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Women's Philosophical Voice, Expression, and Inquiry:
Explorations in Medieval Mysticism,
Performance Art and Ecological Feminism

by
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In the following, I explore the development of women's distinctive voice in three different genres: medieval mystical literature, performance art and ecological feminist literature.

In the first paper, "Flesh Becomes Word: Aspects of the Body in Hadewijch's Literature and Mysticism," I explore the significance of the body in the mystical revelation and contemplation of Hadewijch of Antwerp, a thirteenth-century mystic. Hadewijch describes her bodily experiences as important sources of knowledge about God. She also expresses her sense of union with God physically, as well as emotionally and spiritually. I argue that Hadewijch's literary style was influenced by the thought, content and themes of her work, which to a large extent, include the body and the physical self. The body, therefore, becomes an important element in the development of her literary and contemplative voice.

The second paper, "Feminist Art, Aesthetics and Discourse: The Performance of Karen Finley," investigates performance art as a discourse that describes and explains feminist social, cultural and political concerns. I describe the work of Karen Finley, a controversial artist who was denied a grant from the NEA on the basis of artistic content. In this essay, I assert that Finley demonstrates that performance art can be an artistic and political voice for feminist artists and non-artists.

In the third paper, "Writing the Body in Ecofeminist Literature," I examine five ecofeminist texts that demonstrate the importance of the female body as a source of knowledge, literary inspiration and consideration. I show how 'writing the body' has a strong presence in ecological feminism as an important method to identify the patriarchal oppression of women and nature, and as a source of female knowledge, strength and renewal. These works consider how women can find their voices through the simultaneous reflection upon their female bodies and interactions with the natural world.
Flesh Becomes Word:
Aspects of the Body in Hadewijch’s Mysticism and Literature

I am convinced that 'there are ways of thinking that we don’t yet know about.' I take those words to mean that many women are even now thinking in ways traditional intellection denies, decries, or is unable to grasp. Thinking is an active, fluid process, expanding process; intellection, "knowing," are recapitulations of past processes... I am really asking whether women cannot begin, at last, to think through the body.... (Adrienne Rich, Of Woman Born)¹

Hadewijch of Antwerp, a thirteenth-century mystic, served as a Mistress, spiritual guide, and educator within a Beguine community. She was well-educated, literate in French and Latin, as well as her native Dutch.² Not much is known about her life, though she left a collection of poetry, letters, and records of her visions. Throughout these three distinct genres, the body plays a significant role. In Hadewijch’s visions, for instance, she discusses her own particular body, and her physical sensations during spiritual enlightenment. In her poetry, she uses extensive bodily imagery in a more metaphorical sense. In her letters, she claims to have had a sense of physical identification with Christ, underscoring the importance of the body in the human relationship with God. In this essay, I will discuss the use of the body throughout Hadewijch’s writings. I will also examine Hadewijch’s literary style, and suggest how it may have been influenced by the thought, content and themes of her work, which to a large extent, include the body and physical self.

The Body in Visions

For women mystics of the Middle Ages, visionary activity was the key to their
spiritual practice. Visions helped them gain authority within medieval communities, including the ecclesiastical institutions; it also allowed them to break out of the traditional roles of marriage and motherhood, and devote themselves to their religious vocations. The accounts of these women’s mystical experiences are remarkable -- they often experienced God with their bodies, in addition to their minds and spirits. These utterly encompassing and forceful visions empowered the women mystics to write and communicate their experiences:

...[T]he place of visions is central in women’s religious writing, inspiring confidence in the recipient and others, tapping springs of creativity, providing insights which can be used as a source for teaching, transforming self-understanding and enabling the visionary to transform the world around her.

Hadewijch of Antwerp is one of the women mystics who experienced and wrote about her visions. An important element of her visions is her physical involvement -- like other medieval female mystics, she underwent tremendous bodily experiences during her spiritual enlightenment. She describes, in Vision 7:

On a certain Pentecost Sunday, I had a vision at dawn. Matins were being sung in the church, and I was present. My heart and veins and all my limbs trembled and quivered with eager desire and, as often occurred with me, such a madness and fear beset my mind that it seemed to me I did not content my Beloved, and that my Beloved did not fulfill my desire, so that dying I must go mad, and going mad I must die. On that day my mind was beset so fearfully and so painfully by desirous love that all my separate limbs threatened to break, and all my separate veins were in travail. The longing in which I then was cannot be expressed by any language or person I know; everything I could say about it would be unheard-of to all those who never apprehended Love as something to work for with desire, and whom Love had never acknowledged as hers. I can say this about it: I desired to have full fruition with my Beloved, and to understand and taste him in the full. I desired that his Humanity should to the fullest extent be one in fruition with my humanity, and that mine then should hold its stand and be strong enough to enter into perfection itself, by purity and unity, and in all things to content him fully in every virtue. To
that end I wished he might content me interiorly with his Godhead, in one spirit, and that for me he should be all that he is, without withholding anything from me.\textsuperscript{5}

The physicality and eroticism contained in this vision are obvious; her yearning for God reaches beyond spiritual and mental contemplation and inflames her actual physical being. She clearly feels tremendous anguish and emotion. Her remembrance of the event is filled with passionate images of the body -- her veins and limbs "trembled," she wishes to "taste" God, she desires their humanity should be in "fruition." On many occasions, like this one, Hadewijch speaks of her overwhelming desire for "union" or "fruition" with God. This fruition or union with God is not merely a spiritual union, but emotional and physical as well. Union with God is the most evident theme in Hadewijch's works; she states this over and over again, in various ways. A little further on, in the same vision, Hadewijch describes how Christ comes to her in the form of a man:

\textit{[H]}e came himself to me, took me entirely in his arms, and pressed me to him; and all my members felt his in full felicity, in accordance with the desire of my heart and my humanity. So I was outwardly satisfied and fully transported... I saw him completely come to nought and so fade and all at once dissolve that I could no longer recognize or perceive him outside me, and I could no longer distinguish him within me. Then it was to me as if we were one without difference. It was thus: outwardly, to see, taste, and feel, as one can outwardly taste, see, and feel in the reception of the outward Sacrament. So can the Beloved, with the loved one, each wholly receive the other in full satisfaction of the sight, the hearing, and the passing away of each of the one in the other.\textsuperscript{6}

Hadewijch describes her encounter with God's human form, Christ. She speaks about his physical presence with her, how she felt him with her senses of touch, taste, sight and hearing. She describes her satisfaction in "heart and
humanity," indicating her emotional and physical feelings have been fulfilled.

Hadewijch perceives Christ in his human, not divine form, a point I will discuss in detail later. Hadewijch's desires find contentment through this bodily union with Christ, claiming she "was changed and taken up in spirit," indicating some sort of transformation of her spirit coinciding with physical gratification.

In other visions, Hadewijch alludes to physical sensations in accordance with her spiritual encounters with God. For example, in another vision, she speaks about God's voice "embracing" her and how she "swooned" until her spirit could neither "see nor hear anymore." In another, she says "... our Lord was brought secretly to my bedside because I felt such an attraction of my spirit inwardly that I could not control myself outwardly... that desire which I had inwardly was to be one with God in fruition." Clearly Hadewijch's spirituality is not merely intellectual or passively contemplative. Her desire for union with God appears to overwhelm both her mental faculties and physical senses.

An important characteristic that comes across in Hadewijch's visionary activity is the holism of her mystical experiences: that is, she utterly involves herself on physical, emotional and spiritual levels. When she describes her "desire" for God, she seems to mean a spiritual, emotional and physical desire. In an essay on medieval female mystics' "bodily knowledge," J. Giles Milhaven addresses their physical responses to mystical enlightenment. He emphasizes that these women do not describe their experiences as less than physical and spiritual. He explains that
traditional thought regards physical response to mystical revelation as subordinate to
spiritual response; physical knowledge may assist the learner to the higher plane of
spiritual knowledge, but is of marginal relevance in and of itself. Milhaven points out
that to the medieval women mystics, the physical experience was as significant as the
spiritual, they had no "two-level experience." Yet these women "believed they were
being privileged to know in an intrinsically valuable way" through their bodily
raptures. The experiences of the women visionaries, he claims, revalues the body for
its epistomological capabilities, and encourages the integration of human physicality,
intellect, and spirituality.

Hadewijch's use of the human senses as an explanatory detail of mystical
union also suggests this unitive experience of her spirit and body. In other words,
she felt her mysticism, as much as it existed in her mind as thought or memory. She
claims to have "tasted" or "touched" God, and through this touch/taste, divine
knowledge revealed itself to her. For instance, in Vision 4, she explains how she saw
two heavens of equal splendor, and an angel instructed her to choose the most
glorious of them:

...I sank into [the angel] as encompassed by a new fidelity that was full of
knowledge with the taste of veritable Love.

In this penetrating taste of sweet Love, he said to me: "You are touched by the
perfect fidelity, which eternally shall make all things new: Taste and understand what
the differences between the two heavens is, and choose the richest and most
powerfull!"

Hadewijch's discrimination between the two heavens depends on her senses -- here,
the sense of taste. She does not use a rational or deductive thought process, but relies on her human senses. Whether Hadewijch *actually* used her sense of taste seems less important than that she felt, describes and explains her experience this way. In other places, as well, Hadewijch uses her body and senses to interact with God, through which she has access to a more complete, divine knowledge.\(^\text{15}\)

**The Body as Metaphor**

Hadewijch also makes use of the body in a more metaphorical sense in her poetry and letters. The body has a less particular and subjective presence here, that is, she does not seem to be explaining her own experiences. However, Hadewijch uses bodily imagery to illustrate certain concepts or explain relationships between humanity and God. For example, in a letter about Christ's good works on earth, she explains how humans access divine wisdom:

> Oh! wisdom leads very deep into God! So there is no security of life here except in the deep wisdom that seeks to touch him. Alas! He is always untouched, and so deep to touch that he must be moved with compassion because so few men seek or long, with eagerness or by the force of ardent works, to touch him even slightly in his mystery: who he is, and how he works with love....\(^\text{16}\)

In this passage, Hadewijch says the sense of touch is the connective force between God and human beings. Her lesson here is that when we imitate Christ through our good works on earth, we touch God. Through touch, humans know Christ, and Christ feels compassion for humans because so few wish to "know him", i.e., to perform similar good works. Though use and illustration by the sensation of touch, Hadewijch underscores the body and physical self as a means to divine
knowledge, union, and spiritual enlightenment.

Hadewijch's implication that the human senses are valuable as a source of knowledge and 'right action' differs from the Western intellectual tradition. Since the time of Plato, the West has perceived the human mind's epistemological capacity as superior to the body and its senses. But Hadewijch often enlists the strength of feeling and emotion in human interactions with God. She counsels that humans be empathetic, "O be most compassionate in all things!" or "Console to the best of your power those who are sorrowful," stressing the reliance upon human emotions. She recognizes the power of reason but does not make reason superior to love or feeling. She claims "reason instructs love, and love enlightens reason;" the two, love and reason, are "of great mutual help one to the other." For Hadewijch, human reason, the power of the mind, and feelings, located in the body, are not dualistic -- each is a part of what it means to be human. Perceiving rationality and feeling as mutually important to human experience and spiritual enlightenment, Hadewijch broadens the sources of knowing to include body as well as mind.

In her poetry, the body has a yet more abstract and metaphorical use. The body presents itself in the actions and behavior of 'Lady Love,' the lead player in Hadewijch's poetry. Lady Love symbolizes Divine Love for Hadewijch; therefore, what she imparts of her relationship with Love has implications for her relations with God. The personification of Love appears to signify Hadewijch's active and emotional love relationship with God. She uses courtly love literature to portray this
relationship with Love/God, depicting herself as the knight in service to the lady,

Love/God:

1 Love is so sweet in her nature
   That she conquers every other power.
   He who serves Love has a hard adventure
   Because he knows Love's mode of action,
   5 Before he is fully loved by her.
   He tastes her as bitter and sour;
   He cannot rest for an instant,
   So long as Love does not fetter him completely in love
   And bring him into the union of fruition.

10 Although it causes me such smarting pain
   That I know myself forsaken by Love,
   Love shows honor to all her friends
   Who are prompt to serve her with fidelity,
   So that in pleasure or pain
   15 They understand her rich teaching.
   They who work without growing fainthearted,
   And whom Love completely fetters in love,
   Remain in her glorious kingdom.22

Love's ability to conquer (ln1), love (ln 5), to forsake, or cause pain (Ins 10 - 11) actually reflect Hadewijch's own emotional responses to her relations with God, i.e., Hadewijch feels conquered, loved, forsaken, or in pain. Columbia Hart explains, "Hadewijch used the poetry of courtly love to express the emotional tensions of longing for God."23 The themes and devices of courtly love literature allowed Hadewijch to work out her own feelings of confusion or despair. Instead of suffering passively, she was able to transform her suffering into spiritual and emotional activity.

Hadewijch invented an active expression of her anguish and bewilderment,
embodied in Love. Hadewijch gives Love a physical form and human attributes, indicating that love is acted out and through the physical, as well as the spiritual and emotional, self. This seems to accord with her own visionary experiences in which she felt God and simultaneously, was enlightened by him. Her metaphorical usage of the body accentuates the physical self as a significant aspect of spiritual contemplation and reflection.

The Body and Identification

Hadewijch underscores physicality in another way by creating a sense of concreteness and connection between the human world and God. In her texts, rarely does the reader sense that God is far from the material world -- she portrays him as infused in the activities and movement of the world. In one letter, she writes, "... heaven and earth are full of God; anyone spiritual enough to know God by experience knows this." But God’s connection to the human world is made clear in other ways as well.

Hadewijch demonstrates the unity between humans and God through her own identification with God, described with an emphasis on physicality. For instance, in Letter 9, she explains the relationship between the loved one (human being/Hadewijch) and the Beloved (God), using physical characteristics:

Where the abyss of his wisdom is, he will teach you what he is, and with what wondrous sweetness the loved one and the Beloved dwell one in the other, and how each penetrate each other in such a way that neither of the two distinguishes himself from the other. But they abide in one another in fruition, mouth in mouth, heart in
heart, body in body, and soul and soul, while one sweet divine Nature flows through
them both and they are both one thing through each other, but at the same time
remain two different selves -- yes, and remain so forever.25

The spiritual and physical identification with God has both an erotic and unitive tone.
As lover and Beloved mutually penetrate one another, the Beloved transfers divine
knowledge and wisdom to the loved one. The loved one is "taught" by God through
mouth, heart, body and soul. This passage indicates that Hadewijch’s spiritual
enlightenment is precipitated or accompanied by a sense of physical union with God.
Though there is obvious identification ("neither of the two distinguishes himself from
the other") with God, Hadewijch is not absorbed wholly by God, but returns to her
own bodily entirety ("but at the same time remain two different selves").

