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# Rethinking the Relations of Nature, Culture, and Agency

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**ABSTRACT:** Beginning with a critique of the Enlightenment human/nature dualism, this essay argues for a new conception of human agency based on *culturopoeia* and an application of an ecofeminist dialogic method for analysing human-nature relationships, with the idea of *volitional interdependence* replacing ideas of free will and determinism. Further, it posits that we need to replace the alienational model of otherness based on a psychoanalytic model with a relational model of *anotherness* based on an ecological model, and concludes by encouraging attention to developing *bioregional natured cultures* in place of nation states and multinational corporations.

**KEYWORDS:** Bioregionalism, culturopoeia, dialogics, ecology, human agency

Many people have grown up conceptualizing Nature only as it exists around them right now, with neither past nor future, and treat it as a thing utterly distinct from themselves. Such people find very strange the claim that when humans study nature it is nature studying itself, even though people are, after all, part of the organic world. Perhaps, then, the deconstructionist philosopher Jacques Derrida is correct when he claims that Western philosophy is based on the opposition of nature and culture, since this opposition seems fundamental for a vast array of claims made about human uniqueness, in terms of spiritual essence, right to domination, and exploitative destiny *vis-à-vis* the rest of the world in which humans live and die. This underlying principle of opposition masks and suppresses not simply the history of human origins but also ongoing human interrelationship with the rest of nature of which we remain a part in evolutionary process.<sup>1</sup> Only by denying evolution and the genetic material of human conception can we imagine that we are not part of nature. Only by ignoring the varied rituals of mating and species continuation can we fantasize that culture does not arise from nature even as nature is shaped by culture. And only by blinding

ourselves to the myriad particularities of human interaction with other humans in culture and other nonhumans in nature can we continue to believe either in autonomy or determinacy in debating human agency. By agency I mean the ability of individuals to act in the world to effect change, intentionally and unintentionally and with foreseen and unforeseen consequences.

For many people, nature seems not to be the product of anything, but only the raw materials, the resources to be managed in the production of everything; in contrast, culture seems very much to be the product of the past, and viewed as finalized and reified – i.e., packaged – for public consumption. And that public is not to be or to become, but to remain also a raw material to be commodified as employee, constituent, and consumer. Modern advertising sees to that. These views have arisen with western industrialization and the ‘rational’ philosophies developed to justify the new economic order.<sup>2</sup> Curiously enough such philosophy has been *naturalized* as being just a description of the way things are. As Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno argued nearly fifty years ago, “the Enlightenment has extinguished any trace of its own self-consciousness” (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1990, 4). And the crucial element of this self-consciousness that has been extinguished is precisely the recognition that the alienation of humankind from the rest of nature, which has been enthroned as a necessary condition of modern rational existence, is generated and continuously reproduced by Enlightenment beliefs: “Enlightenment behaves toward things as a dictator toward men. He knows them in so far as he can manipulate them. The man of science knows things in so far as he can make them” (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1990, 9). Culture, then, is presented as the glue cementing past, present and future humans together in a continuity of alienation from the rest of the world from which they arise, in which they participate with other entities, and to which they organically return through death.

## II

The most successful versions of such glue have come to be called ‘Dominant culture’. In its most totalizing forms, such as Western Culture, the Great Books, the new American model of cultural literacy, dominant culture is really another masking and suppressing of the diversity of myriad other human cultures and cultural practices. In many cases such cultures are not inherently proselytizing or colonizing because they are based in subsistence rather than expansionist economies. The actual diversity of human cultures parallels the ecological diversity of healthy biosystems. Efforts to establish a worldwide human monoculture (i.e., the global village or ‘The New World Order’ and ‘the end of history’) are no different from the efforts to establish agricultural monocultures in many of the southern hemisphere colonies of European and US imperialism. Such efforts contradict the natural tendency toward diversity found throughout

