



**“To Bring About a Radical Shift in Human Consciousness:”  
An Interview with Marnie Sullivan on Ecofeminism**  
*Stephanie Mendoza*

Marnie M. Sullivan began her academic career in the sciences with a particular interest in genetics before earning a B.A. in English with an emphasis in Creative Writing and a minor in chemistry from the University of Pittsburgh in 1991. Her interest in science and creative writing persisted as she earned an M.A. from Clarion University of PA in 1993 with thesis projects that analyzed the use of science in *Star Trek: The Next Generation* and an excerpt from a novel. She earned a Ph.D. in literature from Bowling Green State University in 2004 with a dissertation that examined Rachel Carson’s three sea books from a feminist and ecofeminist perspective.

Many of her research interests involve analysis of the creative expressions of traditionally underrepresented groups including women, ethnic people of color, immigrants, working class people, LGBT people, and others. She is a seasoned student advocate who has conducted research and presented papers on feminist pedagogy, service learning, and

learning communities and encourages social justice through critical thinking and civic engagement.

Particularly connected to the landscape and culture of the Great Lakes region, Sullivan is currently a member of the English department of Mercyhurst College, a private liberal arts college in Erie, PA. She may be reached at [msullivan@mercyhurst.edu](mailto:msullivan@mercyhurst.edu).

### **Interview:**

#### **How would you personally define ecofeminism? What is the significance of the movement?**

Ecofeminism is an academic/theoretical, pedagogical, social, and political movement that links feminism and deep ecology with grassroots activism. It begins with the recognition that humans are inherently connected to the natural world, while human culture (especially Western religion, politics, and economics) insist on our asserting human separation from nature. It proceeds with the acknowledgement that women and the earth have been linked in human culture and society in primarily two ways: woman and the earth are both seen as nurturing and life-sustaining (women because of their association with mothering and care giving; the earth because [of] its natural resources and potential fecundity); and, because this perceived relationship is reinforced in language and cultural practices (think of all the ubiquitous metaphors for women: chicks, cats/kittens, bitches). The painful irony is that these beliefs and cultural practices have also made possible the oppression of women and the exploitation of the earth. Historically, social dictums (whether taboos, mores, or legislation) have been used to control women because we are seen as emotional (not rational), nurturers (so therefore not good leaders), and potentially dangerous (hysterical). For the earth, Western religion presents it as a garden that is there for our exclusive use, must be managed (or it will become/remain seemingly unproductive wilderness) and is capable of devastating destruction (the sea and until recently, hurricanes that were given feminine names). Ecofeminism roots out these connections and seeks to bring about a radical shift in human consciousness for the betterment of humans and the earth.

Ecofeminism fosters change through educational practices (see my recent work, below) and political change, often emerging from activism. Academic ecofeminists draw attention to the nature/culture dichotomies that maintain the current unsustainable system. According to Val Plumwood in her study, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, the division into dualisms is neither neutral nor arbitrary, but the result of a process “by which contrasting concepts... are formed by domination and subordination and constructed as oppositional and exclusive” (Plumwood 31). Among the contrasting pairs that are key elements in the dualistic structure of Western ideology are: culture/nature, male/female, mind/body, reason/emotion, human/nature (non-human), production/reproduction (nature), public/private, subject/object, self/other (Plumwood 43). Thus, the qualities (actual or supposed) associated with the condition of being a man

(for example) is culturally construed as superior, whereas the condition of being a woman is understood as inferior. Rachel Carson (who many claim as an ecofeminist grandmother, since it was not a movement with a name when she was born), Sandra Steingraber, and Theo Colborn are scientists who work to change political and economic policies guided by ecofeminist underpinnings. Grassroots activists like Judith Plant, Cathleen and Colleen McGuire, and me work in our local communities to encourage organic agriculture and locally grown foods, to promote sustainable industries and to protect ecosystems, and to insist that all people (especially those in low income, immigrant, elderly and other vulnerable neighborhoods) have the right to live in communities that are healthy as well as safe. While Ecofeminism is plural, fluid, and difficult to codify, in general, all ecofeminists would promote process vs product, cooperation vs. competition, collaboration vs. individual achievement, and a deep respect for cyclical processes and communal values.