Hadewijch also identifies with God by emphasizing his humanity in the form
of Jesus Christ. Several times, Hadewijch writes about Christ’s life on earth as a
man, and his tremendous suffering for the love of humans:

We must be continually aware that noble service and suffering in exile are
proper to man’s condition; such was the share of Jesus Christ when he lived on earth
as Man. We do not find it written anywhere that Christ ever, in his entire life, had
recourse to his Father or his omnipotent nature to obtain joy and repose. He never
gave himself any satisfaction, but continually undertook new labors from the
beginning of his life to the end. He said this himself to certain person who is still
living, whom he charged to live according to his example, and to whom he himself
said that this was the true justice of Love: where Love is, there are always great
labors and burdensome pains. Love, nevertheless, finds all pains sweet: Qui amat
non laborat: that is, he who loves does not labor.26

Hadewijch exposes the shared connection between Christ and humanity, in
order that readers identify with Christ’s labor and suffering. Through this
identification, humans better endure their sufferings and struggles, especially in
imitation of Christ, whose sacrifice was made out of love for humanity. The lesson here is that humanity and divinity join through Christ and his life on earth.

But Hadewijch’s identification with Christ has another, less-didactic sense.

She also shows identification through Christ as a lover and a man. For example, in Vision 7, Hadewijch writes,

... he came in the form and clothing of a Man, as he was on the day when he gave us his Body for the first time; looking like a Human Being and a Man, wonderful, and beautiful, and with glorious face, he came to me as humbly as anyone who wholly belongs to another... he came himself to me, took me entirely in his arms and pressed me to him; and all my members felt his in full felicity, in accordance with the desire of my heart and my humanity.27

Hadewijch expresses her encounter with Christ through human description and activities. Christ comes to Hadewijch as he might approach and embrace a lover.

The elements of human love and desire are present in these two passages. The association between Christ and humanity, and his human expression of love, validate mortal love and desire, and portray the love between God and humanity as mutually-fulfilling and pleasurable. There is a sense of transformation, changing the dynamics of love from the one-way desire (Hadewijch’s desire for God in the first passage), to a more reciprocal desire between God and Hadewijch. The relationship between God and humanity is altered from one of human aspiration toward God, to one in which God shares human life on earth. The union between God and humans expresses itself through love, according to Hadewijch, and through this love, we attain knowledge of God: "Love brings [God] down to us and makes us feel so tenderly who he is; in this way we can know him for who he is." 28
The emphasis on God's humanity is a clear theme in Hadewijch's works. Bynum remarks that the women mystics generally perceived their humanity more fully than, for example, male religious authors of the same era. Instead of seeing "flesh opposed to spirit," they saw themselves... as human beings -- fully spirit and fully flesh. And they saw humanity as created in God's image, as capable of imitatio Christi through body as well as soul. Thus they gloried in the pain, the exudings, the somatic distortions that made their bodies parallel to the consecrated wafer on the altar and the man on the cross. In the blinding light of the ultimate dichotomy between God and humanity, all other dichotomies faded... For it was human beings as human (not as symbol of the divine) whom Christ saved in the Incarnation; it was body as flesh (not as spirit) that God became most graphically on the altar; it was human suffering (not human power) that Christ took on to redeem the world. Religious women in the later Middle Ages saw in their own female bodies not only a symbol of humanness of both genders but also a symbol of -- and a means to approach God.29

This passage helps summarize what I have discussed so far. I started by explaining that Hadewijch's mysticism was both spiritual and physical, indicating the body was an important part of her whole experience. Hadewijch, like the female mystics Bynum describes above, witnessed the body was a significant means for approaching and uniting with God. Next, I suggested that her metaphorical and literary use of the body symbolized the active nature of her relationship with God, and that God's love is felt physically, as well as emotionally and spiritually; doing so, Hadewijch bridged the traditional dichotomy between mind and body. Finally, I showed that Hadewijch's emphasis on God's humanity stresses the union between humans and God, and also perceives human existence as valuable. Like the women mystics described above, Hadewijch identifies with God, seeing the human body as a
symbol of unity with God. In the following section, I will suggest how the significance of the body to Hadewijch's mystical experience influenced her literary narrative.

"Writing the Body"

Hadewijch underwent remarkable physical and emotional reactions in her spiritual encounters. Her reflection upon these experiences, and her wish to make them available to others, necessitated a written record. Though Hadewijch's writing demonstrates her education and literacy, she had virtually no tradition of women's writing and public action to follow -- and this complicated the writing process significantly. In some sense, despite her education, she still had to find her own voice and language with which to communicate her experiences.

History and hagiography show the great difficulties the female mystics faced in practicing their faith. They were often persecuted by religious authorities, who felt threatened by women's presence, especially in communities like the Beguines. The female mystics' extraordinary experiences isolated them from lay society, yet they found little formal acceptance within the religious establishment. Furthermore, women in the Middle Ages, like women of subsequent generations, faced substantial restrictions professionally, economically, socially and politically. These women must have felt particularly alone, aside from their contact with other mystics like themselves. But in order to communicate their experiences, they needed a language that conveyed the depths of their experiences, passion, pain, and emotion.
Though Hadewijch, and other medieval women mystics, may not have been the first religious figures to undergo bodily responses, they are among the most profound. The passion they felt in body and spirit is undeniable. Finding a voice and language to explain these experiences posed a meaningful challenge for women who had no tradition or predecessors to follow. Among other things, these women were not educated to the same extent or in the same way as their male peers. Women were not usually schooled in Latin, the dominant language of theological and scholarly discourse. Aside from these technical problems, Elizabeth Petroff notes that some women, like Hadewijch, could read and write in Latin, but used their native languages instead. Petroff senses women's discomfort in using Latin, despite their competence, and cites Walter Ong's observation that in the Middle Ages, Learned Latin was a sex-linked language: it was taught primarily to males, outside the home and was "in effect, a male puberty rite." Furthermore, Ong notes, Learned Latin was a striking exemplification of the power of writing for isolating discourse and of the unparalleled productivity of such isolation. Writing... serves to separate and distance the knower and the known and thus to establish objectivity. It has been suggested that Learned Latin effects even greater objectivity by establishing knowledge in a medium isolated from the emotion-charged depths of one's mother tongue, thus reducing interference from the human lifeworld, making possible the exquisitely abstract world of medieval scholasticism.

Thus, the process of writing encourages greater objectivity through effective distancing between speaker and subject; in the Middle Ages, Latin exacerbated this process by removing the speaker from his/her familiar mother language. This claim draws attention to the fact that vernacular language may be more versatile and
emotionally-expressive than a learned language, particularly Latin. This suggests yet another reason why the medieval women mystics, like Hadewijch, used vernacular language rather than Latin, despite their knowledge and skill with the latter. In retelling their profound mystical experiences, women sought a language that had the greatest descriptive and expressive capacity. They also wished to communicate with other women who did not speak or read Latin. A language that encourages objectivity and distance would have defeated the purpose of communicating mystical experiences which, to a large extent, emphasized emotion, connection and union.

Hadewijch’s own physical experiences were so powerful they seemed to take away her words, and she claims "no language or person" she knows could express the longing she felt. Her recounting often sounds like a romantic tryst, not a spiritual encounter with God. Yet Hadewijch’s descriptive and sensual detail is not unusual among the medieval women mystics’ literature. Particularly in the thirteenth century, much of the mystical literature had a tone similar to that of secular, courtly-love poetry. Emilie Zum Brunn comments,

In the thirteenth century, the spiritual revolution of which we are speaking -- a new awareness of the solitude of the soul with God, of her divine nobleness and intangible freedom -- was to a great extent the work of ecstatic virgins who, curiously enough, borrowed so many expressions from courtly literature... And so we find the Beguines creating a language to express their passionate experiences, to seek a union more immediate and more total with God, to proclaim a kind of inward gospel a new exigency of Eternal Love.

The women mystics of the thirteenth century, particularly the Beguines, actually invented a new way of contemplating and writing about religious experiences.
Columbia Hart credits Hadewijch with the creation of "mystical love lyrics," the integration of secular love poetry and religious devotionals. Yet her interest was not to write for literature's sake, but to communicate her incredible experiences. Fiona Bowie remarks,

...the women mystics were not primarily concerned with producing works of literature, however cathartic or creative the process of literary composition might have been. They wrote from an inner urge to communicate a personal event of great importance. The impulse to write was invariably preceded by a vision, or visions, through which the woman mystic came to see herself as someone in a direct relationship with God. It was her reputation as a visionary which validated the woman mystic's written work, enabling her to communicate other aspects of her experience with assurance.

Bowie's observation explains the women mystics' internal motivation to write. She also illuminates the power of language in their words, so strongly tied to their faith. Bowie further comments, "[T]he language of personal experience is ... universal and the strength, conviction and clarity of women's writings reach out to us across the centuries." The writings of the medieval mystics seem "universal" because they reflect personal experiences and feelings of the mystics, and appealed to the religious sensibility of ordinary people of the Middle Ages. They are written from deep feeling and knowing, arising from both body and spirit.

There is yet another way that the experiences of the women mystics, and their written records of them, gather significance. Their mystical accounts were often tied so closely to their physical and sexual beings. As Bynum commented earlier, the women mystics saw their female bodies as representative of humaneness and as means to approach God. However, there was no honorable or recognized place for the
female body within Church history or doctrine. For the first time, a precedent in experience and language was created. The physical participation and identification that Hadewijch describes creates a space for the female body and self within mystical and spiritual experience and history.

In this paper, I have explored how the body was an important part of Hadewijch’s mysticism and spiritual reflection. I have suggested that Hadewijch’s profound physical experiences complicated the writing process, because of her relative isolation from a female writing tradition and the West’s denial of the body as a significant source of knowledge. In conclusion, I return to the quote by Adrienne Rich at the start of this paper. I think Hadewijch demonstrates exactly the sort of "active, fluid expanding" thinking Rich believes will result through women thinking through their bodies. The examination of a medieval woman’s bodily experiences and articulation of those experiences hopefully illuminates some dimensions of women’s bodily knowledge and their 'thinking/writing through the body.'
Notes:


6. ibid., p. 281.

7. ibid., p. 282.

8. ibid., p. 288.

9. ibid., p. 263.


11. ibid. p. 356.

12. Hadewijch See Poems in Stanzas:
    Poem 7:24: "For Love gives the new good/ That makes the new mind/ That renews itself in all/ Wherin Love newly touched it." (p. 145)
    Also see Visions:
    Vision 11: "... I could not believe that any human creature loved him so passionately as I -- although I know it is a fact and indubitable, still I cannot believe it or feel it, so powerfully am I touched by Love." (p. 291)

    Vision 13: "The seven gifts are seven signs of love, but the eighth is the Divine Touch, giving fruitin, which does away with everything that pertains to reason, so
that the loved one becomes one with the Beloved." (p. 300)

13. Hadewijch See Letters:

Letter 19: "He who wishes to taste veritable Love/Whether by random quest
or sure attainment/ Must keep to neither path nor way."

Letter 26: "... think of this unitive Love, whom I love and intend... Oh, feel
and understand how gladly I would see that you also did this! And feel also and taste
how much woe it causes me to feel that this is still lacking." (p. 107)

Also see Poems in Stanzas:

Poem 22: "Never so cruel a desert created/ As Love can make in her land!!/
For she impels us to long desiringly for her/ And to taste her without knowing her
being." (p. 187)


15. Knowledge is attained through union with God; this has a particular physical
overtone in Hadewijch’s works. See Letter 11:

... I received from [God] many beautiful gifts, through which he let me feel
his presence and revealed himself. And through all these tokens with which I met in
the intimate exchange of love between him and me -- for as is the custom of friends
between themselves to hide little and reveal much, what is most experienced is the
close feeling of one another, when they relish, devour, drink, and swallow each other
-- by these tokens that God, my Love, imparted to me in so many way at the
beginning of my life, he gave me such confidence in him that ever since that time it
has usually been in my mind that no one loved him so intensely as I." (p. 69)

Letter 27: "I spoke of the Beloved's kiss: that means, to be united with him
apart from all creatures, and to accept no appeasement except what one receives in
the delight of unity within him." (p. 108)

Also see Vision 8:

[Christ says to Hadewijch]: "Now you have tasted me and received me
outwardly and inwardly; and you have understood that the ways of union wholly
begin in me." (p. 284)


17. ibid., p. 56.

18. ibid., p. 57.

19. ibid., p. 86.

20. ibid.

22. Hadewijch Stanzic Poem 2(4) and (10), pp. 131-3.

23. ibid., introduction, p. 19.

24. ibid., p. 10.

25. ibid., p. 66.

26. ibid., p. 58.

27. ibid., p. 281.

28. ibid., p. 71.


32. Ong, p. 113-4.

33. Hadewijch, p. 280.

34. Zum Brunn, p. xxv.

35. Hadewijch, p. 19.


37. ibid., p. 3.

Different Kind of 

Proximity

Karen Finley

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Women's philosophical voice

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Feminist Art, Aesthetics, and Discourse:
The Performance of Karen Finley

This paper examines the performance art of Karen Finley whose work has a clear and original feminist focus. To analyze it theoretically requires a feminist theory of art, or a feminist aesthetic. However, this is no simple task; at this time, there is not a singular, universal, feminist aesthetic theory that captures the many dimensions of her work. Finley’s art is radical, shocking and, I believe, important to the concerns of feminism, feminist art and aesthetics. One of the most interesting aspects of Finley’s work is that she creates a new form of discourse to describe and explain feminism’s social, cultural and political concerns. She also demonstrates the power of performance art and as an artistic and political tool for feminist artists.

The majority of this paper will explore Finley’s artistic goals and techniques, and show how these artistic practices embody a feminist perspective. Importantly, she conveys her cultural/political commentary in a feminist voice. This is a significant consideration for feminism as a political movement and for feminists artists as participants in the male-dominated art world. When I say a feminist voice, I mean voice both literally and figuratively. Historically, women have been silenced in all significant public forums of politics, academics, the art world, the circles of business and commerce. Because of this literal silencing, women have had little or no representation. Much of feminist theory and women’s studies scholarship attempts to
revive and listen to women's voices including their experiences, perspectives and philosophies of the world. Listening to a feminist voice like Finley's, I hope to show how feminists might raise significant and philosophical questions about our society and cultural practices through artistic work.

In this paper, I will be talking about feminist art and theory, as distinguished from feminine art and theory. 'Feminine art,' in the strictest sense of the term, is art created by women. It does not necessarily contain any feminist perspective or insight. However, in this essay, I am not interested in distilling a feminine essence manifested in women's thought or artistic work. Instead, I want to identify those aspects of women's art that deliberately and consciously adopt a feminist point of view. A feminist point of view, in this case, means that thought or expression that regards women as equal to men in all relevant capacities and understands a history of women's overt and subtle oppression by a patriarchal culture. Patriarchy may be understood as

...the power of fathers: a familial-social, ideological, political system in which men -- by force, direct pressure, or through ritual, tradition, law and language, customs, etiquette, education and division of labor, determine what part women shall or shall not play, and in which the female is everywhere subsumed under the male....

