performance events around the world, Helene Aylon’s *Sister Rivers* and other performance pieces, in which Helene Aylon sails sacs filled with sand or earth (“as the visual metaphor through which to call attention to our threatened planet” (Gadon 360)) down the rivers of the world—which she envisions as the arteries and veins of the Mother Earth, are important works in awakening us to the need to save the planet.

Indeed, all ecofeminist literature and arts reclaiming the wisdom of the past in the symbol of the Goddess are energy constructs. The writer’s/artist’s goal is that the reader/viewer takes that energy and turns it into creative change in the process of dismantling all oppressive structures of domination and subordination. It must be recognized that the Goddess is not an empowering image for women only, but for all humankind in the one great web of life. “Let us reaffirm our ancient covenant, our sacred bond with our Mother, the Goddess of nature and spirituality,” says Riane Eisler, “Let us renounce the worship of angry gods wielding thunderbolts or swords. Let us once again honor the chalice, the ancient symbol of the power to create and enhance life—and let us understand that this power is not woman’s but also man’s” (Eisler 34).



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