

## Sacred Genealogies: Spirituality, Materiality, and the Limits of Western Feminist Theoretical Frames

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*With awe and wonder, you look around, recognizing the preciousness of the earth, the sanctity of every human being on the planet, the ultimate unity and interdependence of all beings—somos todos un paíz. Love swells in your body and shoots out of your heart chakra, linking you to everyone/everything... This conocimiento motivates you to work actively to see that no harm comes to people, animals, ocean—to take up spiritual activism and the work of healing. (Gloria Anzaldúa, “now let us shift ...” 558)*

Despite her reverence for the more-than-human world, Gloria Anzaldúa is not considered an ecofeminist. Her work is foundational in Chicana studies and many have taken up her critique of the socio-spatial politics of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands if not her related concern with the region's environment. Her groundbreaking *Borderlands/La Frontera* gained prominence during the 1990s when ecofeminism started to draw heavy criticism, in part for expressions of spirituality not unlike those named by Anzaldúa as necessary in her pursuit of eco-social justice. The once promising mode of analysis that some hoped would guide feminism into a less anthropocentric third wave began to look embarrassingly regressive. As Niamh Moore explains, “The growing dominance of poststructuralist feminism in the academy – and the related commitment to anti-essentialism – has contributed to the abjection and repudiation of essentialist positions, often identified with radical feminism, spiritual feminisms, and ecofeminism” (“Ecofeminism as Third Wave” 229). While Chicana feminists did not abject the spiritual elements from their work in the same way that spiritual discussions were sidelined in mainstream feminism, the threat of ecofeminism's essentialism embedded in a narrow conception of radical cultural feminism put many off. Malia Davis interviewed Chicana environmental activists in the U.S. Southwest, many

of whom spoke about the oppression they experienced and the degradation of their environment. Some even used a maternalist language of care to describe their activism, yet they disavowed ecofeminism. Her interviewees believed it to be a white feminist movement that fails to address differences of race and class; Davis's interviewees also wanted to address the environmental impacts on men in their communities and they believed ecofeminism had no room for such concerns (214-217). Davis and others (Kirk, O'Loughlin, Peña) argued that if ecofeminists could not look at environmental activism by Chicana/o activists, which includes recognition of culturally and spiritually significant uses of the land, without coopting the movement or minimizing the differences among approaches, then there is little incentive to coalesce across approaches.<sup>1</sup> Thus, for Chicana eco-social justice actors, if ecofeminism could not account for the intersectionality of oppression then it was poorly equipped for the decolonial work of those questioning land and water access in the U.S. Southwest, or discriminatory labor policies that bring a largely Latino workforce into toxic and backbreaking agricultural industries, for example.

It is not my intention to fold Chicana environmentalisms into ecofeminism; in *Ecological Borderlands* (forthcoming 2016), I detail the unique environmentalism that grows out of the conditions that shape Mexican-American women's lives in the U.S. Southwest. Rooted primarily in Chicana studies, the bulk of that work explores histories of art, activism, and theory building among Mexican-American women in the varied bioregions that comprise the U.S. Southwest. In this essay, I more specifically explore ecofeminist genealogies and their exclusions, underscoring how the anti-spiritual backlash against ecofeminism developed. This anti-spiritualism may have impacted Chicana feminist scholars concerned that backlash contamination would delegitimize the twined spiritual and ecological threads that show up in Anzaldúa's body of work and the case study by Amalia Mesa-Bains described later. This essay stages a conversation between ecofeminist and Chicana studies audiences that are not often in conversation with each other.<sup>2</sup> New growth can occur between the two fields once the epistemological ground of given

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<sup>1</sup> On cultural uses of the land, see Prindeville; Peña; Pulido and Peña; and Kirk.

<sup>2</sup> Instead of ecofeminism, many Chicana/o studies scholars employ an environmental justice framework to analyze eco-social injustices because of its grassroots origins and its consistent embrace of spiritual healing within environmentally degraded human and more-than-human communities ("Principles of Environmental Justice"). However, there are some gender-related blind spots in the scholarship of environmental justice scholars. In addition, environmental justice research has been produced largely by social scientists. Thus, scholars in that field have not been as adept as ecofeminists at understanding the role of cultural production in eco-social justice struggles (Adamson et al.; Parra; Holmes).

genealogies is turned over. This is especially important because ecofeminism is currently finding new popularity with strains that have made their way into gender and sustainable development studies and new materialist feminisms, but to do so they have had to evacuate the spiritual dimensions of ecofeminist theory and practice. The time is ripe to revisit the tensions between ecofeminist and Chicana environmentalisms, particularly around their intersecting interests in spirituality. I review two comprehensive ecofeminist genealogies to track the stories that have been rehearsed in feminist dismissals of spirituality. I then look to theologians and religious studies scholars for advice: how can we take spirituality and religion seriously again in ecofeminism? Is there room to respect religion even in feminist environmental safe houses, whether socialist and development-oriented or science-infused new materialist approaches? Finally, I turn toward Chicana feminism for an appraisal of spirituality, including its entanglement with nature. I consider artist Amalia Mesa-Bains's installations as a case study to illustrate what Chicana environmentalisms could teach us about materiality, spirituality, and the specificity of positionality.