A feminist point of view is a conscious, political choice of attitude and stance, not derived from biology but from an observation of unequal social conditions and treatment between the sexes, resulting in detrimental effects on women. Feminists seek to rectify the negative effects of patriarchal oppression on women as a class through a dismantling of those conditions and mechanisms by which women are oppressed.
Therefore, I am talking about that art and theory which has particular goals and an agenda. With regard to art, feminist art’s goal is to draw attention to the inequities suffered by women in the art world and outside the art world. Another goal is to create, or recreate, positive images and ideals of women. When artists use their art as a communication vehicle for other-than-artistic ideas, the art becomes yet another discourse to articulate social, political, and cultural messages. Although not all artists who use their art work for socio-cultural or political discourse are feminists, it appears that most feminist artists use their art to convey and engage in socio-cultural and/or political discussion. This quality alone will not distinguish feminist art from all other art, yet it is a significant feature of feminist art because of a prior, elective, political choice of feminist stance. Feminist art distinguishes itself from other social theories of art because of its focus on gender, particularly the inequities and disparities suffered by women because of their sex.

Distinguishing feminist and feminine art and aesthetics raises questions about the political nature of art -- feminism concerns itself with the degree to which these politics are gendered. Ideology and politics often determine how women are represented in the art world, either within art works or as artists themselves. Feminist artists and theorists contend that women are often portrayed as weak, passive, domestic, nurturing, and objects of male desire or power. Additionally, women artists are grossly underrepresented in major galleries and exhibitions, denied grants and funding, criticized as "not-artists," as a result of both internal and external political forces on the art world. Therefore, as both subjects (creators of art) and
objects (within an art work), women in the art world have had little input or power in shaping the content or form of the art world's canon, a critical measurement and standard by which artists are evaluated and established.⁵

We live in a culture that is dominated by images and language, and our lives are significantly impacted by these images. If the images and language portray women as weak, sexually submissive, existing for male desire, dominance and nurturance, then it is possible that real women will also be viewed this way. Art and aesthetics are sustained through audio, linguistic, and visual communication. Feminist theory provides powerful tools to appraise and critique our culture, including the art world. One of the promises in the convergence of feminist theory and aesthetics is this: feminist art, analyzable by feminist aesthetics, is a powerful communicatory tool for feminist artists and non-artists, and the full development of a feminist aesthetic has the potential to challenge traditional aesthetics, including the way we "do" theory.⁶ In this paper, I will examine the work of performance artist Karen Finley whose art work challenges, in both form and content, issues important to feminists and aestheticians.

In this paper, I will discuss the following features of feminist art and aesthetics, and their application to Finley. Her work, I argue, distinguishes itself as feminist art and provides a basis for discussion of certain features of feminist aesthetics:

1. The identification and deconstruction of a patriarchal culture, using art. Feminist artists draw attention to the patriarchal character of both the art world and the society at large. Using a variety of techniques, feminist artists have advanced discussion on themes of the body, violence, subjugation, the silencing of women. I
will discuss in detail the concept of the "male gaze," a term most often used in film theory. The "male gaze" applies to other art forms, in this case, performance art, and is a useful concept for all feminist artists and aestheticians.

2. **Purposely drawing from female life-experiences as a source for artistic creation.** While many artists draw from personal and political experiences of their lives, since the 1970's, there have been leagues of women artists focusing on issues most central to female experience: themes of the body, motherhood, discrimination and violence against women. Basing their art in these experiences draws attention to the way(s) men and women experience the world differently.

3. **Making use of new techniques so that a feminist voice is heard.** For purposes of the present discussion, I will focus on the use of performance art as a significant form of voice for feminist art and political concerns. However, there are numerous techniques and forums in which feminist artists attempt, and succeed, in making themselves heard. The wish to 'make oneself heard' as a woman artist exists because of the lack of women's self-representation in the art world. Feminist art is a political and creative response to this problem but also addresses larger feminist issues.

Limiting my discussion to these features does not imply that these features alone comprise a feminist aesthetic. That is not my goal. I wish to explore some significant aspects of feminist art and theory generally, and see their unfolding in Finley's work particularly. At this time, the nebulousness of a 'feminist aesthetic' forces a retreat to feminist art and feminist theory to develop a feminist theory of art.

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**Finley, Feminism and Performance Art**

"The performance of self in theater has also been strongly influenced by the movement from visual art to environments to happenings. The confluence of these tendencies has created a new genre: Performance Art."  

Performance art exists between authorship and the theatrical production itself. "Performance art" has been applied to a wide range of artists, making the definition rather ambiguous. Mel Gussow comments that, "[P]erformance art is one of the most
inclusive -- and misunderstood -- of theatrical arts." Gussow traces the genre's roots to experimental theater and visual arts. Most artists blend a variety of mediums -- visual, verbal, dance, or musical -- anchoring their performances with their own personalities or experiences. Unlike actors or actresses in traditional theater, in performance art, the distinction between author/text and performer collapses and the performer is, in a sense, the art work. Performer, director, and author are merged and the search for authorial intention falls by the roadside. Performance art is more immediate and directly personal than traditional theater, and more active than plastic art.

Karen Finley is one of several women artists who turned from plastic arts to performance in order to make her artistic themes more immediate and accessible to a larger audience. Parker and Pollock write in the introduction to *Framing Feminism*:

Performance has become an important area for feminists. One of its attractions is the possibility of escaping from the traditions of fine art which are already loaded with meanings, both in the terms of connotations of imagery and the social meanings of the actual practices, paintings and sculpture, for instance....It implies an active relationship between performer and audience which can render activity and experience more collective and social, more immediate, communicative and open-ended... The range of materials and unlimited possibilities for combination offers an art form whose potential complexity of subject and form and address can match the complexity of feminist analysis, which itself demanded by the totality of forces and determinations which shape and condition our lives.11

Other feminist artists and critics have looked to performance as a powerful means for women to express themselves, their thoughts and lives, and to raise social consciousness. Artist Tina Keane argues that performance is a transformative tool for audience and performer because "it demands 'putting oneself on the line’ with often
emotional or intimate material, revealing to both the performer and audience what is
dimly perceived but never publically acknowledged."\textsuperscript{12}

Finley, like other feminist artists of her generation, draws her artistic material
from her experiences as a woman in this culture and attempts to articulate
commonalities in all women’s experiences. Her performances are commentaries on
societal maladies -- rape, incest, discrimination, homophobia, misogyny, and
violence. And though she raises a broad set of issues, she maintains a clear and
constant focus on women’s oppression. In her performances, she relentlessly reminds
her audience that women, as a class and as individuals, are abused, humiliated and
degraded. In a 1986 interview with Richard Scheckner, she says:

...if you’re not a mother and you’re not a whore in this society you’re
considered unproductive. Woman’s value is still based on her biology. If a woman
becomes a bank president she still conforms to a male image of what that is. Women
executives have not been able to establish their own imagery. The only two things
that a woman does that are not compared to a man is giving birth and spreading her
legs. I bring that to light, and that’s very threatening. Female oppression is
everyday, it’s the anchor that I have to society. If I would choose to have a child
right now there are basically no childcare facilities -- it’s a catch-22 situation. They
want us to do our biology’s job, but at the same time they really want to put us down.
That’s what \textit{The Constant State of Desire}’s about, womb envy. Not penis envy, but
womb envy.\textsuperscript{13}

Finley says her artistic goal is consciousness-raising, an acknowledgment of
cultural and personal pain, and she uses her art to address these social and political
concerns. One critic remarks:

Rather than creating a work of art, Finley becomes one, turning her body, her
voice, her presence, her transaction with the public into an object of service of what
she wants to communicate... it makes her form the perfect embodiment of her
substance, as what she wants to communicate is her anger, and what angers her is the
turning of human beings, especially women, into objects.\textsuperscript{14}
Finley’s art begins with anger, maintains its energy through rage, but her performance is not simply a catharsis. She relieves her emotion publically in order to make strong emotions like anger and humiliation "understandable." By debunking their mystery through public display, Finley shows the reality of hatred, violence, prejudice and fear. Her work, although shocking, is not valuable simply for its ability to surprise. Asked if she sees her own work as shocking, Finley replied, "No, I see it as reality; and the only reason it’s shocking to people is that they haven’t accepted it as a reality. Part of my work is the fact that incest, rape and hostility happen in the best of families, in the best of countries. As for people who haven’t had those experiences, hopefully my work will make them more sensitive to people who have.

There are some people who find Finley’s work distasteful, vulgar, and obscene. In 1986, theater bookers began to cancel her performances. When Scheckner inquired about this public response, Finley responded,

People are scared of my information. They really don’t know what I’m going to do, they don’t like me dealing with sexual issues or political issues... If I was doing porn they’d be very happy. When they book me they think they’re going to get some kinky chick from New York going out there shoving my tits in their face. When they find out I’m more than that --- well, in London I was cancelled out this summer. I was banned by the Westminster Council and Scotland Yard....

I think I stir people up for what’s going on in their personal lives, in their one-to-one relationships, interweaving this into the whole society’s corruption. That’s very disturbing. I destroy the games people live on... People really don’t want that questioned.

I see people with a lot of anger towards anyone who can’t make it, anger towards the homeless, or if you’re eighteen years old and can’t afford to go to college... [In The Constant State of Desire] I’m talking about abuse. I talk about how old people are disregarded... Also we’re really scared of our own sexuality which is no longer a sexuality of love but a sexuality of violence.
In 1990, the NEA denied Finley a grant due to the political pressure exerted from the conservative Right, particularly Senator Jesse Helms. However, to condemn Finley’s work on the basis of content is a circular criticism. She claims to derive her material from actual experiences, if not her own, than those of the people she sees. Her works reflect life experiences and points to those circumstances as objectionable. By putting issues like abuse and oppression into stark relief, their shock-value is directly felt. This is Finley’s method for communicating with audiences the horror of abuse and anger she senses in our culture. But she also objects to the collective, apathetic attitude of our society. She works to shock us back into sensibility by presenting abuse for what it is — destructive, oppressive, and brutal. Therefore, what is objectionable is not in the art work itself, but in the culture from which it is drawn.

There has been a tremendous critical focus on Finley’s use of her own (often nude and smeared with food) body. In the following, I will discuss Finley’s use of her body in detail. Finley’s body becomes a metaphor for criticizing the abuse and degradation of women, and the oppression and discrimination suffered by other marginalized people. The literal and metaphorical use of the female body aligns Finley with other feminist artists and radical feminists. Radical feminism views the female body as the center of patriarchal control. Through the control of the body, women’s economic, political and social lives are also controlled. For example, because of the violence women live with each day, in their homes or on the street, there is a fear for personal safety which restricts and hinders women from moving about freely and confidently. The problem of access to abortion or availability of
birth control infringes upon women's economic and social lives; this is an especially difficult issue for women in rural areas (where medical facilities are not available), poor women, women under the age of eighteen, and those in Third-world countries. Moreover, the lack of affordable child care restricts many women to the home and child rearing, and perpetuates their ties to their reproductive capacities. In these fundamental ways, women are denied access to control or protect their own bodies. In order to repossess their economic, social and political lives, women must be able to prevent the domination of their bodies by rape, incest, battery, biological and fertility abuses.

Though Finley's performances are often angry, they are suffused with irony and black humor; she often twists the established notions of gender and acceptable cultural practices until audiences are either laughing with her or shifting uncomfortably in their seats. She intends both the laughter and discomfort in order to raise questions about social and cultural attitudes and behavior. Her work is subversive, fleeting, and refuses to conform to our conventional notions of women or female performers. For audiences, anticipating a Finley performance is impossible -- her "read" of an audience is so quick, so accurate. One critic describes "Yams Up My Granny's Ass," a monologue about the abandonment and sexual abuse of old people during which Finley smears her anus with canned yams:

Finley's approach to "doing the yams" at the Pyramid Club was to enlarge and to exorcise. Having established a remarkable intimacy with a packed house, she encouraged our voyeurism, squatting on a table to give us a better view, while presenting the act very clinically -- in fact, directing our responses. ("Now you're supposed to laugh. Then I say I've got a master's degree in fine arts. You're
supposed to go 'aaaah.' Then I smear it....") It was female degradation, hilariously deconstructed.20

Although Finley’s artistic work focuses on female degradation and oppression, serious and weighty subjects, she combines sarcasm, scathing criticism and rage into an outrageous performance. This enables audiences to see the depth and breadth of women’s lives, the oppressions and humiliations. Doing this, she demonstrates two things important to aesthetics and feminism. One, that art can manifest and explain certain 'truths' about life, in this case, the reality of abuse, incest, rape, which are rarely spoken of or explained. Second, Finley courageously works where few women have chosen to go -- she confronts issues that many women experience, but do not voice. In both ways, she breaks ground as an artist and a feminist.

I. The Identification and Deconstruction of Patriarchal Culture

A. The 'Male Gaze'

The term male gaze has been used frequently in feminist film theory. Mary Devereux describes it this way:

The term gaze has both a literal and figurative component. Narrowly construed, it refers to actual looking. Broadly, or more metaphorically, it refers to a way of thinking about and acting in, the world.

In literal terms, the gaze is male when men do the looking. Men look as both spectators and as characters within works. In figurative terms, to say that the gaze is male refers to a way of a seeing which takes women as its object. In this broad sense, the gaze is male whenever it directs itself at, and takes pleasure in, women, where women function as erotic objects. The feminist claim is that most art, most of the time, places women in this position.21
The "male gaze" refers to two sorts of actions, both problematic for feminists. In the more literal sense of "male gaze," feminists understand the art world as dominated by men who create and judge art work, resulting in a lack of representation by women artists and critics. This lack of representation implies that women are incapable of producing great art and that women's creations are insignificant, since they are excluded in the canon of artistic tradition. Linda Nochlin explains the process by which this occurs in her 1973 article, "Why have there been no great women artists?" She identifies the societal and educational institutions (both formal and informal), which have oppressed women and discouraged them from artistic practice.

The influx of women artists, particularly feminist artists since the early 1970's, has challenged the literal male gaze by producing works from a female gaze. Some of the more innovative and creative work has been done by feminist and lesbian filmmakers, who have created films from a viewpoint of women. But feminists have also attacked the more figurative component of the male gaze. This criticism has been formed out of a broader feminist movement and relied upon the observations, theories, and tools of feminism as a political movement.

The figurative male gaze is pernicious and arguably more damaging and objectionable than the literal male gaze for this reason: the figurative male gaze takes place in all aspects of life, not just in the art world and not just by men. The figurative male gaze sees women as objects existing for the erotic, violent, or dominating pleasure of men. And, because of men's cultural and historical
subjugation of women, both women and men are accustomed to viewing women through a male gaze. The result is that the male gaze has become the norm of perception. This norm or standard of perception of women exists in the everyday world and the art world. The two worlds mutually reinforce one another’s perceptions and standards, through which women are degraded and take on a perceived object-status. Lisa Tickner writes, "Women’s social and sexual relations have been located within patriarchal culture, and their identities have been molded in accordance with the roles and images which that ideology has sanctioned." In challenging the perceptions of women in art, feminist artists and aestheticians have the potential of disrupting our cultural perceptions of women, because of the inextricable link between artistic and cultural perceptions of women.