ecological systems, including the ones in which humans participate. The historical transformation of the past into the Past, upon which Culture with a capital 'C' is founded by the various metropolitan centres, is nothing less than the Enlightenment ideal of the scientific method: "modern epistemology is wedded to discursive logic and to universal concepts or categories to which particularities are rigidly subsumed or subordinated; in this manner the diversity and elusiveness of reality are sacrificed to the primacy of general rules" (Dallmayr, 1991, 35). This is also known as 'the logic of domination'. Yet, as Gary Snyder observes contra any promulgation of absolute alienation, "The term *culture*, in its meaning of 'a deliberately maintained esthetic and intellectual life' and in its other meaning of 'the totality of socially transmitted behavior patterns,' is never far from a biological root meaning as in 'yogurt culture' – a nourishing habitat" (Snyder, 1990, 15). And he suggests that we can learn from past cultures in order to chart a course for future cultures:

The little nations of the past lived within territories that conformed to some set of natural criteria. The culture areas of the major native groups of North America overlapped, as one would expect, almost exactly with broadly defined major bioregions ... In the old ways, the flora and fauna and landforms are *part of the culture*. The world of culture and nature, which is actual, is almost a shadow world now, and the insubstantial world of political jurisdictions and rarefied economies is what passes for reality. We live in a backwards time. We can regain some small sense of that old membership by discovering the original lineaments of our land and steering – at least in the home territory and in the mind – by those rather than the borders of arbitrary nations, states, and counties. (Snyder, 1990, 37)

In the face of such powerful, yet utterly arbitrary political entities, agency is the requisite concept for any strategy of affirming the future as a site for possible human transformation. But the future itself has been occupied by a variety of abstractions reified as 'the perfect society'. The texts written in the utopian genre, whether of the literary or political-visionary type, have tended toward static projections of ideal structures and elaborate depictions of things. In the end they project authoritarian systems to which the people of the future will be obligated to conform even as the narrator-visitor in such fictions eventually conforms for his (almost always a male) own good. This is generally the case whether we are talking about Edward Bellamy or Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Charles Morris or William Dean Howells, Robert Owen or Francois Fourier, Karl Marx or Ayn Rand. In the past, the agency of authorial imagination has denied the agency of future peoples. Jim Jose's interpretation of American novelist Ursula K. Le Guin's critique of the utopian tradition as 'European' is instructive here. "The language of power which assumes that the future can be created in our imagination", he argues, "is a language of conquest and control". But what counts for Le Guin "is to challenge the presumption that the 'future' (or other places) can be theorized as if it were a clean slate. It is not something

we in the present own ... Those who might be inhabiting the future are written out of the 'discovery.' For the 'new world' is to be new only for the inhabitants of the old world" (Jose, 1991, 184). The parallel between European colonization of the Americas and imaginative colonization of the future is, of course, not fortuitous here. Dorion Sagan has, in fact, projected just such a program for future space colonization in *Biospheres: Reproducing Planet Earth* (1990).

We need to conceptualize agency not only in terms of the possibility of our own behaviours and actions in oppositional cultural practices, but also in terms of the possibility of *culturopoeia*. *Culturopoeia*, the imaginative and practical work of conceptualizing and implementing new cultures, could provide nascent structures, practices, behaviours, and attitudes upon which our children can build their own future with a more 'natured culture'. Any one of the recent documentaries on ecological degradation in industrialized Eastern Europe and its effects on the health of the children in that region, or the deformation of the next generation by lead poisoning and other toxic pollutants in the air of Mexico City, speaks to the necessity to redefine culture so as to include human-nature interrelationships rather than nature-civilization contradictions. The multinational corporations and banking combines of the West see the Warsaw Pact zone as a 'new world' for capital investment and low wage industrial labour without the expense of environmentally safe working conditions or health standards. The same corporations, which after DDT and lead gasoline additives were banned in the United States exported them to 'developing' countries, stand ready to shift their most toxic manufacturing to these newly opened horizons. US stonewalling in negotiations over the reduction of greenhouse gases prior to the Rio summit remains true to form. The instrumental reason of global economics cannot provide these people with freedom, democracy, or life, since they are not going to be allowed any other path than the superhighway of toxic industrial development, and only those locales most propitious for exploitation will receive the 'benefits' of contemporary technology. Ariel Salleh, an Australian sociologist and ecofeminist, puts it in no uncertain terms:

The growing number of ecological disasters following on human intervention in natural processes demands continuing critical examination. Given the escalating plunder and misappropriation of natural and 'human' resources that passes for 'productivity', it is not more 'reason' that is required but less: the analytic blade has wrought enough destruction. What is apposite to the human condition at this point in time is 'remembrance'. So Horkheimer comments that "as soon as man discards his awareness that he himself is natural, the aims for which he keeps himself alive ... are nullified." (Salleh, 1988, 137)

The remembrance of which Salleh speaks is the same as that of which Snyder speaks: past cultural practices that have been more nature-related than the nature-alienated ones of the present. Although daily threatened by the expansion of the technocratic 'global village', many of these practices continue to be

implemented today in more remote regions of the world, as well as within the borders of the technocratic states themselves in enclaves of varying sizes.

### III

An agency functional for a human future in which agents are developing cultural practices more in relationship to the rest of nature could arise from working out *culturopoeia* within the ecological niche, multiple foodchains, and biospheric cycles in which specific peoples find themselves. An ecological agency would mean *volitional interdependence*, the appreciation of individual and community opportunities within an increasing awareness of necessities required by interrelationships with the noncultural systems of the physical world. Human beings are dependent on other entities, animal, vegetable, mineral and biotic, for our very existence, just as other entities are on us. Interdependencies are necessities, although the violation of them has varying degrees of consequence. While we won't become extinct immediately after eradicating bald eagles or sea turtles, the Greenhouse effect may wipe out tens of thousands of us through a variety of repercussions.

The inevitability of disastrous repercussions if fundamental changes in the economic organization of dominant cultures do not occur is being increasingly recognized by people around the world. Many of them ask if there is anything that they can do. Do they have any choice, or has 'the end of nature' already arrived? Ecological agency is based on the premise that we do have choices and that we do exercise volition in terms of our behaviour in relation to ecosystemic interdependencies, with all actions producing reactions of one kind or another. But that volition is always exercised by humans with limited awareness and inadequate information to forecast all of the potential repercussions (for example, recent research in Massachusetts suggests that people exposed to pollution by living and playing near a factory making sunglasses in the 1950s suffered genetic damage that is causing an extremely high percentage of their children and grandchildren to suffer from autism – no one anticipated this repercussion at the time). A theory of ecological agency would say: we do not have to accept the present situation; based on what we understand, perceive, and feel, we can seek to become something more 'another' rather than 'Other' to the rest of the world. That is to say, people can learn to live in closer relationship with the vast array of entities constituted as alien others by the current dichotomy of human versus nature. A great wealth of such cultural practice has been recorded and is available as ongoing practice. A *culturopoeia* that affirms our interdependencies and enhances our self-consciousness about the likely trajectory of our volitional behaviours can be utilized to facilitate the evolution of such a condition of 'anotherness'.

A dialogical, rather than alienational, orientation to difference, to otherness,

can be based on the ecofeminist recognitions of interdependence and genetic diversity (King, 1983, 119-20; Warren, 1987, 7-8). Think in terms of dialogue, not simply as verbal conversation, but as the most basic kinds of energy/information exchange as well, as in gene pools and cross-fertilization. Ecological dialogue is the process by which humans can talk through how to live with the rest of their bioregion. Such a concept of human-nonhuman dialogue enables a rethinking of the concepts 'Other' and 'otherness'. 'Anotherness' proceeds from a non-hierarchical sense of difference, recognizing that we are not ever only existing as an 'I' in the world but are also always existing as 'another' for others.<sup>3</sup> If we isolate the feeling of otherness that we all experience in varying ways from a conception of anotherness, then we suppress our conscious and intuitive knowledge of the ecological processes of interdependency. We ignore the ways in which humans and other entities survive, change, and learn through continuously mutually influencing each other, and we deny any ethics of reciprocity. The degree to which Anglo-European patriarchy throughout its historical manifestations has placed women, 'non-whites', and nature in the category of the absolute and alienated 'Other' attests to the continuing refusal to recognize reciprocity as a ubiquitous natural/cultural process. C.A. Bowers, an American educator, argues, for example, that

