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A Journal of Criticism and Theory

Literary Ecocriticism
Edited by Ian Marshall

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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 ecofeminist 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 postmodernism 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
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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 envi-
ronmental quality, even as humans in privileged communities have im-
proved 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 differ-
ent 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 relation-
ship. It would have many actors. It would be a very complex story, tak-
ing 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 pre-
dictability, the “disorderly order,” of nature, as some of the chaos theo-
rists 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.
All 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 through the efforts of individual people will. With people working together for envin multi-racial, multi-cultural, interna-new can emerge. It’s the younger generation about. Children who are now going are in a better position to create the rose of us who’ve been schooled and socialized in action and activity, and it emerges these. And we probably don’t know what it is, how much we want to new master Gare is an Australian philosopher who’s aism and the environmental crisis. He’s serious and the problems that it raises in solution of narrative. Postmodernism’s possibility of the existence of something is, Gare argues that the crisis is real and active. 

That regardless of how we construct it, real, then I think we also have to take there isn’t some type of new narrative that mental crisis. We may not know what it can emerge that can act as a guideline, as one step toward that new kind of making a distinction between constructing new and the notion of an environmental crisis it’s not necessarily mean that we haven’t know.

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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.

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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-

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durers. 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 unnecessary 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
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the problem in terms of a set of relations, and those relations include
new forms of organizing society and new unexplored forms of social-
ism.

JSB: It seems that this goes beyond the North/South dichotomy as well. For
instance in your talk yesterday you made reference to ACE (Alabamans
for a Clean Environment), a group that has transcended the problems
associated with the racial differences among women in Alabama. Could
that be an instance where the tenets of the partnership ethic are made
manifest?

CM: Absolutely. These groups are multiracial and multicultural. Within that
group, there may be a struggle, but the struggle produces a discourse,
a dialogue, and a new effort to try to overcome problems. The result is a
face-to-face dialogue, and it may end up that in some cases it doesn’t
work. But the effort to make it work is worth it, because the larger goal
of trying to accomplish something is the overriding one. I think of it as
a methodology of negotiation, of conversation, of different points of
view being represented. The nonhuman beings in the eco-system (trees,
owls, and salmon, for example) are also there at the table and are repre-
sented in the conversation. It’s a time-consuming process, but I think
it’s a very important one. The spirit of consensus needs to exist; if
there’s tremendous opposition on one side, then there are problems.
Perhaps one side needs to back off.

JSB: So you have a spirit of optimism that things can change?

CM: Yes, I think so. There are many possibilities and each case is totally
different. You can make no prescriptions, but there are some general
guidelines that are rooted in the idea of a partnership ethic with moral
consideration for both the human and the nonhuman, and with respect
for both cultural diversity and biodiversity. There are some general pre-
cepts and guidelines involved in a partnership ethic, but it is not a rule-
governed ethic. You can’t do a cost-benefit analysis, because in a rela-
tionship you look at both differences and similarities.

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 con-
sciousness 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.