### **Becoming Ecofeminism: Genealogical Sedimentations**

Much has been written on the topic of feminist environmental activism and the possible linkages between women and nature; predictably, there is some disagreement on what exactly it means to be ecofeminist. Tensions produce lively debate, and ideas about the field have consolidated as much through the work of self-identified ecofeminists as from the field's critics. Despite ecofeminism's multicentered and transnational roots, many genealogies offer the same origin story, noting that the term was coined in 1974 by Francoise d'Eaubonne as she described how the oppression of women and nature are linked. They rarely cite activist histories though they may reference Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* or Lois Gibbs's activism at Love Canal, which leaves a sense that ecological feminism originated within a Western context.<sup>3</sup> Such histories then thread through Western theorists such as Mary Daly, Ynestra King, Carolyn Merchant, Karen Warren, and Val Plumwood; because of this, contemporary ecofeminists and critics tend to categorize ecofeminist theories according to the tenets of particular

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<sup>3</sup> Sandilands discusses the ways in which Gibbs and Carson are not only hailed as the foremothers of American ecofeminism, but are scripted as "eco-crusaders" for a "motherhood environmentalism" that relocates environmental politics into the private sphere, figuring women as green consumers and protectors of the family; this supports a conservative family values agenda (xi-xxi). She is justifiably wary of ecofeminist formulations that appeal to maternalist narratives for these reasons.

threads of Western feminist theory.<sup>4</sup> Histories of ecofeminism that position it as a project with its origin, central claims, and objects of study grounded in the lives of white, middle-class, Western academics produce exclusions: they do not shed much light on decolonial traditions critical of Western feminist theoretical paradigms (Sandoval, E. Pérez).

In light of the perceived decline of ecofeminism in the Western academy, recent years have seen the publication of a number of good ecofeminist genealogies that have asked after dominant themes within the field as well as points of rupture: Where are the claims of essentialism coming from? Are they justified? If so, how have ecofeminists responded? In addition, what kind of political work does an accusation of essentialism do? Catriona Sandilands and Erika Cudworth offer book-length investigations that, while underscoring the importance of linking feminism and ecology together, nevertheless point out some of the problematic ways ecofeminism has evolved. Sandilands's genealogy follows ecofeminists as they grapple with questions of identity and standpoint; after noting the limitations of identity politics within various iterations of ecofeminist theory, she argues for a post-identitarian, poststructural ecofeminism that performatively disrupts "woman" and "nature" as given, fixed categories. In contrast, Cudworth is interested in the ways ecofeminists have explained systems of oppression (i.e. Does patriarchy oppress both women and nature? Does capitalism? How do these systems collaborate and coevolve?). Cudworth is wary of postmodern ecofeminisms that she believes undermine the power of structural analysis; ultimately, she advocates an intersectional, multiple systems approach that displaces the emphasis on patriarchy as the overdetermining site of oppression for humans and the more-than-human world.

Despite their different aims and theoretical orientations, their genealogies are surprisingly similar as they frame ecofeminist theory production through the 1970s and 80s in terms of conceptual poles: Sandilands explores radical feminism and the socialist feminist reappraisals of "the nature question" that critiqued it, while Cudworth uses Mary Mellor's "affinity" and "social" explanations of the women-nature link to chart similar terrain. Affinity ecofeminism emphasizes "spirituality, and the physical bodily experiences of women, which encourage

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<sup>4</sup> See Tong for an overview of the schools of Western feminist theory referenced in the genealogies (e.g. liberal, radical libertarian, radical cultural, Marxist and socialist, and postmodern feminisms). Gaard's recently published "Ecofeminism Revisited" is not organized in terms of successive waves of feminist theory. It is notable for its attention to diverse activisms (e.g. animal welfare, midwifery, maldevelopment, ecofeminist spiritual practices, bioregionalism) and its greater coverage of the regionalism of various ecofeminisms—including conferences, theorists, and social movements active outside of North America and the differences emerging across the continent (e.g. movements and conferences on the East Coast versus those on the West Coast).

identification with ‘nature’” and social ecofeminist approaches emphasize “ecofeminist ethics and engage more closely with free social and political theory” (Cudworth 102). In this her dichotomy is similar to the radical feminist and socialist distinction that Sandilands and others draw, yet Cudworth also reveals key disciplinary differences in each mode of thought.

Sandilands begins with the radical feminist debates in the 1970s and 80s on the women-nature connection. An originary moment occurs in 1974 with the publication of two essays framed oppositionally: d’Eaubonne’s celebrated woman-nature connection is contrasted with Sherry Ortner’s “Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?” that laments women’s association with nature as a major pillar supporting their oppression. Ortner’s influential essay argues that women should participate in “projects of creativity and transcendence” to shift their alignment *from nature to culture* (Ortner 86). Sandilands then follows radical feminist developments as they are worked out in debates over women’s reproductive capacities. She contrasts Shulamith Firestone’s advocacy for technologies that limit women’s reproduction (and thus, their association with nature and fertility) with Mary Daly’s *Gyn/Ecology* that values women’s reproductive capacity as a most prized sign of gender difference—one that links women with a natural creative power. Daly (who earned a doctorate in sacred theology) also criticized patriarchal religions and sought to rescript women and nature as inherently sacred. As Sandilands, Rosemarie Tong, and other feminist theorists have upheld, radical feminism was a response to the limitations of equal rights strategies within liberal feminism; radicals argued that equality in a system created by men, based on men’s experiences and perspectives, erases the unique possibilities found in alternatives to normative masculinity. Summarizing radical cultural feminism, Sandilands writes, “New relations to nature were an integral part of this culture; women’s ‘special’ knowledges of reproduction and their experiences of mediating between nature and culture were part of their difference from men and thus needed to be discovered and freed” (10).

