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Interdisciplinary Literary Studies
A Journal of Criticism and Theory



Literary Ecocriticism
Edited by Ian Marshall

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A Journal of Criticism and Theory

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Partnership, Narrative, and Environmental Justice: An Interview with Carolyn Merchant

J. Scott Bryson
Mount St. Mary's College

*Environmental historian Carolyn Merchant unquestionably has been one of the most important voices in the contemporary environmental movement. Merchant's *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (1980) is a standard and fundamental text of both modern ecological and eco-feminist thought. She followed up that ground-breaking work with *Radical Ecology: The Search for a Livable World* (1992) and *Earthcare: Women and the Environment* (1996). She now serves as the Chancellor's Professor of Environmental History, Philosophy, and Ethics at the University of California at Berkeley.*

In the spring of 1996, Professor Merchant lectured in Lexington, Kentucky, at Transylvania University and the University of Kentucky. This interview took place following her lectures.

JSB: In your most recent work on the environment and on social justice, the concept of narrative plays an increasingly pivotal role. Why have the stories that we tell and the way we tell them become so important to you?

CM: I've become aware of narrative through the work of people like William Cronon in environmental history, and the work of people in post-modernism who have examined narrative as a master narrative, an enlightenment narrative that is part of a story that a given culture tells itself that holds that culture together. It may be unconsciously absorbed, but once it's identified, we can realize that maybe we've been socialized into a particular narrative. The enlightenment narrative is the narrative of progress, yet that progress has been, in much of Western Europe and the U.S., centered around the values of capitalism. Capitalism entails inequities: some people will benefit at the expense of others. So the idea of identifying a master narrative, the master story into which I, for example, have myself been socialized, is vital. I grew up in the Episcopal Church, the Protestant ethic, getting ahead, working hard, having been told that I could succeed even though I was a woman. The women's movement helped me realize that I could succeed, and certainly the mainstream, liberal part of the movement suggested that we

and Environmental Justice:
with Carolyn Merchant

with Bryson
at Mary's College

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Carolyn Merchant lectured in Lexington, Kentucky, at the University of Kentucky. This interview took place in 1992.

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live through the work of people like William Ogburn, and the work of people in postmodern narrative as a master narrative, and it is part of a story that a given culture tells together. It may be unconsciously abided, we can realize that maybe we've been arranged. The enlightenment narrative is the one that progress has been, in much of Western history, and around the values of capitalism. Capitalism will benefit at the expense of others. As a master narrative, the master story into which we have been socialized, is vital. I grew up in a Protestant ethic, getting ahead, working hard, and I succeeded even though I was a woman. The environment made me realize that I could succeed, and the environmental part of the movement suggested that we

were not victims.

Narrative, therefore, is something that underlies society; it's like a hidden assumption in our culture. If it's identified, and you can see it as a story that has a beginning, a middle, and an end, and that we start from one point, but we're working to get to another, then we can name the story and see what the consequences are. In identifying it that way, we can imagine that there might be alternative stories, and a different way of socializing our children in the future into a different story, into different expectations. So narrative has provided a new direction for my work. I can see my work on *The Death of Nature* fitting into it. I can see my work on *Radical Ecology* fitting into it, because I, too, hope for a recovery of a better world, which is part of the progressive story.

But the mainstream progressive narrative also brings with it the dangers of the environmental crisis, for there's been a decline in environmental quality, even as humans in privileged communities have improved their lives in relation to the rest of the world. What I have called a recovery narrative, recovering what was good about the Garden of Eden, is very important. But environmentalists want to do it one way, capitalists want to do it another way. Identifying what those two different stories are, that one is a progressive story of capitalism, and the other a story of environmental decline is critical. Environmentalists want the recovery to include the environment. That helps us to focus the problem and to ask, Is there another narrative that could come up in the twenty-first century? I don't know what that narrative is, yet.

JSB: But if you speculated, what would it look like, and how would it relate to and influence the forming of new justices?

