

Becoming (More-than-) Human: Ecofeminism, Dualisms and the Erosion of the Colonial Human Subject

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In contemporary, North American society, what it means to be 'human' is often taken for granted; in other words, 'humanness' is usually accepted as a readily knowable, uncomplicated and stable aspect of social reality. Ivone Gebara argues that because we believe that we already know the meaning of 'humanness,' reflecting on this notion often appears to be of little interest, need or value. "Since we imagine that everyone already knows what a ['human'] is, we might have the feeling that we are wasting our time on notions that are already familiar, and that we ought to be seeking solutions to the urgent problems that [currently] face us" (Gebara, 1999: 67). Like Gebara, I argue that the concept of 'human,' is not 'natural,' stable or straightforward, rather it is a culturally-specific and historical invention, one intimately implicated within contemporary, environmental problems. In other words, although the category of human is often understood as readily comprehensible and fundamentally elevated above, and detached from, nature and 'more-than-human' beings, I maintain that the human subject is positioned within what I will term 'the web of life,' that is, the worldwide, ecological community which encompasses both human and more-than-human subjects. I believe the term, 'becoming' is a useful adjective to describe the human; becoming allows us to consider the human not as a natural or stable entity, but as one which is emerging and transforming in relation to environmental and social contexts. As a being situated within an ecological web of life, the human is not distinct from nature and more-than-human animals, but exists and changes in continuous relation to them.

Long before the onset of European colonization of what is now considered North America, various dualisms permeated the European, historical imagination. Within this worldview, aspects of these

dichotomies were understood to exist in fundamental distinction from one another; that is, not only were divisions of each dualism conceptualized as inherently disconnected and independent, but one aspect of each dichotomy was always understood as naturally and intrinsically superior to the other. Sallie McFague argues that the primary dualism within this imagination was the conceptualization of 'reason' and 'nature' as fundamentally distinct entities, in which reason was positioned in hierarchical relation to nature. However, this dichotomy has been broadened to represent, incorporate and interconnect with multiple other dichotomies, including, spirit/body, male/female, reason/emotion, and human/nature (McFague, 1997: 88). According to McFague, "the [reason/nature] dualism illuminates most of the other dualisms: whatever falls on the top side of a dualism has connections with 'reason,' and whatever falls on the bottom side is seen as similar to 'nature'" (1997: 88). In this sense, the projection of these constructions onto seemingly-different aspects of reality, including 'different' bodies, functioned to hierarchically organize both European society and the universe at large.

It is important to recognize that because these dualisms were constructions of a very particular and ethnocentric group within European history, namely elite, white men, such subjects were also imagined to embody the superior aspects of various dichotomies; in other words, characteristics associated with reason were presumed to adhere to white, European males (McFague, 1997: 88). Within this imagination, the rational capacities and spiritual natures of white, masculine and European humans were imagined to prevent them from being confined by or to their bodies, or influenced by emotional or sexual responses. Importantly, because such racialized and gendered subjects were the

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only subjects envisioned to embody these and other superior dimensions of various dualisms, white, European men were positioned as the ideal modes of humanness within a great chain of being. In this sense, as the white, European masculine subject was assumed to embody humanness, subjects who were constructed to embody the opposing dimensions of these dichotomies were regarded as his nonhuman Others. Arguably, as the human was constructed to embody whiteness, masculinity and European ancestry, his Other may be regarded as the colonized, non-white woman. Through her gendered, racialized and cultural difference from the human, she was constructed to embody characteristics he did not. According to this dualistic relationship of interconnected difference(s), because she embodied matter, or solely bodily existence, she possesses neither inherent consciousness nor spirituality allowed by such consciousness. Because she was conceptualized as the Other to the sole, normative human, she was categorized as nonhuman. In this sense, it may be recognized how there has existed a significant, *conceptual* connection between non-white women and nature, as both were understood as nonhuman material beings in relation to the European, white man, who was presumed to embody true humanness. Through this ideology of the normative human subject, women and nature are conceptually demoted to a subordinate position because of what they are assumed to be (Primavesi, 1991: 142). However, this connection between nature and Aboriginal women is not only ideo-

logical: because both are regarded to exist in solely material form, and therefore to lack spiritual natures or capacities for consciousness, various manifestations of colonial violence against both nature and Aboriginal women have been historically disregarded, undermined or recognized as justified. This construction of the masculine human subject as the one who alone inhabits higher realms of reason and spirit served to legitimize and stabilize future social and religious structures of subordination and dominance. Women and nature have been placed under male domination and rule by the compelling and authoritative force of this prevailing ideology (Primavesi, 1991: 142-147).

