Eco-feminism and agroecology

Prof. Dr. Johanna Jacobi, ETH Zürich

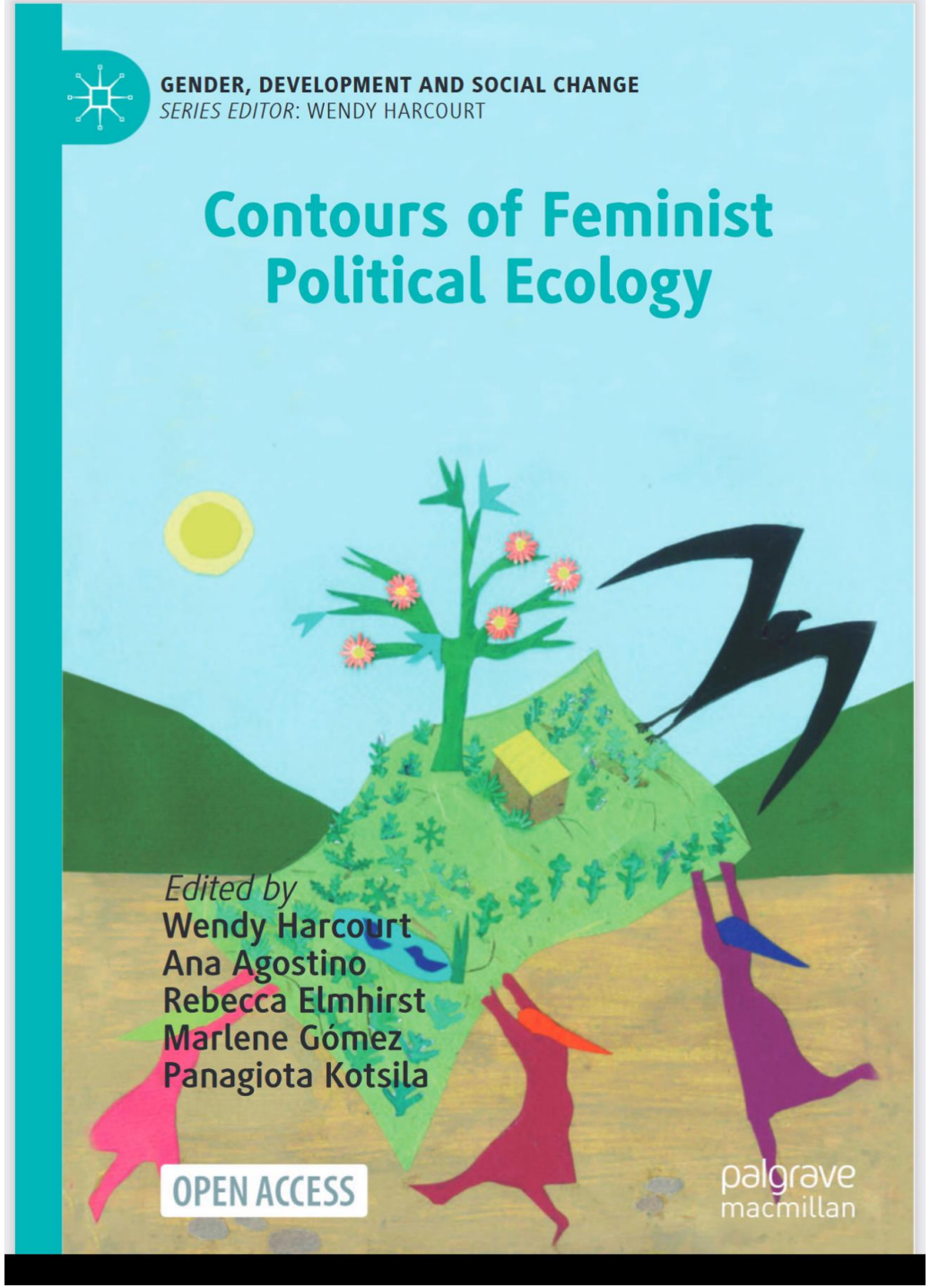
Chipko movement, India

«Man did not weave the web of life; he is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself» (Chief Seattle)

Prof. Harcourt (ISS/The Hague):

«…Contrast between the climate narratives of the corporate fixers and the stories from those who embody the impact of extractivism and corporate greed: mining, toxic waste, oil drilling and ecological degradation.»

"How is it that the root causes of climate change— extractivism, injustice and disconnection from nature—are simultaneously rendered invisible and reinforced in corporate and state responses?"