CM: I think it would have many voices, not just one authoritative voice. It would include the voices of many people, in all kinds of communities. It would be oriented toward process, toward change, toward relationship. It would have many actors. It would be a very complex story, taking into consideration ideas of chaos in the environment, rather than seeing nature as a passive environment that just provides resources for the economic system. It would recognize both unpredictability and predictability, the "disorderly order," of nature, as some of the chaos theorists call it.

JSB: After your lecture a student asked you about the next century's story. You responded, "I can't write the new story. But you can." Can you say a little bit about that?

CM: My idea is that the new story will emerge from action, from the activities and changes that people bring about in the world, and in their own lives. We don't have a master narrative guiding what those actions are, but new social movements and the social transformations that come out of those groups, combined with the efforts of individual people will come together to make change. With people working together for environmental justice and working in multi-racial, multi-cultural, international communities, something new can emerge. It's the younger generation that will probably bring that about. Children who are now going into kindergarten and first grade are in a better position to create the new narrative, probably, than those of us who've been schooled and socialized in the old one.

So the new story comes out of action and activity, and it emerges from the mouths of young voices. And we probably don't know what that is yet. However, some people have hope in regards to new master narratives. For example Arran Gare is an Australian philosopher who's written a book on postmodernism and the environmental crisis. He made a critique of postmodernism and the problems that it raises in terms of relativism and the dissolution of narrative. Postmodernism's relativism almost denies the possibility of the existence of something real like the environmental crisis. Gare argues that the crisis is real and that we need a new master narrative.

So if we agree with Gare, that regardless of how we construct it, that the environmental crisis is real, then I think we also have to take the next step and to realize that there is some type of new narrative that will help us resolve that environmental crisis. We may not know what it is yet, but only that something can emerge that can act as a guideline. I've offered partnership ethics as one step toward that new kind of story.

JSB: It sounds to me like you're making a distinction between *constructing* an environmental crisis and *creating* one. In other words it sounds like you're arguing that just because the notion of an environmental crisis is humanly constructed, that does not necessarily mean that we haven't also created a very real phenomenon.

CM: Yes, I think there *is* an environmental crisis, however we talk about it, or however the debates are framed. Some people will say there's global warming, and some people will say there isn't. But there are different approaches to understanding it: What does it mean? What are its policy and lifestyle implications? Are the implications good in some instances? Those are all constructions by scientists and meteorologists

will emerge from action, from the activating about in the world, and in their own narrative guiding what those actions are, the social transformations that come out of the efforts of individual people will

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it of action and activity, and it emerges. And we probably don't know what people have hope in regards to new master plans. Gare is an Australian philosopher who's been writing about socialism and the environmental crisis. He raises the problems that it raises in the resolution of narrative. Postmodernism's possibility of the existence of something is. Gare argues that the crisis is real and active.

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and capitalists as to how to understand it.

Yet I think there is a real phenomenon there, however we talk about it. And a new narrative, or a multiplicity of new narratives, that will help us deal with that crisis and resolve it, is going to come out of how people change their lives. How do we live differently? How do we act differently? How do we form different routes to deal with those phenomena? So the tension between realism and social constructivism is one of the cutting edge issues of the future.



JSB: Speaking of cutting edge issues, you've written a great deal about the relationship between socialism, ecology, and gender. Could you speak to that connection, in relation to how it relates to issues of justice?

CM: Well, there are many forms of socialism. State socialism has not worked very well, but there are new forms in which people organize their own visions of social action, and those have not been explored very well. This type of socialism is a fundamental method for producing new ways of looking at old issues, how to think about them, and how to be creative and look for new avenues. So is ecofeminism, but with a focus on gender: What are the relationships between men and women, and how can they produce a better society and environment? In particular, I have an idea of combining both socialism and ecofeminism in ways that would focus on reproduction rather than production: How people can reproduce themselves in their lives if the goal is to fill basic needs, rather than to fill the pockets of the corporations, i.e., the pro-

ducers. Right now everything is organized around production, and organizing around production means that people have basically lost sight of the world around them. But if you re-orient priorities so that what is good for the human community is also good for the nonhuman community, then you have an ecology based on reproduction, not on production. People will have children not to provide labor for their own poverty-stricken families, or for security in old age, which often happens in developing countries where people have been pushed onto marginal lands, but because they want them and can care for them. When we provide security for people, such as health security, job security, old age security, and childcare, then we have the possibility of a new kind of society, one that can work in a sustainable partnership with the rest of the world.