Likewise, affinity ecofeminism encompasses a variety of embodied and spiritual women-nature connections, from Daly and Susan Griffin’s positive valuation of the biologically female-nature connection to Ynestra King’s theories of interconnectivity. In describing affinity ecofeminism, Cudworth endeavors to dismantle the power of critiques of essentialism that strike this branch of ecofeminism more than any other; this is particularly important because, to critics, affinity (or radical cultural) ecofeminism seems to stand in for the whole field. Cudworth rereads Daly and Griffin’s bodies of work to locate a certain problematic universalism present while displacing claims of essentialism. She calls critics to think through the potential of the work from its own context rather than stripped

from it. This includes the application of an interdisciplinary (or at least multidisciplinary) lens that recognizes the constraints of disciplinary norms. For example, among spiritual and religious ecofeminisms, essentialism may be a product of theorizing “normative truths about social life” as all religious philosophies do (111). Ultimately, her reframing reads these ecofeminist trends not as essentializing ideas about women and nature, but as an exchange of symbols in a discourse that has political utility at a certain historical moment. Essentialism, itself, is a discourse that cannot be presumed innocent or guilty.<sup>5</sup>

### **The Materialist Turn: Flights from Ecofeminism into Sustainable Development**

Just as feminist genealogies typically frame radical feminism as a response to liberal feminism, Sandilands and Cudworth detail a materialist, socialist response to radical ecofeminists. Expanding an analysis of patriarchy or men’s gender-based domination as responsible for women’s oppression, this group of ecofeminist theorists examined the role of economic systems in the domination of women and nature. Both genealogists cite Carolyn Merchant’s *The Death of Nature* (1980) as paradigm shifting in this regard. Merchant explains how the scientific revolution brought out new technologies and a worldview that objectified women and the natural environment; once turned into objects, women and nature were controlled and turned into profitable resources. Following Merchant’s historical review, other socialist ecofeminists collected empirical evidence that the world’s poorest individuals live in the most ecologically degraded and fragile zones, and that women constitute the majority of the world’s poorest people (Hawthorne). This perspective pays less attention to how women and nature are symbolically linked, focusing more on how the sexual division of labor positions some women (especially in the developing world) such that work responsibilities bring them into greater contact with the natural world. There is recognition that women are affected by the current ecological crisis in gendered ways, but that how they experience those effects will depend on each woman’s particular social location and her relative access to power (Steady 19). Some questioned whether, based on their presumed experience of working closely with the environment, women should be sought out as environmental managers to solve environmental problems (Steady, Zweifel, Low and Tremayne). Others offered a deeper critique of the development process, suggesting that we need more than just change in policy, but a “recasting of the development enterprise” (Harcourt 4, see also Agarwal, Braidotti et al., Visvanathan et al.). While these

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<sup>5</sup> Others have made this point regarding the strategic use of essentialism. For examples, see Moore (“Eco/Feminism”) and Sturgeon.

contributions have been extensive and provided empirical studies that attempt to offer sensitive, intersectional accounts of women's varied relationships to the natural world, there are some important limitations in this line of research.

For example, both Cudworth and Sandilands explore Vandana Shiva's work as it lays bare the intersection of capitalism, colonialism, and the gendering of nature. While Shiva offers a seemingly more complex understanding of structural domination than found in radical or affinity approaches, our genealogists believe such arguments also tend to reductionism, subsuming capitalist and colonialist oppression under patriarchy. According to Shiva, "gender subordination and patriarchy are the oldest of oppressions" (Cudworth 116); Sandilands responds to this by concluding that, "while racism and colonialism were included in Shiva's analysis of the domination of women and nature ... cultural feminist formulations of women, nature, and dualism were strongly present" (52). This critique of Shiva extends to all socialist approaches that assume a relationship of identity between women and the natural environment based on a sexual division of labor that brings women into a closer relationship with nature through water collection, foraging, etc.. Ultimately, Sandilands argues for a move beyond gender dualisms. She wants to see complexity recognized since "women's experiences of nature are organized according to different needs, agendas, oppressions, and histories ... no causal single thread can collect them all" (52). Arriving at a similar conclusion, Cudworth invokes complexity theory as she asks ecofeminists to think carefully about the ways systems (e.g. racism, sexism, colonialism) evolve, including how they may or may not work together in specific instances.