**Why did you first become interested in ecofeminism? Why do you continue to be involved? What are some of the challenges you encounter in the ecofeminist movement?**

Like some of my heroes (listed below), I think I have always been an ecofeminist in that I cherish efforts to reconnect humans to the earth and resist women's seemingly (culturally prescribed) inferiority. Prior to the emergence of ecofeminism in the 1990s, I would have described myself as coming from second wave feminism that promote the idea that the personal is political and require theoretical models to correspond with productive action in the world. Second wave feminists rightly seek redress for women's oppression within the world that men created (Western patriarchy) by bringing about changes in social institutions and public policy. This is necessary and important and has brought about a litany of major changes. I have many more choices in my life than my grandmother did and my students—both women and men—have more choices than I had. Still, I was never constitutionally suited for that kind of public work. I am a nurturer by nature and caregiver by circumstance. I am also from a working class background that finds value in physical labor and maintaining relationships through storytelling sharing histories. Finally, I am a total “nature bunny” and tree hugger. Ecofeminism brings together my politics with my personality and is therefore, the perfect fit.

While this is a rigorous area of inquiry grounded in theory and much practice, ecofeminism is a marginal perspective, perhaps even among feminists (although feminists who don't recognize the importance of caring for the environment are becoming fewer and fewer). And, since ecofeminists are frequently “walking their talk,” working in the world, they may not have the opportunity to reflect on their experiences or produce scholarship to share. Mostly, ecofeminism is discussed in terms of ethics or spirituality, pedagogical implications, and in ecocritical literary analysis. Ecofeminism is gaining in legitimacy however, with increased opportunities to publish. *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* and *Ethics and the Environment* are two journals that frequently include articles on ecofeminism and the Association for Study of Literature of

the Environment (ASLE) has a section of their website devoted to ecofeminism. In addition, there are numerous studies on grassroots activism in the US and in the world that are available for general reading as well as text books.

**Why do ecocriticism and feminism blend together so well? How are they connected, and what are the benefits of linking the two?**

Ecocriticism is a hybrid or plural criticism that benefits from feminist theory—particularly post-structuralism and—as well as work by multicultural, post-colonial, and environmental perspectives.

Ecofeminist literary critics (like me) are concerned with how gender, race, class, and sexuality (among others) reflect and shape human relationships with nature. Although ecofeminist literary critics certainly search for parallels between women and nature, that is the most narrow focus. Ecocritics are equally interested in exploring other identities (shifting, ambiguous, transitional, multiply constructed subjects and examining arrangements that avoid re-inscribing Western ideas of difference.

Ecofeminist critics may identify the ways in which nature can be re-imagined to avoid perpetuating oppression and additional abuse of the natural world. Indeed, ecocriticism and ecofeminist literary analysis are powerful means to challenge hegemonic constructions of nature and human relationships, offer important critiques of science, and provide valuable lessons for humans (students) to resist naturalizing their experience, thereby reinforcing the apparent “naturalness” of culturally constructed and oppressive social systems

**Do your views as an ecofeminist affect your lessons in the classroom? How? What might your students learn in your classroom that they might not learn from other professors?**

This is such a great question and one that I have been thinking about a lot recently because it is a challenge to try to bring about radical change in traditional environments, and while universities have always held an important role in social change (scientific discoveries, fostering critical thinking, student power), they are in fact, social institutions themselves and therefore, have an invested interest in protecting their power, resources, influence. Not only that, students—even those predisposed to radical thinking, often have very traditional ideas about what represents authority in the classroom. A quick example is that students may be more likely to call my Mrs. than Doctor or professor, because I carry my nurturing personality purposefully into the classroom. Most students “get it” eventually and can see that I have high standards and know what I am talking about, even if I am not a white-haired old man in tweed. In fact, I believe this approach can have a really positive long-term benefit for most of them and in the short term (on evaluations), students are often grateful that I care about them enough to support them in their pursuits.

**You say that students often have very traditional ideas about what represents authority, as well as about social institutions. Since ecofeminism is such a radical new way of thinking that students might not be used to, have you ever encountered any resistance to such a change? How do they respond to the ecofeminist pedagogue? Do you find that some students are more open to the ecofeminist approach?**

Teaching is a mix of methodology, personality, and practice. Ecofeminist principles guide the decisions I make developing curriculum. Being a nurturing, optimistic, if introverted person, I strive to make the classroom a safe space so that students can take intellectual risks. Students who are particularly invested in dominant culture may be resistant to challenges to that culture, but most students appreciate my approach in the classroom and most say they know I care about them. Even so, students may chaff when asked to take responsibility for their own learning. I expect them to read challenging material and to analyze topics that are difficult to talk about.