Karen Finley’s performance art acknowledges both components of this ‘male gaze.’ The content of Finley’s work condemns the figurative male gaze, that is, decries male dominance of women, children and other so-called "weaker" members of culture. In a monologue entitled "Enter Entrepreneur," Finley addresses the "male entrepreneur" who represents a capitalistic business culture that destroys ethnic and feminine culture under the guise of "looking for the artistic experience" and replaces true culture with empty symbols of capitalism. Finley says,

... You want everyone to look the same, so maybe they’ll feel the same and then they’ll be easier to control, to take over.

So you come into our neighborhood, into our lives of ethnicity, of difference, of poverty, of artistic expression, and you come into my neighborhood trying to co-op, trying to condominimize our lives so you can make a big real estate deal...
I'm not gonna let you gang rape me anymore, Mr. Yuppie, Mr. Businessman, Mr. Entrepreneur. I'm not going to let you take my streets that I built with my soul, my creativity, my spirit. You just look at all of my art, Mr. Bucks, as another investment deal. My sweat, my music, my fashion is just another money-making scheme for you.\textsuperscript{25}

The performance then launches into a long description of Finley's revenge on the destructive Mr. Entrepreneur where she "breaks" the literal component of the 'male gaze.' She strips off her clothes, slowly, as if doing a strip-tease. As cat-calls ring out from the audience, she smiles, jiggles her breasts and shimmies her shoulders -- toying with the expectations of the audience. She asks in a husky, sexy voice, "Do you like my bunny?" Throughout the process of removing her clothes and covering her body with smashed eggs and tinsel, Finley plays along with the crowd, inviting their voyeuristic gaze and comments. Then, in a sudden rupture, she begins to wail in a voice like a bible-thumping, revivalist minister in a rage. Using excretory and scatological language and imagery, she howls:

I know you want to experience the inspiration of the artist. So I take your Yuppie body and drag it down Avenue B and let your tongue roll along the street licking up the shit and piss, the sweat and blood of me...

I drive down to Wall Street and break into the Exchange. I go up to all the traders and cut off their balls. They don't bleed, only dollar signs come out of them. They don't miss their balls cause their too busy fucking me with everything else they got. So I gather up all of their balls, their scrotum, their testicles, -- oh I love the word scrotum, say that word again, scrotum, yeah scrotum -- so I got all these balls, I got hundreds, I got thousands, and I stick them in my mouth, roll them around in my mouth and I feel like a squirrel in heat. I take all the BBbaballs and I throw 'em in my BMW and everyone thinks I'm so nice, like I'm a future entrepreneur and I'm going to start my own donut hole stand or dim sum store. I take the balls home and I boil them 'cause they're small balls and they need to be plumped up. Just like you guys like your tits big we girls like our balls BIG. So I boil the balls till they're big big balls. Then I take a big, steamy shit and roll the balls in my own manure, my own dung, 'cause I'm the High Priestess of the Dung Dynasty. Then I melt some
Hershey's kisses and roll the Dung eggs in it. Then I gather all the fancy silver-foiled cigarette paper from Eurotrash folk or from academics who think they know everything from reading. Then I roll the scrotum -- manure-covered chocolate balls - - into the fancy, shiny paper. Now I sell my chocolate eggs to Godiva or gourmet shops for one hundred dollars per pound. Oh, I get my revenge. Oh, I get my revenge.26

Thus, with her nude and "decorated" body, excretory language and images, Finley "re-envisions" the yuppie's capitalistic endeavors, using his own tools and ambitions, but to serve her own purposes and protest. Her subversion works on both symbolic and linguistic levels. Food carries many connotations, especially in our culture where there is an obsession with weight-loss and physical appearance. The food with which Finley coats her body symbolizes various things: chocolate represents the way women are treated like shit, candy hearts symbolize how women are only loved when they allow themselves to be treated like shit, and tinsel symbolizes the way women are still expected to be dressed up for men.27 By appearing nude and then decorating her body with food, Finley anticipates and halts the male gaze which strips women and re-dresses them in their own fantasies and expectations. In a linguistic sense, Finley also subverts patriarchal culture. She verbally attacks a culture of exploitation and dominance, revealing and condemning the limits of cultural acceptability. But by using the same language and concepts of capitalism, she 're-tells' the experience from a different perspective, undermining the culture with its own tools.

B. Subversion: 'Overexposure' and Breaking Taboos

Maria Nadotti labels Finley's performance method "overexposure," through which she guts desirability from the male-dominated ideal of desire, and collapses
cultural ideals of gender and sexuality. This overexposure takes several forms. Finley appears on the stage nude or undresses before the crowd, and adorns her body with foodstuffs and decoration. She sarcastically demonstrates how women's bodies are idealized, used and abused to fit impossible male standards of beauty and eroticism. She seems to desecrate her own body, but her performance techniques actually identify female objectification and attack the subject (male) who is objectifying. Nadotti says Finley uses overexposure to de-eroticize the female body. By presenting the female body as "colonized, functionalized, made all too available to our gaze," woman's body is understood as existing only through the gaze from the outside. Nadotti notes that Finley deconstructs the body as "a source of visual pleasure," then:

Becoming invisible as a body by overexposing her body making it into an abstract signifier, manipulating it into something other than herself... she anticipates and combats being objectified and commented upon by others. Thus, she is at the same time performer and spectator, assuming the roles of seeing and being seen, of doing and looking. 29

Finley breaks the male gaze by encouraging it -- appearing nude and covering herself with "decorations." But since she controls her own (symbolic) objectification, she is not truly objectified; through this process, she defies object-status, by remaining subject of her actions and body. After inviting the voyeuristic look, Finley's words and images reverse the male, voyeuristic gaze upon itself, thereby challenging the male-determined definition of eroticism and desire. Using the same tools that objectify and degrade women, Finley subjects the male gaze to its own standards, judgements, actions. Finley reduces men to their genitals; then judging
their genitals as inadequate to women's desires, she explains how to commodify them in the way women's bodies are made into commodities by pornography, plastic surgery, the fashion and cosmetic businesses.

Finley breaks cultural taboos through the public exposure of her own body, and by talking about the female body and how it is treated by male culture. Lisa Tichner reflects that women artists, in an effort to repossess their bodies from a dominant male culture, "take the heritage [of the female body] and work with it -- attack it, reverse it, expose it and use it for their own purposes... the most significant area of women in erotic art today is that of de-eroticizing, the de-colonizing of the female body, the challenging of its taboos...." Finley's art accords with Tichner's description, in part, by defying the acceptable standards of women in the art world and society as a whole. Finley uses her body for her own purposes, and in so doing, attacks culture on several fronts. The public's shocked reaction to her self-use makes her point in this way: women's bodies are not their own, and as a culture we are deeply disturbed to have this pointed out.

I was asked whether the public's outrage over Finley's performance was not due to her excremental/scatological abasement of her self, rather than the appropriation of her own body. While the public sentiment is perhaps fueled by both, I maintain that it is the latter, her self-appropriation, that causes the greatest disturbance. The abasement of her self is an extreme illustration, but on the same continuum as pornography, which is the graphic, sexual subordination and debasement of women. If she was simply putting forth pornography, without critiquing and
condemning it, there would be little alarm. Pornography is an ever-present, endlessly-horrifying representation of women. It exists at all levels of literature, advertising, within the media, film and television industries. We live in a pornographic culture. Female abasement is the root of the pornographic culture.

Finley presents herself "pornographically" in order to show the depths of pornography and its images. Through her narrative, infused with grotesque and monstrous images, she "subverts pornography's representation of desire with images that confound mainstream sexuality by shifting the typical balance of power." Feminist critic Jill Dolan says it is Finley's "aggressive denial of the power dynamic of legitimate sexuality -- that is heterosexuality, in which men are powerful and women are passive -- [that] angers male spectators who often throw lit cigarettes at her." This reaction is a testament to her effectiveness in making her point. I have a hard time believing that male spectators would hurl lit cigarettes at someone whom they did not feel threatened by, say, a woman represented through actual pornography. Pornography is about gendered power relations; it is the subordination and degradation of women through imagery and language. It is Finley's ability to disrupt the pornographic expectations of this culture that rankles so many people. She disrupts these expectations because "her body is subordinate only to her own will. She changes the axis of the power exchange by claiming sexual power for herself to wield." This, I think, is the power and the point of her performances. Because she maintains her own subjectivity, she does not lapse into what can truly be defined as pornography. Through the creation of the pornographic expectation and its denial, she
demonstrates what is wrong with pornography: it legitimizes and affirms a cultural
degradation of women through their bodies and sexuality.

In the end, however, Finley does not cultivate a more hopeful promise for
female sexuality. Her work criticizes, but does not create a more constructive female
eroticism. Dolan says there is little "potential for radical change" in Finley’s work
because "she is still caught within the representational system to which she refers."3 4
I somewhat agree with this statement, though I think Finley's work deserves more
credit than Dolan gives her. Finley draws attention to and ably depicts the culture
that surrounds women, a culture which debilitates and distorts women’s sexuality and
physicality. Her identification of the culture and the terms of its existence (i.e.
through patriarchal, misogynistic, and capitalistic practices and attitudes) through
performance is a difficult task because as Tichner remarks, it means putting oneself
"on the line" with highly charged material. The issues she courageously raises —
incest, rape, homophobia, elder and domestic abuse — are all difficult and "unspoken"
in regular society. If they are discussed, it is in a very clinical or official capacity
which tends to sanitize and negate their atrocity. By contrast, her own presentation of
the issues, though difficult to watch, depicts their horrifying essence and reality.
Finley also faces the further risk that her work will not be understood, or be
misrepresented as pornography. However, watching a show by Finley clarifies that
her goal is not to create pornography, but to critique it. Throughout her
performances, she clearly maintains full control of her subjectivity and body. She
appears liberated with her own body as performer, an important step for female
performers, but she does not present a model for the liberation of female bodies more generally. Though I regard her work itself as important for "naming" the issues, to create actual social change, she would need to present more positive or activist strategies.

II. Drawing from experience: the female body

... [A]s humans, our experiences are deeply influenced by what is said about them, by ourselves or powerful others... we cannot separate our lives from the accounts given of them; the articulation of our experience is part of our experience....

Parker and Pollitt traced fifteen years of feminist art in the introduction to Framing Feminism. Patriarchal resistance is an obvious theme in this art, and this resistance takes a variety of forms. Feminists claim that the artistic tradition has tended to portray women as passive, inert, idealized, or eroticized. Feminist artists have countered these images as false, idealized and misrepresented. One way feminist art attacks patriarchal artistic production is through the recreation of female imagery. Working from their own experiences, they have constructed alternative, positive images of women. To a large extent, particularly in early feminist art, these recreated images have centered around the female body. Feminist artists have tried to "reclaim" the female body, and have focused on its various natural and creative functions like childbirth, pregnancy, lesbian sexuality, menstruation and aging. These bodily functions and experiences, rarely presented in traditional art work, are celebrated and affirmed. The feminist focus on the female body recognizes dynamic and active female body, instead of an idealized or degraded image. The female body
in feminist art history has been a means to counter the traditional depiction of women, to break taboos against acknowledging the physical processes of the body, and to reflect their own ideas about their bodies and identities.

Karen Finley, however, uses her body in alternative ways. Like the feminist artists of the 1970's, the female body is a significant source of artistic content in her work. But rather than affirm the biological, natural female processes, she tends to focus on issues of female gender, which tends to be a social and cultural construction, not a biological one. In saying this, I do not mean to imply that other feminist artists have not examined gender, in addition to biological female sexuality. Rather, I want to point out that Finley does not usually focus on biological sexuality in her art. Because her work examines social and cultural constructs, it tends to be more critical, and less constructive, than other feminist artists who have tried to revalue the female sexuality for itself.

Finley clearly attacks the practices and ideology which construct female gender, and correspondingly devalue it. She examines the oppressive and injurious experiences of women, and criticizes the ideology and actions that perpetuate female subjugation. She focuses on how women are controlled and abused through their bodies through battering (see "Two Stories"), rape ("I’m An Ass Man","Why Can’t This Veal-Calf Walk?")", incest ("Refrigerator") or elder abuse ("Three Women"). All these variations of abuse suffered by women underscore how women’s fear and oppression is connected and suffered by her body. In her critiques, she uses her own body as an emblem of how all women’s bodies are mistreated. Her body becomes a
significant part of her presentations. She often enters the stage nude and then throughout the performance, covers her body with food and clothing. This "reversed" strip-tease, in part, symbolizes and reproaches the ways in which women are encouraged to "cover" themselves, for example with make-up or sexualized clothing. Her stage nudity, she claims, also allows her to "express a certain sense of freedom or abandonment [in a place] where I’m not going to be violated." By appearing nude, she also faces head-on the "male gaze which is always there."

This brings up an issue that performer Sally Potter discusses in her article, "About Time":

[The female performer is] positioned always in relation to the male construction of femininity and in relation to male desire. Women performance artists, who use their bodies as the instrument of their work, constantly hover on the knife edge of the possibility of joining this spectacle of women. The female body, nude or clothed, is arguably so overdetermined that it cannot be used without being, by implication, abused.

Finley has had to cope with this issue in performance. Often her acts are misinterpreted (prior to performance) and people think they are going to be treated to a strip show. Once the act gets rolling, however, it is a different story. Finley only manages to keep her body from being "abused" and out of the "spectacle of women" through her own performance techniques. She maintains full control and subjectivity of her own body, through physical stance and stage presence. The abuse of female performers’ bodies is predicated by the 'male gaze' which creates the spectrum and boundaries of desire, and sees the female body as an object. Finley disrupts these boundaries and,
... refuses to participate in the rules of representation by objectifying herself... she does not offer herself as a passive object. She forces men to be passive in the face of her rage, and she desecrates herself as the object of their desire, thereby mocking their sexuality. Her refusal to play the game leaves the male spectator nowhere to place himself in relation to her performance. He can no longer maintain the position of the sexual subject who views the performer as a sexual object.41

Finley offers the example of a woman who is not subsumed by the male gaze. As a performer, this is an important step and breaks a long tradition of women's visual representation. Additionally, by providing this example, Finley takes a first step towards recovering the female body in a more universal sense, showing that it is possible for women to escape the male gaze. Finley resists the male gaze through the use and actions of her own body, and refusing to be a passive object, she reverses the balance of power in the "male looking" dynamic.