In spite of these calls for the recognition of complexity, a binaristic logic remains not just among individual ecofeminists who have critiqued those who came before them, but among our genealogists who move from radical and affinity approaches to socialist and social approaches before attending to the rise of postmodernism and its influence on ecofeminism. On this point, I leave our genealogists to delve deeper into the framing of materialist environmentalisms where, in response to ecofeminist theologians and radical cultural theorists, those working in gender and sustainable development sought to distance themselves from the field as they critiqued it.<sup>6</sup> To avoid association with ecofeminism, scholars gave

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<sup>6</sup> I use "gender and sustainable development" as a broad umbrella to capture a number of perspectives. This field has gone by the name "women in development" (WID, recognizing the need to add women into development schemes to address inequality), "gender and development" (GAD, which recognizes that development itself is a gendering process), and "women, environment, and development" (WED, a subfield of feminist development studies more concerned with issues of sustainability; see Braidotti et al. and Visvanathan et al.).

new names to their work including (to name just a few) feminist political ecology (Rocheleau et al.), feminist environmentalism (Agarwal), and environmental feminism (Steady); as they did so, they took up some ecofeminist claims, but not others.

Cudworth and Sandilands position Shiva as an ecofeminist figure whose work filters materialist concerns through a reductionist lens limited by its reliance on radical cultural feminist tropes of maternalist care and spirituality. These and other critiques of Shiva's work illustrate the potential shortcomings of gender and sustainable development approaches positioned binaristically in opposition to radical cultural feminism. As one of the most recognizable names in ecofeminism, Shiva's writings on maldevelopment are widely cited while her elaboration of Shakti, the feminine creative power in Hindu cosmology, is dismissed. Bina Agarwal suggests that the strong ideological focus within Shiva's spiritual ecofeminism fails to address the material sources of the domination of women and nature; she believes it does not account for women's lived relationship with the environment and ignores the intersectional nature of identity, where race or caste may play a larger role than gender in women's subordination (Agarwal 70). While Agarwal advocates greater balance between ideological and materialist analyses, few examples from within the gender and sustainable development literature grounded in the social sciences offer nuanced cultural or spiritual analyses. Following Agarwal, Meera Nanda criticizes what she takes to be the ahistorical, uncritical celebration of the feminine subject of patriarchal communities in India that she finds in Shiva's work. She contends that an emphasis on the "subsistence perspective" as an alternative to neoliberalism ignores traditional forms of patriarchy, including those associated with Hinduism from which the principle of Shakti derives. This is no small matter as Nanda suggests that this subsistence perspective works hand in hand with both traditional patriarchal modes of domination as well as new ones that incorporate women's subsistence labor into development schemes for profit (378).

Nanda does not address criticisms of development projects that have had a hand in what some see as a loss of sovereignty among nation states in the South. She also mobilizes an instrumental concept of nature theorized in terms that do not consider environmental wellbeing. She commits the error she sees in ecofeminism of failing to cite *which* women's lives she thinks may be improved by integration into development projects such as microlending. Nanda situates her own work in a liberal humanist tradition that reiterates the lack of intersectional analysis many have found to be missing in some ecofeminist writing and she does so while offering a theory that does not attend to the natural world on its own terms. Nanda's analysis, like many of the gender and sustainable development-driven accounts, also fails to bridge the gap



between material and symbolic resistances. For example, Nanda advocates local hybridizations of western cultural and economic models that defy the good/evil binaries of the developed and developing world that she attributes to Shiva's work, but she leaves little space for what might arguably be a similarly hybridized, resignified, and strategically deployed use of the concept Shakti that she finds troubling.

Ultimately, reading Shiva as a cultural feminist proves more limiting than useful, especially as that theoretical orientation is rooted in a Western philosophical tradition that may make little sense to women in rural India such as the Chipko, on which Shiva has written extensively (Mies and Shiva). Like the women of the Chipko movement, whose activism cannot easily be fit into a narrowly defined framework, Chicana/o environmental activists are likely to use a number of different strategies to improve the health of their human and more-than human communities. Chela Sandoval challenges schools of thought that separate feminist activism according to whether it is informed by Western liberal or socialist feminist theory, for example. She reviews genealogies of hegemonic white feminism in which theoretical traditions are imagined as phases, each evolving into a more complex and intellectually sound conceptual framework from liberal, to Marxist, to radical cultural, and finally to socialist feminism. Sandoval concludes that "this four-category structure of consciousness as presently enacted interlocks into a symbolic container which sets limits on how the history of feminist activity can be conceptualized, while obstructing what can be perceived or even imagined by agents thinking within its constraints" (10). Starting from the experiences of U.S. Third World feminists, she details a "methodology of the oppressed" in which a major tool deployed by activists is differential consciousness—the ability to switch among varied oppositional approaches and strategies, including "equal rights," "revolutionary," "supremacist," and "separatist" oppositional practices as each situation calls for (8-9). As a "tactical subjectivity," differential consciousness develops as necessary for survival.

### **Spiritual Matters: From Abjection to Reclamation**

The proliferation of self-consciously socialist ecofeminisms, including those that were renamed and absorbed by scholars working in gender and sustainable development (and related fields such as feminist political ecology), fueled the conceptual bifurcation between radical and socialist approaches. Genealogies that uphold this binaristic categorization further cement the epistemological divisions perceived in ecofeminist texts and case studies. As a result, spiritual ecofeminism has become one of the most contested and detested nodes of feminist thought and, as such, it is minimized in feminist histories and in the feminist classroom.