JSB: Related to the notions of ecofeminism, you write that a potential problem for the implementation of what you call a partnership ethic comes from differences between different women's groups themselves, such as a criticism of the consumption habits of women in the North by those in the South. How do partnership ethics acknowledge women's differences while simultaneously maintaining some sort of ecofeminist coherence? Does doing so compound the notion of ecojustice?

CM: Partnership is grounded in the concept of relation. If you talk about relation, you can talk about similarities and differences, not just identity or identity politics, where you think only of the similarities. Partnership ethics encompasses both similarities and differences. In any partnership based on a relationship, there's a dialogue, there's a give-and-take, there's a mutual responsibility, a mutual sharing, a holding back for the benefit of the other partner. So in North/South partnerships, the recognition of differences is important to acknowledge and to deal with.

The problem with the North/South emphasis is that it tends to polarize the environmental crisis in terms of what is called overpopulation in the South, and overconsumption in the North. The root, however, is not in either of those two polarities, but rather in production itself. Why is production oriented toward producing a lot of unneeded consumer goods for people in the North? Why is production oriented in such a way that it encourages people in the South to have very large families because they have been relegated to marginalized land, while the international corporations have taken over the best land? If instead you focus on ways to re-orient production, rather than this polarization of North/South in terms of overconsumption/overpopulation, you have the possibility of resolving the dilemma. You see

the concept of relation. If you talk about similarities and differences, not just identity think only of the similarities. Partnership similarities and differences. In any partnership there's a dialogue, there's a give-and-take, there's a mutual sharing, a holding back for the other. In North/South partnerships, the recognition to acknowledge and to deal with. The North/South emphasis is that it tends to polarise in terms of what is called overconsumption in the North. The root of these two polarities, but rather in production oriented toward producing a lot of unemployment in the North? Why is production that encourages people in the South to have been relegated to marginalized corporations have taken over the best land? How to re-orient production, rather than this polarisation in terms of overconsumption/over-exploitation of resolving the dilemma. You see

JSB: The current political discourse in Washington could be characterized as working from a preponderant egocentric ethic that is quite different from partnership ethics and from the ecocentric ethic you describe in your writings. How does this occurrence affect the American consciousness regarding topics related to ecology and justice?

- CM: One reading of the dialectic is that when things go too far in one direction, there's a reaction. The current Washington atmosphere is pushing too far toward the right in terms of the environment, not to mention other social issues. People are still very solidly in support of environmental concerns. Some local groups are solidly against certain dimensions of environmentalism, but for the most part, the vast majority of people have indicated that undercutting the funding for environmental objectives is not going to be popular.
- JSB: So where does the story go from here? Where do you see the environmental movement headed in the next few years?
- CM: My ideas about radical ecology are based on the idea that we have a contradiction between production and ecology, and another between production and reproduction. Current changes in consciousness are taking place against the backdrop of the master narrative that is recorded in our mainstream history over the past 300 years. All of those contradictions will reveal something new and different. As the contradictions deepen, the opportunity for change intensifies. What I see is the possibility that over the next three or four decades, we will see movement toward a new story, movement toward a new ethic, so that our children entering kindergarten in the year 2040 will learn a new story. They'll learn ideas from ecology, such as "There is no free lunch"; "There's no away"; "Everything is connected to everything else." They'll be able to understand those ideas in very concrete terms, in terms of their own daily lives. And that transformation will come about from the successes of radical ecology. Greener politics. Greener capitalism. A movement toward more community-based and community-owned businesses, toward reproduction for the sake of human security. If production, reproduction, and consciousness all change, we'll have an ecological revolution. That's an optimistic reading of what could occur. I'm hoping it will.