Within contemporary, North American academe, this historical, European construction of the human has been greatly interrogated, denaturalized and critiqued by postcolonial, critical race and psychoanalytic theorists, including Frantz Fanon and Sylvia Wynter, among many others. Within their theories, great energy is focused on how the articulation of humanness has, and continues to affect subjects who have been historically excluded by this rigid definition at the level of social, emotional, psychic and bodily realities. These theorists are correct in their assertions that the purpose of the human construction was to reduce the modes of being, embodied by nonwhite and non-European/nonwestern subjects, in order to elevate the mode of being embodied by their cultural Others. However, it must be recognized that there exists a subtle, but continued, hierarchical and dualistic relationship between human and

nonhuman within these theories. Not only do human beings continue to be understood as stably and inherently different from nonhuman beings, principally animals, but human experiences of colonial violence, and therefore, human modes of being, are essentially recognized as more significant than the modes of being and lived realities of more-than-human beings. In fact, as the conflation of racialized humans with more-than-humans is articulated as undermining the violence experienced by such human subjects, violence against animals and nature, in such forms as human invasion, objectification, exploitation and voracious consumption, is disregarded as violence per se. Gebara calls this trend an anthropocentric “hierarchicalizing of knowing [that actually] runs parallel to the hierarchicalizing of society, [which is] itself a characteristic of the patriarchal world” (1999: 25). In this sense, within such criticism, there is an attempt to destabilize one conception of the boundary between human and nonhuman, while a second human/nonhuman dualism is (re)produced and supported; ultimately, the traditional border, employed in colonial fantasies to distinguish what counts as (a) human and what does not, is kept intact.

These attempts to distinguish the human, along with having a colonial genealogy, are built on the assumption of a distinct sphere in which humans act, and blind to ideas of significant interconnection and interdependence: dimensions of each dualism are considered not only unrelated to, but to actually oppose, one another. However, each element of social reality is constructed in relation to others; in other words, every

aspect of each dichotomy involves a reference to that which is supposedly opposite, distinct from, or Other to, the primary category (See Hewitt Suchocki, 1982). In this sense, all aspects of the dichotomies require reference beyond them in order to develop as intelligible categories and, therefore, cannot be understood, or even exist, outside the relationships within which they are implicated (Hewitt Suchocki, 1982: 6–7). More importantly, there are material interrelationships that are not captured by these dichotomies. As an example we can think of contemporary environmental threats, such as global warming and Colony Collapse Disorder in North America, that illustrate how humans are not ultimately separate from nature, but dependent on it for our survival, and that ‘natural’ phenomena has the potential to powerfully and disastrously affect humans. In this sense, it must be recognized that there is danger within denial: by assuming that we are not part of nature, we ultimately deny the significance of ecological problems on their own bodies and lived realities.

However, I think it necessary at this point to remark on the (neo)colonial anthropo-centrism within many conceptions of human/nature relationality. Similar to the consciousness of more-than-human animals, when ecological problems are recognized as problems per se, and especially, when such issues are recognized to transcend the human/nature divide and create an impact in the lives of humans, such problems tend to be understood in human terms. In other words, nature often becomes the subject of human attention, concern, and care when humans acknowledge the fact that we





are intimately related to, and ultimately dependent on, the earth for our survival and wellbeing, and that by abusing and destroying nature and more-than-human subjects, humans ultimately bring about their own destruction. Although within such types of care, the interrelatedness among all beings within the web of life is recognized, such care for nature often develops because humans fear the effects of environmental disasters on our lives, and not because we genuinely care about the lives and wellbeing of Other creatures or the earth, in and of themselves. And even within environmental concerns, the recognition of the interrelatedness of all living subjects often leads to a hierarchy of environmental issues. Within conceptions of human/more-than-human relations, there is often a hierarchy of environmental issues and social issues, including the (neo)colonial treatment of humans outside the dominant, white, European/western man as nonhuman, strengthening the conceptual disconnect between these human and more-than-human. These aspects of environmental interrelatedness must be regarded as not only anthropocentric, but violent, contemporary manifestations of the historically-dominant, European construction of the normative and viable human subject.

In this sense, it is evident that a new consciousness must emerge. Humans must begin to recognize that, as Paula Gunn Allen states, “we are the land... the land and the people are the same... The earth is the source of being of the people and we are equally the being of the earth. The land is not really a place separate from ourselves... The land is not a mere source of survival, dis-

tant from the creatures it nurtures” (Allen, as quoted in Christ, 1997: 114). Christ employs the term ‘interdependence’ in order to characterize the connection between all beings in the web of life. Yet the word interdependence must be used cautiously, for although humans are dependent on nature, animals, plants and other more-than-humans, as well as other humans for our survival, the earth is not reciprocally dependent on humans. In fact, the presence of (certain) humans on the earth has historically prevented, and continues to threaten, the flourishing and wellbeing of Others, including both human and more-than-human beings within the web of life. In this sense, concepts such as interdependence undermine the reality of power relations that exist between and among different modes of being, including human relationships and those between humans and nature.