Significantly, even though Sandilands cites Rosemary Radford Ruether's groundbreaking book in feminist theology, *New Woman/New Earth*, noting both its symbolic, cultural elements as well as its materialist analysis, ultimately, she finds "the primary logic of women's oppression in Western societies operates through their conceptual linkage with nature and vice versa" (Sandilands 13). A logic of identity is not always and in every context dangerous.<sup>7</sup> Even so, Ruether's text destabilizes rather than consolidates the idea of "women" (as Sandilands notes, Ruether gestures toward a potentially genderless future) while destabilizing what Christianity signifies. Ruether strategically works both with and against gender norms *and* religious understanding from within the specific disciplinary borders of theology—a field that largely relies on textual analysis. Losing sight of Ruether's broader project and disciplinary context, her work is absorbed into an over-simplified Western cultural feminism in which ecofeminist spiritualities are most often interpreted.

Ivone Gebara, too, has long self-identified as ecofeminist, and she offers theological insights that fall outside the theoretical and geographical realms outlined in many genealogies. Writing from Brazil, Gebara's "The Trinity and Human Experience: An Ecofeminist Approach" uses the notion of the Holy Trinity to think beyond confining and oppressive interpretations of Christianity. She adopts an ecofeminist perspective "to show that there is a need to rediscover and reflect on the truly universal aspect of life, on dimensions that reflect what the earth and the cosmos are telling us about themselves, and the things women are vehemently reaffirming with regard to their own dignity and that of all humanity" (14). Though some might read this with the critique of universalism and essentialism tied to radical cultural feminism in mind, Gebara is better understood by situating her writing and workshops (where she centers the role of poor women's experiences) in relationship to indigenous traditions as well as popular education and liberation theology movements (Ress, *Ecofeminism in Latin America*). In the tradition of Freire's popular education, individuals engage in a process of coming to critical consciousness through analysis of the experience of oppression. Nothing can be presumed outright; identity and consciousness are worked out in workshops such as those held by the ecofeminist Con-spirando women's collective (Ress, "The Con-spirando Women's Collective"). The social movement building in Gebara's workshops also embraces an ecofeminist understanding of the Trinity, which accommodates the tension between unity and multiplicity, sameness and difference. Consequently, the subject is not necessarily presupposed nor is it necessarily a bearer of normative

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<sup>7</sup> Cuomo challenges Sandilands's critique of identity politics based on the Marxist model of worker identity and argues for a contextual understanding of the deployment of identitarian claims.

gender characteristics. As such, Gebara's approach challenges essentialist readings of ecofeminist theology.

Early criticisms from secular feminists painted spiritual ecofeminisms as apolitical; this is not the case, as Ruether, Gebara, and Shiva show, but goddess worship came under even stronger fire. In it critics saw a celebration of individual paths to healing rather than movements toward collective change. In the worship of supposedly feminine principles in nature, critics also saw the imposition of gender essentializing human traits on the natural world (Gaard, "Ecofeminism Revisited"). Some of those criticisms were valid, but a closer look at how discourses are taken up by actors and manifested in practices would tell us more about the effectiveness of spiritual ecofeminisms at combatting eco-social injustice. Most secular feminists have not looked closely at spiritual ecofeminism or offered a generous critique, but theologians and religious studies scholars continue to grapple with ecofeminism, often in disciplinary enclaves and with little acknowledgement from those outside of their field: "Scholars of religion who study ecofeminism do a far better job of representing and analyzing the role of religion and spirituality in ecofeminist theory and practice than do scholars outside the field of religion, who tend to ignore, malign, or seriously distort the role of religion and spirituality in the ecofeminist movement" (Toviss 301). Religious studies scholars share lessons on how to study spiritual perspectives on nature and gender. These lessons include looking not just to scriptures for analysis, but to how theology is activated (or not) "on the ground"—what is the relationship between belief and practice?<sup>8</sup> For example, through case study research on the Women, Environment, and Development Organization (WEDO) to activism at Clayoquot Sound, Noelle Sturgeon, Niamh Moore, and others saw that even the most gender essentializing language looks different as it is taken up and negotiated by ecofeminist activists. Page Toviss's research on Catholic agricultural communities demonstrates that such gender ideologies "actually *lose* some of their normative power when put into practice" and in some cases, language is contradicted by practices, which raises an opportunity for practitioners to dwell on these inconsistencies (310-311).

Additionally, critics accused spiritual ecofeminists (especially goddess worshippers) of a New Age focus on the individual—spirituality was seen as a feel-good, escapist retreat from eco-social problems and escapism is a solution only the privileged can afford. The most visible target of this critique is ecofeminist Wicca practitioner Starhawk, yet even a cursory glance at *Webs of Power: Notes from the Global Uprising* shows how her faith and practice fuel her work in movement organizing. In my

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<sup>8</sup>For more on the importance of considering not just exegesis, but ethnographic and historical analyses of religious practices, see Toviss; Eaton; Low and Tremayne.

own work with Mexican-American women at a women's center along the U.S.-Mexico border, interviewees saw their personal healing practices, such as the use of Reiki massage and meditational labyrinth walking, as restorative so that they had the strength to combat daily injustices and work on behalf of their community (Holmes).<sup>9</sup> Theologians and religious studies scholars ask us to consider, with more humility and generosity, how faith practices connect the individual to a bigger human, nature, and spirit community that motivates social action.