Finley repossesses the female body in two primary ways. First, her own theatrical techniques and gestures resist the male gaze which objectifies the female body; thus, she maintains control and subjectivity of her own female self. Second, Finley works out of the real life experiences of women in our culture. These experiences are highly influenced by social and cultural gender ideals which partly determine what it means to be "a woman." Since this culture denigrates womanhood, according to Finley, the experiences of women are often negative, oppressive, insulting and abusive, especially with regard to their bodies. As she retells the experiences of women and the stories of their bodies, she recovers the female body from the world of patriarchal violence and domination, and returns it to a place where women's lives and bodies become their own again. She creates a space for women's perspectives and experiences.
III. A Feminist Voice

The promise I see in the convergence of feminist theory and aesthetics into feminist aesthetics, is a new discourse and expression of feminist concerns. Feminists have set themselves to the task of developing new philosophical (and aesthetic) models of inquiry, attempting to free themselves from patriarchal modes which have tended to characterize the last two thousand years of Western intellectualism. In order to broaden the methods and subjects of inquiry, feminists must engage themselves in new techniques and practices of asking questions and framing problems. Finley's art and performance presents an example of how feminists might engage in new methods to understand and articulate issues.

Finley's art validates the importance of artistic practices and the truth art can reveal. By using linguistic and imagistic forms to convey socio-political commentary, Finley shows how art can powerfully convey to audiences subjects of great importance to our everyday lives. Art is not just stuff sitting in a museum, or something collected by the rich and powerful and hung in private homes. Art can embrace the very elements that make up our lives. Finley brings art to people in the same spirit as guerilla or street theater brought it to the populace. Her art consists of subjects and issues that touch all of us, regardless of gender, class, race. She raises social consciousness in a unique and forceful way.

However, her performance also distinguishes itself as feminist through its form and content. Her acknowledgement of the male gaze and her deconstruction of it make her performances feminist in form. She relies on personal experiences as a
woman, and those of other women, and weaves them together with larger social, cultural and political issues, exemplifying the feminist credo, "the personal is political." Moreover, her use of performance art, rather than plastic arts or literature, enables her to cross into the public realm, where women have had a limited history as public figures or performers. In this sense, I think she breaks ground for women to speak, act and express themselves publically.

The content of her work, by the very nature of its issues, is feminist. Though she comments on a variety of issues, the strongest and most consistent is women's oppression and subjugation in this culture. She understands and articulates how the female body is implicated through oppressive practices and beliefs. Issues such as rape, incest, battery, gender inequities in the workplace, health and child care, are all feminist issues, discussed and debated in a variety of forums. Through Finley's work, the artistic work space and theater become additional forums for presentation and questioning of these topics.

My project here has been to demonstrate the ways in which feminists might raise significant and philosophical questions about our society and cultural practices through artistic work. Philosophical questions about subjectivity, identity, perspective and the "gaze" arise from the performance work by Finley. She also clearly raises issues of importance to feminism: female degradation and subjugation, issues of domestic violence and gender equity. She speaks about them in ways that better describe the severity and multi-faceted nature of the damage and pain caused to
victims. She also shows the face of the perpetrators and the warped nature of our society that perpetuates a culture of victimization and domination.

"Performance has been a major area of practice, attractive to feminists because it seems relatively untrammeled by tradition and it has also allowed for a woman's immediate power over and contact with -- even confrontation with -- the audience."43 This is the reason that all feminists, not just artists and critics, should pay attention to Finley's work. Her art is a demonstration of discourse in new terms and about subjects for which we have hardly found a language to speak. Yet, she speaks, and acts, and in some way, finds a way to communicate with her audiences.

The critical conditions to a(ny) feminist aesthetic is 1) it contain a critique of a patriarchal culture: because feminism arose out of inequitable social and political conditions between the sexes, any position that considers itself 'feminist' must acknowledge these conditions; 2) it must have some means, platform or foundation from which women can find a "voice" to speak, to articulate experiences, perspectives, accounts. Furthermore, I have observed that feminist artists and theorists have turned to the female body as a place from which they will find this voice. I suggest that this is because feminists have recognized the multifaceted ways women have been controlled through their physical bodies and manipulated politically, socially and economically. At this time, by focusing on the female body as a source of power and strength, feminists hope to repossess, not just their bodies, but full subjectivity. The attention to the female body may not always be an especial focus to
feminist art and aesthetics. But by the time women possess their bodies, and other areas of their lives fully and equally with men, feminism itself may be obsolete.
Notes:


2. I understand feminist art practices as a brand of social art, in that one of its goals is consciousness-raising. I would distinguish it, however, by its focus on gender and what sexual/gender distinctions have entailed for women.


5. With regard to "male" art history and artistic canon formation, Mira Schor’s article, "Patrilineage" is helpful. She says, "One indicator of the separate but unequal system" that women artists face is the degree to which "current canon formation is still based on male forbears, even when contemporary women artists -- even contemporary feminist artists -- are involved." She examines four broad areas of artistic practice and discourse: 1) exhibition reviews; 2) art magazine features; 3) catalogue essays; and 4) essay anthologies.

   Schor’s basic thesis is that despite women’s many and critical contributions to artistic practices, creation, and criticism, they are rarely awarded the credit they deserve; rather, an artistic patrilineage persists. She cites several examples of the way in which women’s work is debased and/or men’s work is elevated. For example, often a contemporary woman’s work will be "traced" back through the preceding artists (all male) to show from where the contemporary work was influenced. This tracing, however, rarely if ever, traces a contemporary male artist’s work to a predecessor who is female. Furthermore, women’s creativity or ingenuity is almost always discredited, subsumed or classified under a male rubric. Women artists work is regarded as similar but "quieter" than male artists, evoking the sense that it is properly more "feminine."

   Schor’s article demonstrates the power and pervasiveness of male ideology in the art world. She acknowledges how many women have entered the world of art in the last twenty years, but questions the degree to which they have gained proportional power and influence in artistic production, criticism and history. *New Feminist Criticism: Art, Identity, Action,* Ed.: Joanna Frueh, Cassandra L. Langer and Arlene Rosen. (New York: IconEditions, 1994)

7. Laura Cottingham explains that American women artists prior to the 1970's "utilized a variety of techniques in their attempts to be accepted as artists, not women (e.g. signing initials instead of full, evidently-female names) -- because to be a woman was by definition not to be an artist." ("The Masculine Imperative: High Modern, Postmodern," in New Feminist Criticism, p. 136)

Women artists' suppression of their femininity changed gradually as the women's movement of the 1970's grew more powerful. For example, feminist body artists of the 1970's, like Mary Kelly, Hannah Wilke and Carolee Schneeman, were some of the first to insist upon the primacy of their femininity in their artistic practices, both in form and content. They address feminist issues like women's exclusion from the art world, experiences of their female bodies, or female representation/male gaze. They also used their bodies as a communicatory and artistic medium. For more information the history of women practicing feminist art, see Framing Feminism.

8. There does not, at this time, seem to be a feminist aesthetic that addresses the variety of things Finley does in performance. Hilde Hein, admits that the formulation of a feminist aesthetic may not be the goal of feminist aestheticians. See "The Role of Feminist Aesthetics in Feminist Theory" by Hein.

Marcia Morse, as well, questions a definitive feminist aesthetic. She says, "We will continue to examine the visible and more symbolic aspects of gender in women's art, while resisting the temptation to be formulaic about what women's art looks like or should look like... We can identify some things about female imagery as it pertains to the differences of the body and more specifically to reproductive anatomy. We can also deal more speculatively, with certain archetypes of form or tendencies of formal organization that seem dominant in the work of women. But these paradigms by no means encompass the full range of work either historical or current, and insofar as a feminist perspective involves a self-defined and self-determined rethinking of issues of both form and content, we must remain open to the possibility of new manifestations which may not fit and may even defy extant categories. The transformative perspective, characterized by its questioning voice and its stress on conceptual possibilities more than formal prescriptions is, I think, evidence that the notion of the avant-garde, a cutting edge, is still viable." ("Feminist Aesthetics and the Spectrum of Gender," Philosophy of East and West, Vol. 42(2), April 1992, p. 292.)


10. ibid.

11. Framing Feminism, p. 39.

12. ibid.
This idea of voicing issues that are "never publically acknowledged," and even less frequently performed, is one of the strongest elements in Finley's work. She consciously and deliberately raises issues that people are uncomfortable dealing with, like sexuality and abuse, yet which are of intense social and personal concern. This is one of the interesting intersections I see between Finley's and MacKinnon's work. MacKinnon writes:

[A] whole shadow world of previously invisible silent abuse has been discerned. Rape, battery, sexual harassment, forced prostitution, and the sexual abuse of children emerge as common and systematic. We find that rape happens to women in all contexts, from the family, including rape of girls and babies, to students and women in the workplace, on the streets, at home, in their bedrooms by men they do not know, by men they are married to, by men they have had a social conversation with, and, least often, men they have never seen before... Until women listened to women, this world of sexual abuse was not spoken of. It was unspeakable. What I am saying is, if you are the tree falling in the epistemological forest, your demise doesn't make a sound if no one is listening. Women did not report these events, and overwhelmingly do not today, because no one is listening, because no one believes us. This silence does not mean that nothing happened, and it does not mean consent. It is the silence of women of which Adrienne Rich has written,"Do not confuse it with any kind of absence. ("Pornography, Civil Rights and Speech," Harvard Civil Rights Civil Liberties Law Review, Summer 1985, vol. 20(2), pp. 11-14.)

The "shadow world" of abuse that MacKinnon describes is the same world Finley represents and refers to in her performances. Both women emphasize the silent and pervasive violence that is an undercurrent of many women's lives. MacKinnon notes that women did not begin to identify and resist what they experienced until they began to talk to one another. Furthermore, the refusal too acknowledge this kind of abuse on the part of the larger culture exacerbates the problem. Finley's performances address MacKinnon's concerns: she publically acknowledges the abuse and, by making it evident, forces it open to questions and critique.


18. See Framing Feminism, particularly Section IV. "Strategies of Feminism."

19. Radical feminist Catharine MacKinnon argues that male domination is exercised fundamentally on the female body, though its reach extends into all aspects of women's lives.

[F]eminism fundamentally identifies sexuality as the primary social sphere of male power. The centrality of sexuality emerges not from Freudian conceptions but from feminist practice on such diverse issues, including abortion, birth control, sterilization abuse, domestic battery, rape, incest, lesbianism, sexual harassment, prostitution, female sexual slavery, and pornography. In all these areas, feminist efforts confront and change women's lives concretely and experientially. Taken together, they are producing a feminist theory centering upon sexuality: its social determination, daily construction, birth to death expression, and ultimately male control. "Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State: An Agenda for Theory," in Signs, Spring 1982, Vol 7(3), p. 529.


22. Nochlin, "Women, Art and Power."

23. ibid.


26. ibid.


29. ibid.

30. Tichner, p. 266.

32. ibid.

33. ibid., p. 67.

34. ibid.


36. Finley, Shock Treatment.

37. Juno, Research 13, p. 49.

38. ibid.

39. ibid., p. 48.

   Potter says some feminist artists have repossessed "subjectivity" by, "... building an imagery based on the female body -- on menstruation, reproduction, and female sexuality; on tackling what has been endlessly portrayed as female mystery from the other side -- the inside. This might be on the level of documentation of the unmentionable traces, or on the level of myth, taboo, or cult of the mother in opposition to the patriarchy. For others, it might mean reversing the gaze, breaking the silence of centuries and getting the female nude to speak."

41. Dolan, p. 66.

42. MacKinnon, "Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State." MacKinnon explains, "The feminist concept of the personal as political... means that women's distinctive experience as women occurs within that sphere that has been socially lived as the personal -- private, emotional, interiorized, particular, individuated, intimate -- so that what it is to know the politics of women's situation is to know women's personal lives." p. 534-5.

Writing the Body in Ecofeminist Literature:

Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres*, Susan Griffin's *Woman and Nature*, and Terry Tempest Williams' *Refuge*, Leslie Ryan's *Clearing in the Clearing* and *The Other Side of Fire*.

In this paper, I argue that some ecofeminist authors are employing something similar to Helene Cixous's concept, "writing the body." To this point, this concept has found its widest applicability in literary criticism and psychoanalytic theory. The concept reaches further than this, and is present in the above works. I hope to show that 'writing the body' has a strong presence in ecological feminism as an important method to identify the patriarchal oppression of women and nature, and as a source of female knowledge, strength and renewal.

I am working from the assumption that the female body has been a fundamental means used by the patriarchy to oppress women biologically, socially, politically, and economically. Patriarchy, in this case, is defined as:

"... the power of fathers: a familial-social, ideological, political system in which men -- by force, direct pressure, or through ritual, tradition, law and language, customs, etiquette, education, division of labor, determine what part women shall play or not play, and in which the female is everywhere subsumed under the male...."  

In feminist studies, patriarchy has been examined at length to show the multiple ways it has maintained women’s oppression. Ecofeminism has taken this a...
step further to show how the same patriarchal mechanisms that oppress women also oppress nature. However, this is not simply a transitive process by which ecofeminists appropriate the tools of feminism and apply them to nature. Rather, ecofeminism challenges existing feminist paradigms and "[b]y pitting new empirical concerns against established feminist analyses, ecofeminism is encouraging a new synthesis in feminist political thought." Thus, ecological feminism extends further than (current) feminist thought, not only by including environmentalism and female oppression in its theory, but by providing new ways to conceptualize and theorize about a broad range of social, cultural and political issues. Through the examination of the associations between women and nature, we gain more insight into feminist and environmental concerns. In "Feminism and Ecology: Making Connections," Karen Warren argues for a "Transformative Feminism," a theory that recognizes and makes explicit the systemization of oppression. She acknowledges the contributions of black feminists and Third World feminists who have argued that "because of the basic connections between sexist oppression and other forms of systematized oppression, feminism, properly understood, is a movement to end all forms of oppression." Warren says socialist feminism has identified the "structural interconnections between sexism, racism, and classism"; ecofeminism would expand these interconnections to include the oppression of women and the oppression of nature, thereby expanding and transforming the definition of feminism as a movement that ends all oppressions.

When we speak of sexual oppression, we usually understand it to mean male
oppression of women. The sexual oppression of women occurs no matter what their culture, class or race, though these factors may further complicate the oppression. Sexual oppression, among other things, is violence, manipulation, degradation, and coercion of the female body, through physical force, images and language, or institutional practices. I will focus on the ways in which ecofeminist authors have witnessed sexual oppression, and have observed that the same mechanisms oppress nature.