For this reason, ecofeminists’ use the notion interdependence to illustrate that humans are not separate from, but intimately implicated within, the natural world. This concept helps to demonstrate that “‘human’ beings are essentially relational and interdependent. We are tied to [‘human’ and ‘more-than-human’] Others from the moment of birth to the moment of death. Our lives are dependent in more ways than we can begin to imagine on support and nurture from the web of life, from the earth body” (Christ, 1997: 136). Because the interdependent relation between human subjects and the earth is conceptualized as so intimate, human actions can have significant, and often disastrous effects on nature. However, the agency and power

of nature in creating significant phenomena in the lived realities, societies and experiences of humans must also be recognized. This concept destabilizes colonial, western (and gendered) conceptions of the earth as a passive object, to be owned, harnessed, excavated and harvested in order to increase the economic and social flourishing of humans. In other words, the notion of interdependence demonstrates that humans are also affected by more-than-human lives, and that the earth is not a passive, receptive instrument to be exploited by and for human cultures. Examples such as decreased air quality and Colony Collapse Disorder illustrate the power of the earth to violently fight back against human abuse in order to protect itself.

In order for a more life-affirming, harmonious relationship between the natural world and human beings to emerge and, therefore, in order to ensure the survival of all beings within the web of life, what ultimately needs to emerge is a new conception of the relationship between human and more-than-human life. McFague proposes the notion of subject-subjects relations, which encompasses a radical and life-affirming way of transforming this hierarchical relationship. According to this model, human subjects must relate to nature as a subject. While recognizing their own intrinsic relation to Other subjects, grounded in their interconnection within the web of life, human subjects must recognize more-than-human subjects' own intrinsic value and right to live, quite apart from human interests and lives. In other words, we must recognize the otherness of more-than-humans, yet simultaneously feel a connection and recognize an affinity with such subjects. This connection "underscores both radical unity and radical individuality. It suggests a different, basic sensibility for all our knowing and doing and a different kind of know-ink and doing... It says: 'I am a subject and live in a world of many other different subjects'" (McFague, 1997: 38). According to McFague, this will involve "the loving eye [as well as] the other senses, for it moves the eye from the mind (and the heavens) to the body (and the earth). It will result in an embodied kind of knowledge of other subjects who, like ourselves, occupy specific bodies in specific locations on this messy, muddy, wonderful, complex, mysterious earth" (McFague, 1997: 36).

Practicing this type of relationship will implicitly and explicitly embody a radical challenge to what it has historically meant to be both a human and nonhuman subject. It will require an erosion of the imagined boundary, grounded in the perception of difference, between human and nature, and the other, interconnected dichotomies within the European, colonial, historical imagination. It will also involve re-valuing the both sides of classic western dualisms as significant and worthy in and of themselves. This type of relationship will necessitate the erosion of concepts such as intrinsic inferiority and superiority, and potentially end the embodied and lived power relations that such concepts

sanction. Perhaps most importantly, the subject-subjects relationship will allow a new understanding of the relations between all beings within the web of life to emerge; the human, that is, the normative, white, European man of the (neo)colonial imagination, and the human of the human/nature dichotomy, and his wellbeing, subjectivity, knowledge and mode of being, will be displaced of from the dominant center. Beginning to recognize and relate to more-than-humans as subjects will inevitably represent a strong challenge to the coherence of the traditional, anthropocentric, colonial paradigm. The fantasy of humans as the sole, normative subjects within the universe has historically, and continues to provide powerful senses of security and identity to many of us; we are therefore deeply attached to this conception of humanness. However, in order for a more life affirming, harmonious relationship between the natural world and human beings to emerge, we must begin to practice such models within all of our relationships, including relationships with more-than-human beings and other human subjects. Such an endeavor is crucial for the flourishing, and ultimately, the survival of all beings within the web of life.

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ⁱ The term, 'more-than-human' will be used in place of the term, 'nonhuman' in certain areas within this paper. For a number of reasons, I believe the former term is more appropriate. Firstly, nonhuman carries connotations of difference from an explicitly human norm, and a related sense of deficiency and deviance. For this reason, I will employ nonhuman in areas in which I describe traditional, colonial human perceptions of more-than-humans. However, I believe that more-than-human conveys a sense that there literally exists significantly more than simply human realities in the world. More-than-human is also more comprehensive than related terms, such as animals or nature, as it can encompass many diverse expressions of realities, experiences and subject(ive)ities that transcend traditional constructions of humanness.