Briefly, let's shift from the materialist inflected gender and sustainable development uptake of ecofeminism, with its evacuation of spirituality, to the rise of new materialist feminisms. Genealogies that adhere to Western theoretical models frame the field's evolution from radical feminist, to socialist, and then poststructural approaches to ecofeminism yet the recent poststructural turn to performative materiality, including new materialist feminisms and object-oriented ontologies, has not been traced back to ecofeminism by many of its major proponents (see Alaimo and Hekman; Bennett; and Barad). New materialist feminisms reject the nature/culture dualism that ecofeminists have also worked to deconstruct over the last several decades. These approaches point out the vital agency of the material world in ways that are consistent with the works of ecofeminists such as Ynestra King and Val Plumwood who have theorized humans in their web of interconnections with the environment. Bridging ecofeminism with Chicana/o environmental activism, Gwen Kirk summarizes these material interconnections:

Both ecofeminists and Chicano environmentalists see people as intimately connected to the nonhuman world in the most profound, yet mundane way: through the water we drink, the air we breathe, the food we eat, and our own bodily processes. As embodied human beings, we are part of the continuum of life. To imply a separation between people and nonhuman nature is to deny the very real day-to-day connection with nature through our sensuous, lived experience. (91)

New materialisms look closely at the inter- and intra-actions (Barad) that create bodies in all their entanglements: bodies of water merge with and create the bodies of humans, for example; or, as the "proletariat lung" in Stacy Alaimo's *Bodily Natures* illustrates, bodies of silica dust create the diseased human, marking class status on the miner's body.

The new materialist turn raises two concerns: first, the connection to ecofeminism is either buried or denied outright, as writers legitimate their theoretical take-up of materiality through unmarked male European

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<sup>9</sup> See also Pulido's "The Sacredness of 'Mother Earth'" on spirituality in the American Southwest.

scientists and philosophers such as Darwin, Bohr, Spinoza, Deleuze, and Heidegger. Clare Hemmings's "Telling Feminist Stories" not only disrupts the radical→socialist→poststructural progress narrative that is embedded in some ecofeminist genealogies, but her work also makes plain the politics of citation. She asks: how does Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* read differently if we emphasize not Foucault, but Monique Wittig's influence on Butler's work (131)? We could ask a similar question about ecofeminism's influence on the material turn. Gaard's frustration on this subject is clear: "Is this silence a form of antifeminism, a feat of prestidigitation that simultaneously appropriates and erases feminist scholarship? Is it intellectual dishonesty? Is it simple ignorance of the work that has been done?" ("Ecofeminism Revisited" 53).

Earlier, I revisited the work of three self-identified ecofeminists—Ruether, Gebara, and Shiva—examining how their treatment of spirituality complicated radical versus socialist, and affinity versus social paradigms that characterize ecofeminist genealogies (and feminist histories, in general). As we consider alternatives to how the new materialist turn is theorized, not only could we go back to the ecofeminists that preceded the material turn (Plumwood, King, for example), but we could look outside of Western science and philosophy for resources on the vital movements of matter. Rooted in her study of both ancient Mexica cultures and Buddhism, including Thich Nhat Hanh's notion of interbeing or co-arising, Anzaldúa sees her spirituality as deeply political and justice-oriented as she sees the influence of spiritual-material bodies speaking with and acting on her own (Delgadillo, Keating). She writes, "I'll look at that tree silhouetted by the sun, and its design says something to me, to my soul, which I then have to decipher. We get these messages from nature, from the creative consciousness of the universe or whatever you want to call the intelligence of the universe. It's constantly speaking to us, but we don't listen, we don't look" ("Speaking across" 74). In Anzaldúa's worldview, the world is alive, active and unpredictable: "every cell in our bodies, every bone and bird and worm has a spirit" that can speak with and move us (*Borderlands* 36). There is resonance between the ways objects speak in Anzaldúa's world and the ways they speak in accounts of object-oriented ontologies; some perceive in this a kind of problematic, creeping mysticism or a willful extension of human ideas of agency onto the non-human world (Cole). Others such as Kate Rigby and Gaard ("Mindful New Materialisms") embrace a more nuanced view of spirituality in new materialist feminist theory, advising a full and open accounting for the materialization of spirit, though theirs are some of the first brief writings on the subject. Although Chicana feminists such as Anzaldúa have not been read for their contributions to material feminisms (or ecofeminism), there are lessons to be learned about the material co-construction of human, nature, and spirit beings (Keating 67; Holmes). In the next section I look closely at the ways one artist, Amalia Mesa-Bains,

envision human-nature-spirit interconnections and puts them to work for personal healing and eco-social justice.