The gender issue raises important questions about the origins of our guiding generative metaphors; for example, are the analogues for the image of both the utilitarian and expressive forms of individualism derived essentially from masculine domains of experience and metaphorical frameworks?... there are metaphorical images of self as an individual that promote power through separation, and ... other metaphors of self, derived from a more contextual way of understanding [that] foster an awareness of the more subtle and complex information exchanges that characterize relationships. (Bowers, 1988, 118)

#### IV

One way that ecology has attempted to organize socially a more 'contextual way of understanding' is through bioregionalism. Increasingly in ecological circles, bioregionalism has gained credibility as a political organizing and human habitation base, because the bioregion is a small enough unit of socio-ecological organization for a finite group of humans to work out interdependencies in far greater sophistication than is possible at nation-state and global levels. Bioregional analyses and programmes also aid us in affirming the strengths and limits of particularized cultural beliefs and practices because such programmes cannot be universalized. Even the concept of the constitution of a bioregion is subject to regional specificities and random variables through time, such as rainfall, volcanic eruptions, and river course changes. Bioregional parameters for

culturopoeia would facilitate the remembrance of viable past cultural practices and reveal the inadequacy of any kind of totalizing claims for human domination. Such an awareness of ecological specificity would serve to dispel the kinds of myths of global identity and uniform human progress currently espoused by the American proponents of the George Bush vision of a 'New World Order'. Concomitant with the ecofeminist recognition of the health of ecological diversity and its applicability to human behaviour is the refusal to valorize anthropomorphic conceptions of natural hierarchy, such as the predatory symbolism of eagles and lions, which have been used to justify oppression and exploitation.

Donna Haraway, a historian of science, provides an illustration of the extension of the concept of otherness beyond human/human relationships to human/other-natural-phenomena relationships. In direct contrast to the Enlightenment acceptance of absolute alienation and the reduction of everything outside the Anglo-European male subject to the status of objects, Haraway posits that "in a sociological account of science all sorts of things are actors, only some of which are human language-bearing actors, and that you have to include, as sociological actors, all kinds of heterogeneous entities". She adds that "this imperative helps to break down the notion that only the language-bearing actors have a kind of agency" (Penley and Ross, 1991, 5).<sup>4</sup> Many writers are countering the Enlightenment model of otherness with the questions: is alienation really the way of the world for human beings who have self-consciousness? what if instead of alienation we posit *relation* as the primary mode of human/human and human/other-natural-phenomena interaction without conflating difference, particularity and other specificities? From an ecological perspective, the crucial criterion for evaluating the health of any given culture would be the ways in which that culture defines its relationship to the rest of the natural world. From an ecofeminist perspective, such defining would invariably also reveal the relationship of men to women within that culture.<sup>5</sup> The differences in the United States between the dominant culture and Native American cultures is quite instructive here, in terms of both male/female and human/non-human relationships.

"Historically specific human relations with 'nature' must somehow", Haraway argues, "be imagined as genuinely social and actively relational"; and, "efforts to come to linguistic terms with the non-representability, historical contingency, artefactuality, and yet spontaneity, necessity, fragility, and stunning profusions of 'nature' can help us refigure the kind of persons we might be" (Penley and Ross, 1991, 3). We demonstrate what kind of persons we can be through our actions in the world, our affective agency. An ecologically sound human agency should involve determining how to engage biospheric responsibility on a daily and long-term basis, building on those aspects of existing cultures that display some sense of this responsibility, and fashioning new cultural practices that place otherness at the heart of culturopoeia, our construction of human relations with the rest of nature.