The texts chosen, *A Thousand Acres, Woman and Nature, Refuge, "The Clearing in the Clearing"* and *"The Other Side of Fire,"* differ in form, but each arrives at a similar conclusion. As the female body’s relation to the land is recognized, a new sort of consciousness seems to arise. This consciousness acknowledges patriarchal abuse of women and the environment, and seeks healing through a deeper connection with the land. This consciousness develops into 'epistemic advantage': the privileged knowledge that an oppressed group (e.g. women as a class) possesses because of their experiences. Sondra Farganis explains the "sociality of personhood," also known as the social construction of knowledge. Though she is concerned with scientific knowledge in this essay, her words apply to epistemology in a larger sense as well. She says:

... Individuals are not divorced from time and place, housed in some conflict-free world populated only by themselves. Instead, individuals, men and women, are historically embodied, concrete persons whose perspective is a consequence of who they are; therefore, in a society divided by gender, women will see and know differently from men. The gendered sociality of their existence gives
women a different perspective, and the place at which they stand -- their activity within the world and how they are esteemed in gender-stratified society -- will make them practitioners of a different kind of science... thought bears the marks of a thinker's social characteristics and how these are socially regarded [and] women have different social experiences of the world than do men, and, therefore, they see the world differently. In other words, both the content and the form of thought, or the ideas and processes through which those ideas are understood, are affected by the concrete social factors of which gender is one.11

As Farganis describes here, 'experiences' are a necessary determinant in the formation of knowledge. Farganis is one among many feminists who turn to the 'concrete' or 'lived' experiences of women as forming a basis for gendered-difference in knowledge and ways of knowing. Farganis cites numerous feminist theorists, including Dinnerstein, Chodorow, Gilligan, Hartsock, Keller and Harding, as developing "an epistemology that builds on the gendered social and psychological experiences of women."12 Hartsock builds on this theme, calling for the development of a 'feminist standpoint,' which she claims is a "an important epistemological tool for understanding and opposing all forms of domination." Feminist standpoint, a political position, is not the same thing as epistemic advantage, though they are each based in the actual historical conditions and incidents of women's lives. Hartsock says,

Feminists have only begun the process of revaluing female experience, searching for the common threads which connect the diverse experiences of women, searching for the structural determinants of the experiences... Both the valuation of women's experience, and the use of this experience as a ground for critique are required. A feminist standpoint may be present on the basis of the common threads of female experience, but it is neither self-evident nor obvious.13
Hartsock recognizes that although there may be features common to all women's lives (e.g. all women live under a patriarchy), they do not have the same experiences (that is, each woman’s experiences vary under a patriarchy). There are significant differences among women because of class, race, sexual orientation, and one’s particular situation. We do not yet know if there is a feminist standpoint that can account for these class and individual variations among women. Though we may be interested in identifying the commonalities among feminists, there must be an acceptance and respect for differences. Moreover, differences among feminists ought not be overridden or diminished for the sake of unity and sameness.

Like other feminists, I take the position that epistemic advantage is a product of 'nurture,' as opposed to 'nature.'\textsuperscript{14} This seems to be the opinion of the following ecofeminist authors, based on the content of their writing, i.e., that they include so much of their own experiences in their discussion of the natural world. In the following sections, I will discuss writing and epistemic advantage in greater detail.

* * *

I am convinced that 'there are ways of thinking that we don’t yet know about.' I take these words to means that many women are even now thinking in ways which traditional intellection denies, decries, or is unable to grasp... we have by no means yet explored or understood our biological grounding, the miracle of the female body and its spiritual and political meanings. I am really asking whether women cannot begin, at last, to think through the body, to connect what has been so cruelly disorganized -- our great mental capacities, hardly used; our highly developed tactile sense; our genius for close observation; our complicated, pain-enduring, multipleasured physicality.\textsuperscript{15}

Adrienne Rich wrote these words in 1976; in 1994, I am convinced that
ecofeminists have set themselves to this task -- writing the female body to reclaim it, understand it, draw strength and power from it. I am not arguing that men are incapable of having deep connections with the land, but their connection would be different. As I explained earlier, the different experiences of men and women importantly shape their perception of the world and their bodies; for women, bodily experiences have been significant to this perception. The authors I am examining are writing from a consciousness of what it means to be female in this culture and are linking that consciousness to their interactions with the natural world. Though women’s connections to nature have various forms, this paper will look primarily at the similar treatment and use of nature and the female body.16

The term ecofeminism was coined in 197417; Susan Griffin’s book Woman and Nature appeared four years later. She planned to examine man’s disassociation from nature, because of nature’s perceived inferiority, and how man also regarded women as inferior and closer to nature.18 Her book developed into a critique of Western culture since Plato, documenting the many socially-constructed associations between women and nature, and within a patriarchal context, their perceived negativity. Griffin shows the resulting "silencing" of women and nature because of oppressive conditions in which they live. The historical silencing of women has been well-documented, and includes the restriction of women from speaking publically, writing, attaining an education, participating fully in social or political forums. Despite the recent, positive changes to women’s status in the West, there remains a
sense that women have not fully attained a voice. By this, I mean that women’s thought and interests are still ignored, neglected or violated, and this is yet another form of silencing. Women are silenced because they are regarded as lacking full-subjectivity and as having few or no interests. For example, women are the primary caretakers of children, work that is an unpaid, full-time job. Yet women are penalized when they seek more independent work outside the home, since there is a lack of affordable day-care. Or perhaps a woman wants to have a child and a career, she is labeled a "mommy-tracker," and her career is perceived as stagnant. Women are often expected and encouraged to subsume their identities and interests under the banner of "motherhood," reducing them to their reproductive capacities. Yet even if a woman wants to have a career and have children, there is nothing within our society that allows her to do this easily. Her subjectivity and ability to voice her interests or needs are ignored.

By the same measure, nature is also regarded as having few or no interests of its own, which seems to rationalize the human use or ill-treatment of nature. It becomes an object or thing-structure which may be profitable or useful to humans, thereby justifying its existence for human consumption. When an entity has no interests, it is silenced. And though nature cannot literally speak or articulate itself in the same way humans do, we know intuitively that there are some things that are good for nature and other things that are not. Clearcuts are not good for the landscape or biological life, though it is a fast and profitable way to acquire lumber...
for human construction. Polluting a river does not encourage or sustain life within a stream, or the wildlife that drinks from the stream, but it may be the most accessible "dump" for chemical wastes from manufacturing or mining. Such actions bespeak human negligence for nature's interests, in pursuit of our own convenience or goods. By ignoring nature's interests, or by not even asking whether nature has interests, we deny nature's interests and effectively silence it.

Therefore, nature is "silenced" because it is perceived as having no interests in what is good or bad for it -- the natural world is perceived as a resource for human use and consumption. To hear nature, we need to become "aware of its being and its freedom by recognizing its relationship to a greater whole which is not us, but which includes us." Additionally, since human actions so seriously affect nature (e.g. human-made pollution and extractive practices), part of "hearing nature's voice" is a greater consciousness of our own actions and their effect on the natural world.

Warren applies Marilyn Frye's distinction between "loving" and "arrogant" perception to explain the differences between care and conquest when we approach non-human life and the natural environment. Warren explains that environmental ethics or movements based on arrogant perception expand the moral community and accord moral rights to those beings who are perceived as similar to humans in a morally relevant capacity:

Arrogant perception builds a moral hierarchy of beings and assumes some common denominator of moral considerability in virtue of which like beings deserve similar treatment or moral consideration and unlike beings do not. Such environmental ethics are or generate a "unity in sameness." In contrast, "loving
perception" presupposes and maintains difference -- a distinction between the self and other, between human and at least some nonhumans -- in such a way that perception of the other as other is an expression of love for one who/which is recognized at the outset as independent, dissimilar, different.20

A central concept to Woman and Nature is 'separation,' the process through which man has divorced himself from the natural world and from woman.21 Separation has created a dualism between man and nature/woman, through which man becomes subject and woman/nature, object. When a woman and/or nature is objectified, she/it becomes a thing-object and appears to lose her/its voice or particular interests. A thing-object with no interests, has no voice and is regarded as silent. After demonstrating the breadth and multi-faceted nature of this silencing, Griffin attempts to recover the "voice" of both woman and nature. This voice is "an embodied voice, and an impassioned one," as contrasted with the authoritative, bodiless, "objective" voice of the patriarchy; the latter is the voice of "recognized opinion."22 "Voice" means the whole system of communication, including but not limited to written and spoken language, poetry, art -- any means by which experience is articulated. When a "male" voice is the only voice acknowledged, it assumes that male and female experiences are the same and equally communicated through the same language. A great part of women's studies and feminist scholarship denies this claim and has worked to recover both women's voice and lived experiences.23

So why should an "embodied" voice characterize feminist or ecofeminist writing? Some American feminist thought, rooted in a liberal tradition, has minimized focus on the female body. "Liberal feminism" wishes to minimize
differences between men and women because the "difference" attributed to women has always been detrimental. In the past, women's biological differences have been a source of discrimination and used to restrict them from educational, professional, social and political opportunities. But other schools of feminist thought, like ecofeminism, see that simply "leveling the playing field" (which liberal feminism emphasizes) does not adequately address the cultural and societal apparatus that maintains women's (and nature's) subordination. To use an "embodied voice" means to challenge particular ontological, cultural and epistemological assumptions. It bridges the mind-body split that has associated 'male' with the mind, and 'female' with the body, effectively silencing women by determining that the 'body' cannot speak. It also means to "embody" one's voice and speech with lived experiences. It is rich with history and memory. It may include, as these writings do, the body as a part of the thinking process and contemplation about the world.

To "think through the body" means to incorporate the presence and experiences of one's body into the intellect. There are numerous associations between women and their bodies: through biological processes, like menstruation and pregnancy; the abuse and manipulation of women's bodies, like sexual assault or prostitution. Women's everyday consciousness is preoccupied with the body -- its appearance, biological functions, security, or memories. Thinking through the body includes an awareness of our female bodies and their significance within the larger culture. In a multitude of ways, women's bodies have shaped their physical,
intellectual, professional, personal and emotional lives. For instance, a woman may have been raped or sexually abused as a child, and for the rest of her life battle physical, emotional and mental trauma. Or perhaps a woman chooses to be a sex-worker because of the money she receives, rather than pursue some other career in which her sexualized body is not her livelihood. Suppose a woman lives in a culture in which the "ideal woman's" body is impossibly slender, altered and supplemented by plastic surgery. Is it possible she will feel inadequate to the point of developing an eating disorder or want to alter herself to fit this cultural ideal? These are just a few of the many examples in which women's bodies, particularly in relation to the values of the larger culture, have altered their lives.

'Thinking through the body' can create a powerful discourse, as the following writers demonstrate. It is a strategy rooted in an epistemology based on women's experiences in this world. The authors imply that there is a connection between nature and the female body and, for the most part, this connection is a product of social and cultural conditioning. Each writer I will examine demonstrates that her understanding and connection to nature developed, it did not spring forth spontaneously. These authors work out of their own experiences, relying upon memory and history to tell their stories of their own bodies or those of other women. Throughout the telling of their stories, these authors look to the natural world for inspiration or explanation. By turning to nature, they develop a connective understanding through observation of the treatment of the female body and the similar
Susan Griffin’s work, Woman and Nature, traces the history of association between women and nature and their mutual exploitation and subjugation. The first half of Woman and Nature is Western civilization’s history in which the patriarchy dominated major institutions -- science, the Church, government, the academies, war, and the home. She uses the voice of the patriarchy to tell the tale. Though there are women’s voices present in the first half of the book, they speak the perspective of the oppressed, down-trodden and helpless, because of the overwhelming patriarchal power. In the second half of the book, Griffin contrasts this history with women’s perspectives, experiences and voices. Women’s voices in the second half of the book, by contrast with the first half, grow stronger and more assertive, speaking their own thoughts, ideas and emotions. By writing and re-writing history in this way, Griffin shows that the connection between women and nature is neither (solely) biological nor accidental. The connection is one created and enforced by a patriarchal culture and its institutions. However, Griffin’s book also demonstrates that women can reclaim their eyes and re-envision, take back their bodies and feel, find voices and speak their words in their own way.

The ‘patriarchal voice’ of the first half of the book, Griffin calls “bodiless.” The body, says patriarchal thought, is to be despised, repudiated, ignored, and degraded to the higher and more pure powers of rationality, spirituality, and the
intellect. Superior human activity occurs in the mind, not the body; human intellect separates us from the beasts. The rise of patriarchal power forced a separation between mind and body, spirit and matter, male and female. Through these separations, Griffin claims, women have become associated with the body, come under patriarchal control, and lost the voice to speak.

Griffin tries to show that the undoing of these separations frees women's voices. When women identify with nature, Griffin implies, they discover their voices:

We are the rocks, we are soil, we are trees, rivers, we are wind, we carry the birds, the birds, we are cows, mules, we are horses, we are Solid elements, cause and effect, determinism and objectivity, it is said, are lost. matter. We are flesh, we breathe, we are her body: we speak.  

Griffin suggests that the separation between humans and nature is a false rift created by the patriarchy, and that women have the potential to mend the disjunction. Because woman and nature have suffered and been silenced under the patriarchy, they are connected and even the same, "We are woman and we are nature. And he says he cannot hear us speak. But we hear."  

Woman, through identification with nature, sees herself, how she has been manipulated and mistreated. Griffin's book reopens the dialogue between women and nature, allowing them to speak in a collective response to the patriarchal voice that has appropriated their voice.

Griffin undoes the history of "common knowledge," and retells history through women's work, lives, and bodies rather than through wars, scientific "discovery," and violence. For example, in the first half of the book, Griffin writes about female aging
and the plastic surgery industry, which has preyed upon and perpetuated women's fear
of old age. In the following passage, she intersperses women's fears with the surgical
techniques used (in parentheses):

Our faces begin to die. We are full of defect. Our brows, for instance, are
lined (For transverse wrinkles of the forehead, the skin above the frontal hair line is
excised and the lines are eliminated by lifting the skin of the forehead in a resection.)
Our flesh is aging. Our chins sag. (For ptosis of the chin, a resection is performed
which tightens the skin in a transverse direction, to elevate the point of the chin.)
...We find wrinkles cover our faces....

The description of aging and applied surgical techniques continues until the
bandages are finally removed,

Our hands reach to our faces. We lay the insides of our fingers on our
cheeks. Our palms cradle our chins. We feel the blood rush in our temples. We
blink. Our eyelashes brush against the lines in our hands. We breathe through the
spaces between our fingers. This is strangeness. Our hands are familiar. We know
these hands. But we do not know these faces. This skin. Its smoothness; its
tightness. We shut our eyes. We try to turn away from ourselves. None of this fear
of ourselves shows back to us in the face we see reflected before us.

In attempting to reconcile their fear of aging, a fear manufactured by a
capitalistic, patriarchal system, women lose the familiarity of their own faces. They
have been remade into another face, conceived by a surgeon, popular magazines and
movies. Women unlearn themselves and become removed from their natural selves.
The very things that shape human lives, the experiences to which these lines and
wrinkles are a testament, disappear at the end of the surgical knife. They lose their
experiences, knowledge, life which is imprinted on their faces, in the small creases
and lines that surround eyes, mouth, forehead. They become more like the socially
and culturally-constructed ideal of the ageless, traceless, perfect female who graces
every form of advertising. Women, symbolically, are erased.

In the second half of the book, Griffin shows there is another response to women's aging, one that comes from women themselves. Her "revisioned" passage reads,

From the body of the old woman we can tell you something of the life she lived. We know that she spent much of her life on her knees (fluid in the bursa in front of her kneecap.) We say that she must have been fatigued, that her hands were often in water. (Traces of calcium, traces of unspoken anger, swelling in the middle joints of her fingers.)...