**Amalia Mesa-Bains's Material Cultures:  
A Chicana Eco-Spiritual Case Study**

*The images of my art...reflect my ongoing interests in land, spirituality, and memory... the themes associated with land and nature have often been expressions of my concern with Mesoamerican origins, colonial resistance, and contemporary issues of social justice and rights, as well as the personal memories of an agricultural life in the Santa Clara and San Joaquin valleys. (Mesa-Bains, "Artist Statement" 3)*

Many Chicana feminists orient their work toward an ongoing process of decolonization from Spanish colonization through present day American neocolonialism. Both Chicana feminists and ecofeminists document the governing logic of dualisms across Western thought that position rational logic in opposition to spiritual awareness, that separate the human from nature, that distinguish the sacred world from the material world (Gaard "Toward a Queer Ecofeminism," L. Pérez, Steele, Warren *Ecofeminist Philosophy*). Chicana feminist scholars, writers, and artists understand spirituality to be a path to self-empowerment, to building community, and to improving the world and creating more just futures. In the context of decolonization, spirituality is particularly important because it heals divisions created by Western dualisms so that mind, body, nature, and spirit are reintegrated into wholeness: "Spirituality is about connection ... it is your outlook, what keeps you going ... it is knowing that something connects us to each other and to earth. Sea water is almost the same as placenta liquid" (Medina 192-3).

Amalia Mesa-Bains's altar art further illustrates this point of convergence between ecofeminism and decolonial Chicana feminisms. The artist was inspired by the altar builders in her family as well as by the Chicano movement's reclamation of cultural practices that, though syncretized with Catholicism during the era of Spanish colonialism, have roots to the pre-Columbian past. The construction of altars has traditionally been a feminine domain; altars are put up in private households and curated by women for the express purpose of maintaining family, spiritual, and cultural ties to loved ones—those who are living, those who have passed, and the deities and immanent spiritual presences that link us all together. Altars are defined by their excess materiality and

they may include candles, flowers, photographs, religious iconography, shoes, toys, and other personal artifacts. Highly idiosyncratic, each woman's altar is a representation of her relationships and aspirations. The practice is also fully embodied in a way that opens up the practitioner's sense of self; the objects that make up the altar, along with the family members and spirit presences cited there, are felt to be an extension of the creator, collaborating with her to reshape the world: "through speech and gesture, [the altar builder] performs the expectation and certainty of having her needs met. The self-created altar becomes a vehicle for self-creation, a place for manipulating and shaping consciousness, for making the world the way the altarista wants the world to be" (Turner 195). In other words, the spiritual co-creates the material. Altar builders bring a creative element to the spiritual interaction, but the material objects are integral as they represent how the world is seen and what it can become. Typically, women's altars are built for the purpose of healing personal and familial health, relationship, and economic problems, but Chicana/o artists have extended the use of altars for the work of decolonization—healing social, political, and economic harms to the Chicana/o community through their depiction of revisionist historical projects, affirming iconography, and future visioning.

Mesa-Bains's *Private Landscapes/Public Territories* (1996) can serve as a case study if we take to heart the insights of ecofeminist religious studies scholars and Chicana feminists' wariness about stripping away the geographic and experiential positionality that informs Chicana art and activism.<sup>10</sup> The installation is staged in a museum where a border of painted bushes lines the room. A green and mirrored wardrobe, standing in as an altar, is placed in front of the tall painted hedgerow. The altar/wardrobe sits on a large carpet of moss, dirt, and marigold petals and the doors are spread open. The artist's personal photos and mementos are interspersed with tree clippings, pomegranates, a colorfully painted Virgin figurine, and other Virgin statues that are painted green and mossy. The doors of the wardrobe are draped with marigolds that are traditionally hung on Day of the Dead *ofrendas* to welcome and celebrate the spirits of the dead. In using a wardrobe instead of a more traditional altar table, the artist emphasizes the performance of gender and spirituality—one dresses up and performs to create oneself (L. Pérez). This display strategy echoes Turner's findings on the performance and performativity of spiritual healing among altar builders discussed earlier.<sup>11</sup> It also exemplifies the

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<sup>10</sup> Detail of the altar/wardrobe and wall for *Private Landscapes/Public Territories* can be seen online at [http://artsites.ucsc.edu/sesnon/exhibitions/2009/assembly/mesa\\_bains.html](http://artsites.ucsc.edu/sesnon/exhibitions/2009/assembly/mesa_bains.html) (last accessed January 16, 2016).

<sup>11</sup> For additional examples of performativity in feminist religious and spirituality studies, see Armour and St. Ville (eds.) and Alexander.

kinds of performative denaturalizations of “woman” and “nature” Sandilands recommends for poststructural ecofeminisms.

