

Ecofeminism in Two Worlds

**Women and the Environment: Mobilizing and Globalizing,
National Women's Studies Association Conference , Orlando, Florida, USA**

**Embracing the Earth,
9th International Interdisciplinary Congress on Women, Seoul, Korea**

The U.S. National Women's Studies Association holds an annual conference, and in June 2005, its 26th year, the theme was Ecofeminism. But the conference location in Orlando, Florida certainly created a sense of cognitive dissonance. Everywhere were fake environments, resorts, theme restaurants, and a host of disconnected and unreal places to be. The first was the hotel, the Renaissance at SeaWorld, with its carefully controlled and air-conditioned environment, its caged birds, its non-vegetarian meals—and for extras, a dance run by an arm of the U.S. military on Saturday night. It was an uncomfortable start.

Vandana Shiva's Keynote, "Terra Madre: Women and the Environment," drew on her forthcoming book, *Earth Democracy*, outlining two conflicting worldviews—"terra madre" and "terra nullius." In addition to the meaning of terra nullius as uninhabited land, or rather land whose ownership is unrecognized by the colonizer, Shiva described such land as repeatedly "emptied" by the hyper wealthy who ignore already existing living economies of the poor. For example, agricultural figures from Nigeria show that women's gardens, using just 2 percent of the land, produce 50 percent of that country's food. Shiva has a subtle sense of humor that allows her to see the Burbank potato as the "ultimate Cartesian potato" and golden rice as "jaundiced rice."

She spoke of how there is six times more water in the world's dams than in the world's rivers and then turned her ecofeminist eye to the racket of environmental conservation; the sale of "protected species" for example, like woodpeckers sold for USD\$100,000 a pair. She also noted how the decimation of mangroves to create global aquacultures for the shrimp industry and tourist resorts had affected the level of tsunami destruction in coastal communities. One wonders how much of the funds donated by governments in rebuilding schemes are tied to precisely those same destructive industries. Shiva's conclusion: "The last thing we need, is to have capital mediate our relationship with life."

The plenary session the following day on Women and the Environment was a mixed experience. The programmed speakers were indigenous Green activist Winona La Duke, Vassar professor Jill Schneiderman, and ecofeminist philosopher Karen Warren. La Duke spoke with passion about personal and civil responsibility. She touched on genetically modified (GM) plants as predatory, created to be dominant, and against all the principles of ecosystems. Instead, she observed, it is human relationships of power that are replicated in the GM ecosystem. In Iraq, Paul Bremer left behind Rule 81, under which farmers can grow only U.S. patented plants. So a place that symbolizes the origin of agriculture—the Fertile Crescent of Mesopotamia—now becomes a place of dead agriculture, a form of farming that creates profit for U.S. corporations rather than wholesome food for Iraqi people.

Schneiderman gave a personal reflection, building on Chris Cuomo's "ethic of flourishing" as central to a philosophy of ecological feminism. Her contribution to the diversity of approaches was based on her experience as a geologist and queer parent, living in a small community in Trinidad and Tobago. Unfortunately, Schneiderman did not elaborate on the political persecution of gays and lesbians in the Caribbean. Such an analysis would have deepened a presentation that focused too much on the "niceties" of alternative lifestyles. Warren, the third speaker, was unable to attend. Her abstract had promised to compare different positions within ecofeminism.

Over the next few days in Orlando, there were around 20 sessions on aspects of ecofeminism, globalization, biocolonialism, and biodiversity. But there is a long way to go in U.S. Women's Studies as far as understanding the repercussions of taking on an ecofeminist perspective. This extends to what we eat, how it is grown, how much is spent on wasted and fruitless consumption, and taken for granted technologies. One well-known American ecofeminist actually felt that SeaWorld had something to offer as an "ecofeminist experience." I find this troubling, since SeaWorld represents commodification of both the environment and of human experience.

Following the NWSA conference, I flew to Seoul, South Korea for Embracing the Earth: 9th International Interdisciplinary Congress on Women. This gathering was more diverse both in attendance and in the scope of papers presented. Joo-hyun Cho gave a fascinating paper on "Gender and Biotechnology" in which she looked at the history of invitro fertilization (IVF) in Korea where the first IVF child was born as early as 1984 (the same year as Louise Brown in the U.K.). Cho moved on to look at how women's bodies are used as a natural resource in Korean economic development through production of customized stem cell lines, and she drew convincing connections between nationalism, scientific progress, and the use of women as "free resources" by capital.

Liz Philipose's paper on "Pain and Empire" traced the intersections between torture, racism, the discourse of American Empire, and its disconnection from emotion. In relation to Abu Ghraib, she spoke of "comfortable numbness and glib indifference" in the face of "genuine heartbreak." In a plenary on globalization, Gigi Francisco from the Philippines spoke of international power relations and ways in which Third World countries are marginalized in multilateral negotiations. Foundational U.S. feminists Cynthia Enloe and Nancy Folbre were also there and gave useful presentations on militarization of western capitalist patriarchal culture and on ecological economics, respectively. There was also significant discussion on the proposed legalization of prostitution in Korea, with many participants voicing concern at this proposal.

In comparison with the U.S. conference, I found more willingness among feminists in Seoul to discuss in depth the issues raised by panelists and plenary speakers. No doubt the more international nature of the conference contributed to this sense of engagement, but I suspect that the immediate environment also affected the level of discussion. In Seoul there were small groves of trees and a sense of the existence of a real world.

These 2005 conferences suggest a growing engagement with ecofeminist concerns among feminist theorists. My hope is that alongside this theory, there is also a growing engagement

with intersections between the inbuilt violence of globalization, free trade, war, fundamentalism and anti-feminism. That is, ecofeminism must remain trenchantly political if it is to be relevant. But it seems that feminist conferences these days do not end up even attempting to outline a forward position. Have we lost the skill and political will to do that?

—Susan Hawthorne