By the body of this old woman, we are hushed. We are awed. We know that it was in her body that we began. And now we say that it is from her body that we learn. That we see our past. We say that it is from the body [of this old woman], we can tell you something of the lives we lived."

In contrast to the first passage, Griffin shows how we learn from the body of the old woman, rich with clues about her life. It is a life common to many generations of women, one of hard work, duress, silence. Instead of blotting out this history, forgetting or ignoring it, Griffin insists that we revere this body and draw strength from the information it confers. Griffin cites innumerable parallels between the treatment and regard of nature and the female body in Western culture. One passage, entitled "Use," begins with a quote from Man's Role in Changing the Face of the Earth, "Putting virgin soil under cultivation initiates a breakdown of what could be called the 'body' of the soil." Keeping in mind that she may be talking about land, or the female body, Griffin writes:

He breaks the wilderness. He clears the land of trees, brush, weed. The land is brought under his control; he has turned waste into a garden. Into her soil he places his plow. He labors. He plants. He sows. By the sweat of his brow, he makes her yield. She opens up her broad lap to him. She smiles on him. She
prepares him a feast. She gives up her treasures to him. She makes him grow rich. She yields. She conceives. Her lap is fertile. Out of her dark interior, life arises. What she does with his seed is a mystery to him. He counts her yielding as a miracle. He sees her workings as effortless. Whatever she brings forth he call his own. He has made her conceive. His land is his mother. She smiles on the joys of her children. She feeds him generously. Again and again in his hunger he returns to her. Again and again she gives to him. She is his mother. Her powers are a mystery to him. Silently she works miracles for him. Yet just as silently, she withholds from him. Without reason, she refuses to yield. She is fickle. She dries up. She is bitter. She scorns him. He is determined he will master her. He will make her produce. He will devise ways to plant what he wants in her, to make her yield more to him.31

It is unclear whether Griffin is describing women’s culturation or nature’s cultivation, and that is how she makes her point. Read from either perspective, the passage applies to women or land. The female body and the land are perceived for their use-value and production.

It could be argued that there is no problem with regarding the land as resource potential, but it is problematic to view women this way. One of the points that ecofeminists, like Karen Warren, make is that perception necessitates a conceptual framework. Warren writes, "A conceptual framework is a set of basic beliefs, values, attitudes, and assumptions which shape and reflect one’s views of oneself and one’s world. It is a socially constructed lens through which we perceive ourselves and others."32 She goes on to say that an oppressive conceptual framework "explains, justifies, and maintains relationships of dominance and subordination."33 If Griffin is correct (and she has a great deal of historical evidence) that man perceives women as inferior and closer to nature, then women, through their perceived status,
will merit similar treatment as nature. It is not entirely clear whether women are treated badly because they are associated with nature, or whether nature is treated badly through its association with women. The oppressive conceptual framework through which women and nature are viewed does not discriminate, rather, it merits similar treatment to each. Furthermore, if we agree with Warren’s earlier claim that feminism is a movement to end all oppressions, then it is antithetical to feminism that any oppression is permitted to exist. Feminists who would argue that it is allowable that nature be treated as a resource fail to see the interconnection between various oppressions. It is the oppressive conceptual framework itself that is objectionable, not the similarity or dissimilarity between those who are oppressed.

What happens when women and nature are similarly perceived through a patriarchal lens? Jane Smiley’s Pulitzer-Prize winning, A Thousand Acres tells the story of the disintegration of an Iowa farm family, owners of a thousand acres, and the rise in consciousness of the eldest daughter, Ginny. The novel is a microcosm of a patriarchal society, a drama that takes place over and over again, in many guises. Ginny’s father, Larry Cook, regards his land and his daughter’s bodies as possessions, existing solely for his pleasure, profit and convenience. He controls them through force, manipulation and terror.

The first indicator that the 'body' is an important theme to the novel is the prologue, a quote from Meridel Le Sueur, "The body repeats the landscape. They are the source of each other and create each other. We are marked by the seasonal
body of the earth, by the terrible migration of people, by the swift turn of a century, verging on change never before experienced on this greening planet.\textsuperscript{34} From this point, the body as a theme is not obvious until the turning point of the book, when Rose, Ginny’s sister, recalls how their father raped them when they were adolescents. Rose says, “You were his as much as I was. There was no reason for him to assert his possession of me more than his possession of you. We were just his, to do with as he pleased, like the pond or the houses or the hogs or the crops.”\textsuperscript{35}

From this point forward, and looking back, things begin to fall into place. In the book, Ginny describes the "distinct feeling" of "shame,"\textsuperscript{36} especially with regard to her body. There is no clear explanation for this feeling until she recalls the sexual abuse. However, women’s shame about their bodies is a widespread phenomenon. There is an implicit understanding that women do, or ought to, feel shame about their bodies. This shame however, is not born internally. It comes from the outside culture. It is a learned response to practiced or expected behavior. Ginny’s sister Rose says later,

[Our father] did fuck us and he did beat us. He beat us more times than he fucked us. He beat us routinely. And the thing is, he’s respected. Others like him and look up to him. He fits right in. However many of them who have fucked their daughters or stepdaughters or their nieces or not, the fact is they all accept beating as a way of life. We have two choices when we think about that. Either they don’t know the real him and we do, or else they do know the real him and the fact that he beat and fucked us doesn’t matter... That’s the thing that kills me. This person who beats and fucks his own daughters can go out into the community and get respect and power, and take it all for granted that he deserves it.\textsuperscript{37}

Rose and Ginny’s situation is not unusual; Rose implies that there are others
like themselves within their community. Rose points to not only the regularity or commonality of domestic and sexual abuse, but that it is actually sanctioned as "appropriate" behavior in the patriarchal mind, as a means of control. When a patriarchal mind-set guides a culture, certain mechanisms, cultural expectations, social and material conditions maintain societal violence. *A Thousand Acres* demonstrates the sanctioning and sustenance of abuse in several instances. In one of the more crucial actions, Larry permanently leaves the family farm after a vicious and brutal outburst. The community views Ginny and Rose as perpetrators, who threw their aging father out of the house and shuns them for their perceived disobedience and lack of parental respect. Larry's actions are never questioned despite the fact that some persons understand his violent and destructive nature.\(^3\)\(^8\) The point here is that often victims and bystanders of patriarchal violence are encouraged to 'forget, forgive and move on' from the violence they undergo and witness. Part of the problem is not recognizing the many forms of violence and their justification. Ecological feminism, in an attempt to get at the conceptions that sanction violence in all forms, may provide a theoretical framework to address ecological and human violence. In the passage I have cited, the harm that is caused to human beings when they are treated like things is apparent. Ecofeminism requires further questions about what we consider "things" and appropriate treatment as such.

One strength of a book like *A Thousand Acres* is the way it is able to contextualize ecofeminist themes present in other works like *Woman and Nature*. 
Read together, the books point to one another, elaborate on certain ideas especially with regard to the subjugation of the female body by patriarchal dominance. The overwhelming and pervasive patriarchy of Woman and Nature stalks the pages of A Thousand Acres in the body of Larry Cook. He rages, dominates, terrorizes, rapes. He fears his daughters and anything 'feminine,' and because of this terror, seeks ultimate control. For example, in Woman and Nature, Griffin tries to show how the patriarchal mind views women and animals as things to be hunted:

*Because she is his, she offers no resistance. She is a place of rest for him. A place of his making. And when his flesh begins to yield and his skin melts into her, he becomes soft, and he is without fear; he does not lose himself; though something in him gives way, he is not lost in her, because she is his now: he has captured her.*

In A Thousand Acres, we witness daughters who are mere extensions of their father's property, fit for his use and control. They, too, are "hunted" in the middle of the night:

*And so my father came to me and had intercourse with me in the middle of the night. I could remember pretending to be asleep, but knowing he was in the doorway, moving closer. I could remember him saying, "Quiet now, girl. You don't need to fight me." I didn't remember fighting him, ever, but in all circumstances he was ready to detect resistance, anyway... I tried to make my legs heavy without seeming to defy him... I remembered my strategy, which had been desperate limp inertia.*

Both passages show the ways in which women and men's "proper roles are shaped by an oppressive, patriarchal conceptual framework. For women, the role is one of passivity, lack or resistance and force -- she is perceived as willing to be captured and controlled. For men, the role is one of dominance and ultimate control.
Ginny eventually escapes the farm and leaves everything -- the inherited farm, husband, family -- behind. When she encounters her husband several years later, she demonstrates how her viewpoint has evolved through her experience and knowledge. Her viewpoint manifests an ecofeminist attitude towards the patriarchal treatment of women and nature. She says to Ty,

I see you taking what you want because you want it, then making something up that justifies what you did. I see getting others to pay the price, then covering up and forgetting what the price was. Do I think Daddy came up with beating and fucking us on his own?... No, I think he had lessons, and those lessons were part of the package, along with the land, and the lust to run things exactly the way he wanted to no matter what, poisoning the water and destroying the topsoil and buying bigger and bigger machinery, and then feeling certain that all was 'right,' as you say.42

The book has other features that qualify it as ecofeminist literature. Ginny speaks about 'inheritance' towards the end of the novel; her meaning differs from the usual family inheritance. With regard to the land, she and her sisters inherit the farm, literally, but it is a dubious gift. In an ecological sense, the farm's soil is replete with chemicals and drastically altered from its natural conditions. If we recall that the novel begins in the 1950's, the first time agricultural chemicals were widely used and chemical weapons were being developed, we can view Ginny's inheritance in light of the inheritance of her whole generation. The promises of "progress" ultimately destroyed the health of the land and its people. Our environmental situation in 1993 is an inheritance from previous generations: the careless development of industry, the build-up of weapons and power sources for which no adequate waste-disposal was
planned.

But Ginny speaks of inheritance in another way as well, pertinent to the motif of the body. In the epilogue, she writes,

... my inheritance is with me, sitting in my chair. Lodged in my every cell, along with the DNA are molecules of topsoil and atrazine and paraquat and anhydrous ammonia and diesel fuel and plant dust, and also molecules of memory... all is present now, here; each particle weighs some fraction of the hundred and thirty-six pounds that attach me to the earth, perhaps as much as the print weighs in other sorts of history.43

Ginny, like the land, is saturated with the chemicals that fill the land. In some way, she and the land are unnatural products, shaped and determined by her father, his father and grandfather. In every part of herself lies some trace of her father’s desire to control and produce. Ginny appears to conclude there is no way to remove the chemicals, her father, or her memories of her adolescent body -- they are part of what makes up her self. The earth is part of her, and she, it; they are continuous. The traces of earth and chemicals, memories of her father’s abuse are some "fraction" of her, and she compares them to the weight of the print of "other sorts of history." The textual print of history seems an insignificant weight, yet it carries the entire import of the events for future generations. In the same way, these "traces" Ginny contains are "insignificant" in their literal weight, yet they have utterly determined her life. One conclusion of this novel is that even the seemingly unimportant human actions and choices have tremendous ramifications. The dominance with which Larry Cook ruled his farm and his family ultimately destroyed both. This same patriarchal
dominance is present in Western practices and treatment of women and nature.

*A Thousand Acres* recognizes our ecological inheritance and patriarchal inheritance. Ecological feminism seeks to undo both. This novel tells us the history of one woman and her family, but it is the embodied history of many women and their families. It questions this 'inheritance,' or heritage of family and tradition, and as will be discussed shortly, reminds us of Terry Tempest Williams’ work, *Refuge*.

Like Jane Smiley, Leslie Ryan also examines patriarchal objectification of women in her essay, "The Clearing in the Clearing." She writes about women’s experience in a culture where rape is an epidemic, and of how rape is a product of viewing women as objects and a source for male pleasure and dominance. Similarly, wilderness is viewed as a source of raw material existing for human use and pleasure. Ryan writes:

To [rapists]... a virgin is not a young being with value -- however inchoate -- of her own. She is a tunnel-thing, a sweet-to-perforate barrier between their being who they are and their feeling something better, or at least, for a moment after ejaculation, something less desirous. We don’t make people into objects when we like or respect them; we do it when we covet, when we desire something inordinately without regard to the rights of others... the men violate the girl’s own rights: her right to her body, her right to live a life of a certain quality, and her future right to feel trust or tenderness with other human beings.\(^4\)

Ryan writes this, in a partial explanation of the separation process by which we objectify beings, making them into "things," in order to justify our use and abuse of them. But our culture requires that women do this to themselves also, to engage in
a process of separation through which our minds and bodies are split. In a culture in which women's bodies are abused -- through pornography, rape, domestic violence, plastic surgery, disregard by the medical community -- women learn to separate body and mind in order to survive. Among survivors of sexual assault, separation of mind and body is a common phenomenon. If it is considered that women's bodies are assaulted in many ways, not just when they are raped, the process of mind-body separation is even more pervasive. Women live in our culture replete with images of eroticized violence in advertising, pornography, literature -- in addition to actual physical battering and rape. Mind-body separation may be a common phenomenon among women, but to varying degrees, as a survival mechanism in a culture where actual and figurative violence against women is routinely expressed.

In "The Other Side of Fire," Ryan talks in more detail about the separation between mind and body in order to survive. She begins the essay, "I have heard it said that storytelling starts with body and ends with the body... But as a woman I worry about this. For most women, the body, like the story, is not a simple thing. It's a battlefield where lies and truths about power go at it." Ryan tells her own survival story, a painful one, in which she learned that for a woman to survive in this culture, she must separate mind from body, and use her body as a commodity. She discovers later on that this survival strategy is not that unusual for women. But she also learns, in the desert as a survival instructor, that the female body has power, but not as a sexual commodity as she had been taught.
Upon becoming a wilderness instructor, teaching survival in the Great Basin desert, she says:

My mind and body began separating less and less often, mostly because I was learning to survive out there, and doing so did not require that my mind float up in the air and watch bad things happen to my body.

In fact, the desert required just the opposite: in order to survive there, I had to be fully present... In the desert, a mind that wanders from the body can land a person in strange territory, far from water or cover. If at any time I stopped listening to my body and to my lived experience, I might get lost.47

In Ryan's essays, there is a strong sense of 'lived experiences' as sources of knowledge, especially for women. 'Lived experiences,' in this instance, means those experiences through which we gain insight and knowledge first-hand through our bodies, minds and emotions. The euphemistic "women's intuition" may be better explained as those techniques that women learn from childhood that enable them to survive a culture hostile towards women and female children. Such education is not always overt; rather, it is compiled and collected from a variety of sources that threaten women: their bodies are not their own, they can be taken at any time, that male dominance is something women must simply accept.