Mesa-Bains places three glass vases full of dirt in front of the open wardrobe. They are joined by small decorative topiary made of clear and blue glass beads stuck into moss-covered planters. Taken together, the artist’s play with real and artificial elements of nature challenges nature/culture binaries just as the brightly painted Virgin statue contrasts against the mossy figurines surrounding her—this is a reference to the earth deities of Mexica spiritual traditions (Coatlicue, earthly Aztec goddess of life and death, has featured in other installations by the artist); it also challenges the idea of spirit as transcendent of the human and nonhuman world. While the figurines bear the weight of these significations, the viewer doesn’t forget that they are also cheap statues mass-produced in a factory that likely exploits Mexican and Mexican-American women as a gendered and racialized workforce; these material facts cohabitate in the altar builder’s spiritual worldview and, as an “artist,” Mesa-Bains uses these artifacts to reflect her critique of neo/colonial norming logics that dehumanize and desacralize women so that they can be turned into laborers and commodities. Two other elements of the installation help us to understand the artist’s blending of “natural” and human-made elements, including the vases of earth set in front of the wardrobe: First, on one wall, above the painted hedgerow, Edward Soja is quoted on the construction of space and place. In gold paint, drawing our attention to the colonial contest for gold, reads, “We see how space can be made to hide consequences from us, how relations of power and discipline are inscribed into an apparent innocent spatiality of social life, how human geographies become filled with politics and ideology.” Second, Mesa-Bains writes the names of all the places her family has lived (on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border) on the walls of the wardrobe. Similar to Anzaldúa’s personal, familial, and Chicana/o place-making histories in *Borderlands/La Frontera*, with this action, Mesa-Bains traces personal and collective roots across the changing social, political, economic, spiritual, and ecological landscape of the border region. She cherishes these landscapes that have so shaped her and yet recognizes how colonization and its ongoing legacy are punishing and poisoning Chicana/o communities across the Southwest.

As Mesa-Bains shows us, the construction of public territories is deeply entwined with the experience of private landscapes, but the altar builder’s agency, in concert with the material and spiritual forces with which she collaborates, can also have an impact on the environment around her. In this exhibit, “nature” (the moss, pomegranates, soil, and flowers that make up the exhibit) holds the memories of community despite shifting borders. In fact, land—its memory, materiality, and spiritual capacity to heal personal and social wounds—becomes all the



more important *because* of these shifting borders. For Mesa-Bains as for other Chicana/os, attending to nature and claiming the landscape of one's family and ancestors is a way of affirming *belonging* in the face of Anglo America's ongoing xenophobia and racism. Spiritual work that connects individuals and dispossessed communities to nature is a way to forge citizenship outside of the colonial paradigm that rewards only those whose bodies seemingly conform to the valued side Western dualisms (read as mind, reason, culture, etc.). Mesa-Bains's altar highlights the co-construction of materiality, sociality, and spirituality in the specific region of the U.S. Southwest as experienced by her contemporaries and her ancestors. After looking closely at the ways Chicana feminists theorize and practice a decolonizing spirituality, we better see what is lost on ecofeminist genealogies that separate spirit work from economic and political analyses of women's oppression. Such genealogies play into the same binaries that many eco- and Chicana feminists seek to undermine: rational/non-rational emotion and spirit, civilized/primitive, production/reproduction, male/female, political/personal and spiritual.

### Conclusion

Genealogies shape not only how we understand our history, but also our present and future. In reifying a Western feminist radical and socialist bifurcation we dangerously prop up a progress narrative of feminist theory that celebrates socialist and development-oriented feminisms as smarter and more evolved. In so doing, we may cede ground to perspectives that largely conceive of the natural environment as a resource that is in more or less danger of disappearing or being degraded. Such views do not challenge individuals to see the natural world as inherently valuable or as inherently connected to human subjectivity, and thus do not call for a radical rethinking of subjectivity or behavior. Poststructural and new materialist feminisms do radically rethink the subject and its relationship to nature yet these theorizations are also divorced from the foundation built by radical ecofeminist foremothers. Whether grounded in sustainable development or new materialism literatures, the role of spirituality itself is at stake. Environmental feminisms of all shades need a more generous and more complex way to understand religious engagement that moves beyond accounts that reduce religion to culture (as either idealized celebration of religious symbols or as merely part of a political and economic system that positions men and women differently in relation to resources).

Moreover, if we avoid framing spirituality as irrational or pre-modern, we allow ourselves to see how spirituality offers a unique engagement with materiality; it may yield important insights about the nature of the self, our connections with others, and the ways we gain

strength to continue difficult resistance efforts. Disrupting genealogies with case studies outside of the geographical and theoretical realms typically rehearsed offers a new lens that can upend how we understand histories of feminism and ecological activism. Gebarra, Ruether, and Shiva all write through non-western and transnational perspectives. Following a reappraisal of their work that responds to their critics with readings informed by religious studies perspectives, I then turned to a case study in Chicana studies. Within the confines of this brief paper, I gestured to the ways Chicana feminist ecological work by Anzaldúa and Mesa-Bains challenges Western philosophical frames of understanding, exposes their exclusions, and demonstrates an appreciation for the spiritual dimension of materiality in ways that can deepen our understanding of eco-social oppression. Mesa-Bains makes her work personal, connecting to the specific landscapes of her life even as she transforms the sterile environments of the museum into installation spaces that recall colonial contests over nature, religion, and women's bodies. One of the decolonizing objectives in this and other politically and spiritually motivated art by Chicana activists is that the audience witnesses the artist's alternate account of personal and communal histories. That is, we see how land is imagined through the eyes of Spanish colonizers and American imperialists and we see how the artist means to reclaim the use and meaning of that land. We read the spiritual work staged at the artist's altar and, as an audience to it, we are enfolded in her vision. Ideally, we leave inspired by her vision of the world, ready to collaborate in pursuit of transformation. At the very least, we are called to question the series of oppositions created in Western thought and to think *connectively* about materiality, sociality, and spirituality.

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