**As ecofeminism is still a fairly new movement, resistance might be encountered in academia as well. Is ecofeminism looked down on, and, if so, have you ever experienced it? Are ecofeminists marginalized in the university, or outside? Is academia more open to ecofeminism than in the past? Do you think this will continue to be a challenge to the ecofeminist movement?**

This is a reasonable question, but a hard one to answer. One challenge for ecofeminists in the academy is that promoting non-hierarchical arrangements and consensus building (among others) is inherently anti-institutional. On the other hand, fostering critical thinking and self-reflection are objectives of both eco-feminists and a liberal arts education. The challenge is to walk the talk! It means ongoing self-examination, managing ambivalence, and reconciling paradox. Fortunately, I do not feel marginalized at my institution, although my alliances are more often coalitions than cohorts.

**What writers do you think are most important to the movement? How do they inspire you?**

Off the top of my head, these are the books that made a big impact on me, early on:

Carolyn Merchant's *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (San Francisco: Harper and Row).

Annette Kolodny's *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975).

Carol J Adams' *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian  
Critical Theory* (New York: Continuum, 1990).

All I can tell you is that these books changed my life and I think about them even now. I was already a vegetarian when I read Adams, but she made "the personal is political" very, very real for me.

Others who I have enjoyed since and are important contributors to the movement include: Stacy Alaimo; Karla Armbruster; Lynda Birke; Glynis Carr; Chris J. Cuomo; Mary Daly; Irene Diamond; Françoise d'Eaubonne; Nisvan Erkal; Greta Claire Gaard; Susan Griffin; Paula Gunn Allen; Donna Haraway; Ynestra King; Mary Mellor; Patrick D. Murphy; Vera Norwood; Gloria Orenstein; Judith Plant; Val Plumwood; Vandana Shiva; and Noel Sturgeon.

Karen Warren's anthology, *Ecofeminism: Women, Nature, Culture* is an early and still excellent collection of essays on Ecofeminism

### **What current projects are you working on?**

Because I walk my feminist/ecofeminist talk, I see my work as a teacher as a form of activism with potential to bring about social change. I have applied for a Fulbright teaching award to teach Rachel Carson and the American Environmental Movement in Hungary next year. Rapid industrialization, water and air pollution from within and without, and the difficult transition from communist to "market" economies have wreaked havoc in the Hungarian environment and I think I can contribute something to the students, there. Another part of that walk does involve talking to both scholars and teachers. I have finally (finally, finally) returned to my dissertation and have a chapter, "Of Webs and Waves: Rachel Carson and the Three Sea Books," that was invited to appear in *Ecofeminism and Literary Criticism*, Berghman Books, forthcoming 2010. I am finishing an essay on the continued relevance of Carson's example, instruction, and writing in today's college classroom to *Transformations: The Journal of Inclusive Scholarship and Pedagogy* (that, and the end of the term competed with this interview! Phew). Additionally, I will present a paper informed by ecofeminist and feminist pedagogy, "Rethinking Radical Pedagogy to Reach the New College Student" at the Conference on College Composition and Communication's 2010 Annual Convention, "Remix: Revisit, Rethink, Revise, Renew," in Louisville, Kentucky. Wish me luck!

**Finally, what do you think the greatest challenges are for ecofeminists for today? What advice do you have for students looking to learn more or become more involved in the ecofeminist movement? What are some of the challenges they might face?**

Unfortunately, we live during a time when the degradation of the planet is not only accelerating, but intensifying. The climate is getting warmer, the environment more toxic,

and food systems are increasingly threatened by corporatizing and artificial modification. Moreover, the impacts of these conditions on our lives can be seen in the epidemic numbers of respiratory illnesses and immune-suppressed disorders diagnosed each year and the increasing number of so-called climate-change refugees driven from ancestral lands. Until social and environmental justice is achieved, until the human-driven degradation of the planet is stopped, and until sustainable standards of living are established, there will be Ecofeminists. I have great faith in the power that students have to bring about positive change. Students are creative, energetic, and motivated; they have played a role in every major social movement in the 20th century, around the world. The students who are drawn to Ecofeminism are more likely to be idealists and are also more willing to turn their moral truths into action in both private and public domains. It's a difficult path, the rewards are few, but the stakes are too high to ignore.