But Ryan doesn't accept it. In turning to the wilderness and learning the techniques to survive there, she no longer depends on the survival techniques she was taught as a twelve year-old girl in Virginia. Feminism must also learn new techniques to do more than survive. Feminist theory has shied away from the female body as a source of inspiration because it has been so 'problematic.' In a culture such as ours,
sexual difference has been the root of discrimination against women. Anglo-American feminists, especially liberal feminists, have avoided theories and discussion that perpetuate the differences between men and women, especially those having to do with biology. "French feminists" like Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julie Kristeva have begun discussion about the female body, especially in connection with psychoanalytic theory. Anglo-American feminists can gain from these insights but can also develop their own theories and discussion about the female body -- and this is what ecofeminist writers have already started. By writing through the body, learning and knowing the body, understanding its power, women gain control of their bodies. The control of one's physical self is fundamental to every kind of freedom humans value. Women have not yet fully possessed their bodies: in a biological sense, women's bodies have been manipulated by medical and political institutions; women live under the threat of rape and physical violence; women's bodies are objectified in the media, advertising, not to mention the enormous pornography industry. Ecofeminist writers are breaking a path towards full realization of the female self and connecting it to their observations and experiences in the natural world.

Ecofeminists present a positive connection between women and nature. Instead of seeing women and nature as passive and objectified, ecofeminism deconstructs these mythologized images and perceives women and nature as possessing power and subjectivity. Ecofeminists, like Ryan, show that we can draw inspiration from nature when we live in nature. In her case, the mind-body separation
she learned in childhood was neither natural nor sustainable; in the desert, she learned
to survive and thrive through the reconnection of her mind and body.

In *Refuge*, Terry Tempest Williams writes about her mother’s slow death to
cancer, in unison with the changes in landscape caused by an immense rise of the
Great Salt Lake. The two stories, at first, seem dissimilar. Yet, as the book
progresses, her mother’s changes in connection with the land appear more and more
evident. Williams is the member of a large and close-knit Mormon family who have
lived in the Great Basin for generations. Williams is a naturalist by profession, but
her mother and grandmother, of whom she writes most, are also connected deeply to
the land. All three women, in their own ways, seek refuge and restoration from
nature.

Trying to cope with her mother’s pain and eventual death by cancer, Williams
seeks refuge in the land, the nearby Bird Refuge, in her family and her religion.
Again and again, she turns to the landscape for solace, seeking the safety she has
found in her mother’s arms. The parallels between her own mother and the landscape
are present when she says that the mother’s womb is the first landscape we inhabit.
She speaks of her mother and the land:

The heartbeats I felt in the womb -- two heartbeats, at once, my mother’s and
my own -- are heartbeats of the land. All of life drums and beats, at once, sustaining
a rhythm audible only to the spirit. I can drum my heartbeat back into the Earth,
beating, hearts beating, my hands on the earth -- like a ruffed grouse on a log,
beating, hearts beating -- like a bittern in the marsh, beating, hearts beating. My
hands on the earth beating, hearts beating. I drum back my return....
This passage, in accordance with others, does not metaphorize the earth as a mother in the sense of "Mother Earth." Rather, there is a sense of identification, similar to the one present in Griffin's writings (see page 11). Williams' heart beats with her mother's, it beats with the land, her mother's beats with the land. She suggests it is the same beat. The rhythm connects the women to each other and to the earth. Like Griffin, Williams' implies that women can draw strength from their identification with nature.

Williams subtitles her book, *An Unnatural History of Family and Place*. In an interesting way, what connects *Refuge* to Ryan's essays is the discussion of what is natural and what is learned in this culture. Ryan contends that the objectification process, by which we separate things from ourselves (or even within ourselves), is something we learn in order to exploit or, in the case of separation within, to survive. It is learned behavior and practiced response. In *Refuge*, Williams painfully learns to accept death and change as natural parts of life: her mother's cancer comes from within and is natural; the rise of the Great Salt Lake is also natural, though it destroys the Bird Refuge. However, we later discover her mother's cancer itself is caused by human-created nuclear weapons, their detonation contaminating the land and life present in the land. Death, in and of itself, is natural. Cancer caused by nuclear warhead detonation, is unnatural. When we accept death that is preventable (in this case, the detonation of nuclear warheads which cause death and destruction is preventable) unquestioningly, is this simply a learned response in a patriarchal and

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destructive culture? In other words, nuclear warheads are not something natural to this world. They are the output of a culture that reveres war and violence, a culture that is too short-sighted to see the destruction of its people and land. As a culture, have we simply learned to accept the most destructive elements of ourselves, allowing generations of people and wildlife to be irreparably harmed? Refuge points out that we have learned to accept nuclear weapons, and the destruction they incur too passively.

It is not until the conclusion that Williams reveals that U.S. bomb tests throughout the Great Basin desert are the cause of her mother’s, aunts’ and grandmothers’ cancer. However, even before this revelation, Williams is already questioning the institutions that regard obedience, deference and turning-the-other-cheek as appropriate responses to destruction. Though the Mormon Church and her family have been sources of safety and reliability all her life, as her mother’s cancer progresses, she begins to see each institution tacitly condoning, through encouraged behavior, the death and destruction of women and the land. She asks, if there is a "Godhead," where is the

"... Motherbody. We are far too conciliatory. If we as Mormon women believe in God the Father and his son, Jesus Christ, it is only logical that a Mother-In-Heaven balances the sacred triangle. I believe the Holy Ghost is female, although she has remained hidden, invisible, deprived of a body, she is the spirit that seeps into our hearts and directs us to the well... If we could introduce the Motherbody as a spiritual counterpoint to the Godhead, perhaps our inspiration and devotion would be not longer be directed to the stars, but our worship could return to the earth...." 

Aside from this clear criticism of the Church, Williams has already begun to
turn inward to understand herself as a woman and turn outward towards the land to understand her place in it. She says:

I want to see the lake as Woman, as myself, in her refusal to be tamed... She will survive us. I recognize her as a wilderness, raw, and self-defined. Great Salt Lake strips me of contrivances and conditioning, saying, 'I am not what you see. Question me. Stand by your impressions.'

We are taught not to trust our experiences. Great Salt Lake teaches me that experience is all we have.51

From the time of her mother's death forward, the book changes in tone. The experience of her mother's prolonged pain and death make her aware of the ways in which her people's women and the land have been expected to bear the burden of unasked questions about nuclear bomb testing. The last chapters of the book show Williams moving closer and closer to the earth, closer to the spirits and beliefs of Great Basin tribes, further away from those institutions in which she was raised. She writes, "Great Salt Lake is a spiritual magnet that will not let me go. Dogma doesn't hold me. Wildness does."52 The Great Salt Lake, the desert and wildlife surrounding it, becomes her spiritual inspiration and source of healing.

Then, while hiking in the desert, she takes a spill which results in a long, red scar across her forehead. She says,

I have been marked by the desert. The scar meanders down the center of my forehead like a red, clay river. A natural feature of the map. I see the land and myself in context.

A blank spot on the map is an invitation to encounter the natural world, one's character will be shaped by the landscape.53

Williams recognizes her body as part of the desert. As she increasingly identifies with the desert and her natural surroundings, she grows ever-more-
conscious that the cancer that has killed the female members of her family is the result of human actions. Both the women and the desert have been contaminated by the nuclear bomb tests. Her identification with and connection to the desert, as a woman and a member of the Clan of the One-Breasted Women leads her, finally, to a stunning conclusion, where she looks to the women who "would reclaim the desert for the sake of their children, for the sake of the land." The women, she says, "understood the fate of the earth as their own." 

* * *

In each of these works, the female body has significance. Each of the authors identifies ways in which women's bodies have been used, manipulated, neglected and abused and connected these abusive practices to treatment of nature and non-human life. Through the process of association between women and nature, the authors demonstrate a growing consciousness that abuse does not occur in isolated instances; rather, abuse results from a patriarchal conceptual framework that dominates our culture. In order to stop the abuse requires a new framework, one in which differing sex or ontological form does not justify dominance. Ecological feminism, as a theoretical framework, attempts to fill the position. By studying the association and treatment of women and nature in this culture, ecofeminism hopes to identify the processes by which nature and women are oppressed. Some theorists, like Karen Warren, see ecofeminism reaching further than the illumination of women and nature, believing it has the power to uncover the mechanisms at the root of all oppressions,
the so-called, "logic of domination."56

'Writing the body' seems to have a strong presence in ecofeminist literature. In this paper, I have tried to show how authors are writing associatively through the body, about their experiences in the natural world. I think this can be a powerful communicatory means for all feminists interested in freeing the female voice to speak. Our bodies, not just our minds, comprise who we are. What is done to our bodies and what we do with our bodies significantly affects our minds, actions, and self-perception. Understanding our position in the "natural" and "cultural" world tells us who we are and what we value, as individuals and as a community. The engagement of mind and body to the writing process promises increased understanding of our present position, as women and environmentalists, and may lead the way to a future position in which the status of each is culturally-valued.

Ecofeminists are offering unique conceptions of the female body, particularly its relation to the natural world. This is a promising direction for (Anglo-American) feminist theory, which to this time, has not explored the theoretical potential of the female body nor fully embraced ecology as a feminist issue. In moving beyond female victimization by patriarchal culture, we need to search for original methods to articulate our experiences. I think ecofeminism offers such an original method. Ecofeminism takes up Rich's challenge to "think through the body," to reorganize our knowledge and experiences as women, and moves us closer to more connected intellectual and physical selves.
Notes:


4. ibid.


6. ibid.

7. ibid.

8. When I write 'male' or 'female,' I understand these as socially-constructed categories of gender, not categories of biological sex. 'Men' or 'women' refers to biological sex. 'Man' or 'woman' may indicate a specific man or woman, or may mean universal man or woman in the sense of, "Woman's relation to man;" the context in which the term is used determines specific or universal meaning.

9. Ynestra King comments:

   But one problem that white cultural feminists, like other feminists have not adequately faced is that in celebrating the commonalities of women and emphasizing the ways in which women are universal victims of male oppression, they have inadequately addressed the real diversity of women's lives and histories across race, class, and national boundaries. For women of color, opposing racism and genocide and encouraging ethnic pride are agendas they often share with men in a white-dominated society, even while they struggle against sexism in their own communities. These complex, multidimensional loyalties and historically divergent life situations require a politics that recognizes these complexities. (King, in Gender/Body/Knowledge, p. 125)

11. ibid.

12. ibid, p. 212


14. The question of "nature/nurture" is an important one, but is not a major point in this paper. However, in the writings I am discussing, the fact that women are writing from their experiences, drawing knowledge from these experiences, leads me to the conclusion that women’s connection to nature is more a matter of "nurture" than "nature." Nonetheless, I find this sort of dichotomizing rather limiting; our connections are probably a combination of both nature and nurture.


16. There is much literature on the many and varied "connections" between women and the natural world. See Vera Norwood, Made From This Earth, for a history of women and the environment in America.


21. See Griffin, Book 2, "Separation," p. 94-151. Griffin writes in the preface, "The second book is entitled "Separation," and beginning with the separation of a womb from a woman’s body, lists and protests against all those separations which are a part of the civilized male’s thinking and living -- mind from emotion, body from soul -- and reveals that separation which patriarchy requires us to make from ourselves."

22. Griffin, xv-xvi.

23. See Lugones and Spelman, "Have We Got A Theory For You," in Women’s
Studies International Forum, Vol. 6(6), 1983. Lugones and Spelman, in their aim to demonstrate that women's studies has been primarily a reflection of white, middle-class, Anglo feminism that has silenced "other" voices, write a succinct and comprehensive explanation of the goals of women's studies. Spelman says, "... the demand that the woman's voice be heard and attended to has been made for a variety of reasons: not just so as to greatly increase the chances that true accounts be given, but also because the articulation of experience (in myriad ways) is among the hallmarks of a self-determining individual or community. There are not just epistemological, but moral and political reasons, for demanding that the woman's voice be heard, after centuries of androcentric din." p.20.


25. ibid., p. 46.


27. ibid., p. 86.

28. ibid., p. 87.


30. ibid. 52-53.

31. ibid.


33. ibid.


35. Smiley, p. 195.

36. ibid.

37. ibid., p. 302.

38. ibid., p. 91.
39. See Griffin, especially "Land: Possession, Use;" "Her Body;" "Acoustics: What He Hears;" "His Control."

40. Griffin, p. 104-5.

41. Smiley, p. 280.

42. Smiley, p. 343

43. ibid., 368.


45. The separation between mind and body is a sensation common to survivors of sexual assault. "Splitting" is described as "the feeling the survivor [of sexual assault/abuse] has when she separates her consciousness from her body or leaves her body." (The Courage to Heal, p. 42 footnote) This "splitting" may occur at the time of the sexual assault or later, in "flashbacks." Because the survivor cannot physically run away, they "leave" their bodies to escape the traumatic situation or memory. The Courage to Heal: a Guide for Women Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse by Ellen Bass and Laura Davis, (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1988)


47. Ryan, "The Other Side of Fire," p. 23.


Roach discusses the harmful effects to both earth and mothers through the mutual association in the term, "Mother earth." The popular slogan "Love Your Mother" with a picture of the world, is supposed to suggest that we treat the earth in an ecologically-sound manner, to care for it as we would care for our mothers. However, in a patriarchal culture, mothers and mothering is "problematic," therefore, the metaphor applied to the earth is also problematic. Roach suggest that this euphemism is inappropriate because of "our tendency to relate to our mothers as ambivalent love-objects, expected to care for all our needs, and that for this reason, instead of achieving the desired result of encouraging us towards environmental
soundness, this slogan has the opposite effect of helping to maintain exploitive patterns towards the earth and mothers." p. 56.

50. Williams, p. 240.

51. ibid., p. 92.

52. ibid., p. 240.

53. ibid., p. 243.

54. ibid., p. 287.

55. ibid., p. 288.

56. Warren, "The Power and Promise of Ecological Feminism."

Warren does not claim that the "logic of domination" she describes will get at all the roots of all oppressions. Nonetheless, her clarification of the "logic of domination" reaches more broadly than other concepts aiming at the elimination of oppressions. The "logic of domination" is the most significant feature that arises from an oppressive conceptual framework; the latter is defined as a conceptual framework that "explains, justifies, and maintains relationships of dominance and subordination." (p. 127) The "logic of domination" is both a logical struture and it involves "a substantive value system." This value system sanctifies the "'just' subordination of that which is subordinate."

Warren does say:

[E]cofeminism clarifies why the logic of domination, and any conceptual framework which gives rise to it, must be abolished in order both to make possible a meaningful notion of difference which does not breed domination and to prevent feminism from becoming a "support" movement based primarily on shared experiences... there are no "monolithic experiences" that all women share, feminism must be a "solidarity movement" based on shared beliefs and interests rather than a "unity in sameness" movement based on shared experiences and shared victimization. In the words of Maria Lugones, "Unity -- not to be confused with solidarity -- is understood as conceptually tied to domination."

Ecofeminists insist that the sort of logic of domination used to justify the domination of humans by gender, racial, or ethnic, or class status is also used to justify the domination of nature. (p. 131-2)