## V

As always, we address the problems we mutually recognize as besetting our cultures and humanity at a time of upheaval and crisis. The dissolution of the Soviet Union signals the beginning of the last major phase of the razing of geographic empires that began with the national independence movements that started almost as soon as the European global empires were consolidated. I also suspect that it signals the beginning of the end of the apparent domination of world politics and ideology by nation-states. The true empires, the multinational conglomerates, owe no allegiances to state or place, have no investment in ecology or community. As Snyder cogently observes, "it is not nature-as-chaos which threatens us, but the State's presumption that *it* has created order. Also there is an almost self-congratulatory *ignorance* of the natural world that is pervasive in Euro-American business, political, and religious circles" (Snyder, 1990, 92-93). The real dominators of the planet thus pose the greatest threat to sustained life, but it will become increasingly difficult for them to wield the governments and the communities in their interests, Operation Desert (Oil) Shield notwithstanding.

It will not suffice merely to support and promote the various movements and practices that stand against the cultural homogenization of the world's peoples for the reduction of all things, human and otherwise, to resources for the maximization of profits and self-perpetuation of growth-model economics. Salleh asserts that the now-traditional utopian projection for the future is no longer a viable option: "To argue for the collective emancipation and rearrangement of men and women in a classless society is to tamper with mere appearances. Reorganization of productive ownership, or the reshuffling of status hierarchies, affords no release from the present excesses of productive imperialism" (Salleh, 1988, 135-36). Perhaps the conceptualization and implementation of diversified, bioregional natured cultures might afford some release without waiting for an ecological apocalypse or economic Armageddon to clear the ground for fresh planting. That method of agriculture, scraping the ground bare with the topsoil blowing away on the wind, is inefficient and profligate anyway. Much more energy efficient is the as-of-yet little practised cultivation of new growth within the midst of the old, which is interdependent and much more self-sustaining.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> From this vantage point it makes sense, in a very ironic way, that in the United States only Native American human beings are represented and analysed in the museums of 'natural history', while other humans are represented in 'cultural' museums. Apparently,

the Western mindset views their historic lifestyles as too unalienated from nature to be regarded fully human, while believing that ‘modern’, as opposed to ‘primitive’, humans have no *natural* history to record.

<sup>2</sup> Carolyn Merchant treats this relationship quite extensively in *The Death of Nature* (1980).

<sup>3</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin’s work in dialogics has helped me to clarify some of these issues. Iris M. Zavala contends that “what is specifically challenging in Bakhtin is precisely the lucid exploration of dialogics as a coherent epistemological conception of meaning as a responsible engaging with ‘another’ and the communal basis for human emancipation and freedom ... dialogics is a method of thinking as a whole and a rejection of worldviews that recognize the right of a higher consciousness to make decisions for lower ones, to transform persons into voiceless things” (Zavala, 1990, 86) [i.e., the objectification of both women and nature as silent objects of attention rather than agents and actors]. Please see my articles, “Ground, Pivot, Motion” and “Prolegomenon for an Ecofeminist Dialogics”, where I develop some of these ideas in greater detail in relation to literature and ecofeminist philosophy.

<sup>4</sup> Haraway’s most recent text, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women* (1991) is subtitled *The Reinvention of Nature*. She explains this collection of essays as being “a book about the invention and reinvention of nature – perhaps the most central arena of hope, oppression, and contestation for inhabitants of the planet earth in our times”, which “treats constructions of nature as a crucial cultural process for people who need and hope to live in a world less riddled by the dominations of race, colonialism, class, gender, and sexuality” (Haraway, 1991, 1,2).

<sup>5</sup> Susan Griffin has tellingly drawn this comparison for Western Culture in her book *Woman and Nature* (1978). For those unfamiliar with ecofeminism, Ariel Salleh distinguishes it from other manifestations of feminism by stating that “the ecofeminist contribution stands apart from conventional feminism, because it is an analysis which puts the current global predicament first. Its theoretical frame provides a rationale for the integrated study of environmental exploitation, gender relations, Third World development, bio-technology and militarism. Beyond this, by affirming the continuity of ‘human’ and ‘natural’ spheres, ecofeminism involves a profound epistemological challenge to Humanism” (Salleh, 1988, 130).

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