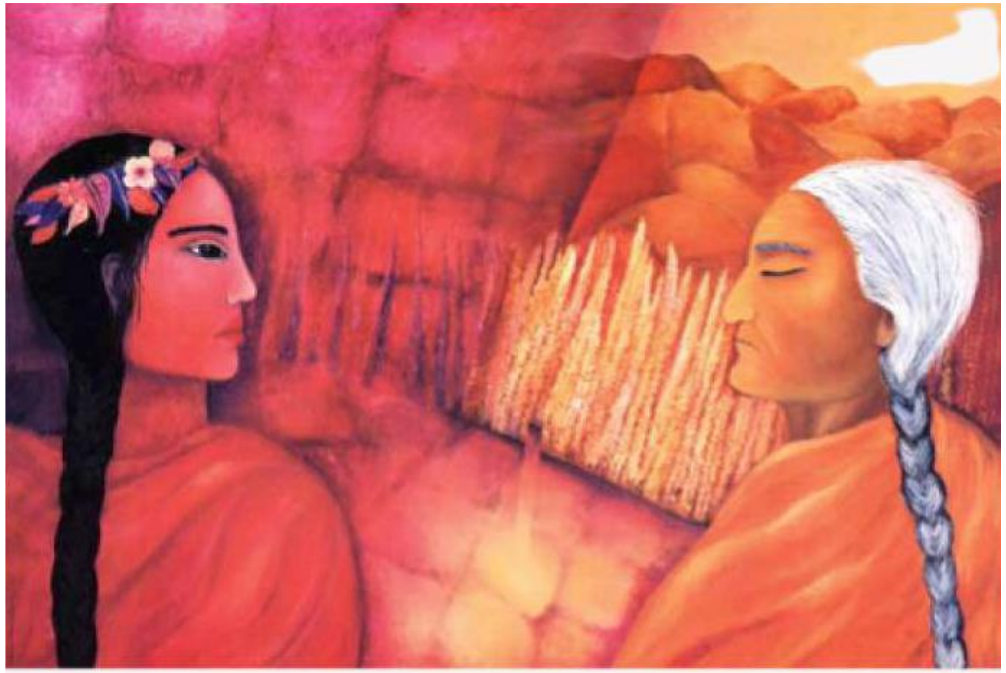


Definitions of feminism in agroecology

«feminism refers to a broad movement and lens which seeks to examine and uproot the underlying causes of inequality and disempowerment—not just for women but for all marginalized people—by challenging patriarchal and colonial power structures»

Source: Zaremba, H., Elias, M., Rietveld, A., & Bergamini, N. (2021). Toward a Feminist Agroecology. *Sustainability*, *13*(20), Article 20. https://doi.org/10.3390/su132011244

«*Ecofeminism is a worldview that recognizes that all humans are part of Nature, not separate. Irrespective of their gender, culture, work and livelihood, no human is superior than any other. We are one interconnected and interdependent humanity living on planet Earth.*» (Ecofeminist Manifesto, Navdanya, 2023).



What other understanding of the human-rest-of-nature-relationships than «ecosystem services?

«*The conversion of the earth from mother earth to dead raw material is really the construction of a very few centuries (…) of capitalist patriarchy, that began as colonialism and that moved into fossil fuel industrialism first, when coal was found, and then when oil was found. This process has allowed the illusion to grow, and that the earth has no creative power. And along with the earth and nature, women are defined into a passive, inert nature. And the only function is as reproductive machines*.»

Vandana Shiva

→ Go back in history to understand the roots of ideas and narratives

History of science as a history of conquest and domination

British Royal Society for Improving Natural Knowledge (1662):

«Captivating nature»,

«Empire of men over the inferior creatures of god»
→ Hierarchy of existence, even in the language

Cartesianism separating body and mind, mechanistic understanding of living beings

Modern science is presented as a universal, supposedly value-free system of knowledge, but remains Eurocentric, male-oriented and based on dominance over nature

→ Ecofeminism does not accept the false construction that we are separate from nature
→ Exploitation and destruction of nature are at the center of ecofeminist perspectives

Ecocide, genocide, feminicide: connected ways of destruction

«Capitalistic patriarchy has made a choice for death:

100 years of agrochemicals, 200 years of fossil fuels, 500 years of colonialism»

Vandana Shiva

How does eco-feminism decolonize this violent process of war against life?

→By removing the false assumptions of superiority and separation

→It questions a violent system, it is the refusal of extinction

By realising that we are connected to the earth through our life, through our intelligence (to be able to make choices), by using our will, our creativity and our knowledge (Vandana Shiva)

Law of Exploitation and Law of Domination

The industrial paradigm is based on seeing **humans and nature as mere inputs in a production system.**

Twin constructs of **capital and corporations** are at the center.

The paradigm of industrial agriculture is rooted in war: it very literally **uses the same technologies (e.g., chemicals) that were developed to exterminate people to destroy nature.**

Tools governed by the Law of Exploitation and the Law of Domination harm people's health and the environment. These tools are often toxic substances marketed as **"agrochemicals,"** and we are told that farming is impossible without them. In reality the corporations that make these chemicals are **shaping the paradigm of possibility.** They define what constitutes scientific knowledge, what an efficient food production system looks like, and what the boundaries of research and trade should be (Shiva, 2016: Who really feeds the world?)

Source: https://www.permaculturenews.org/2014/05/10/woes-industrial-agriculture/

Source: https://www.sierraclub.org/forests/climate-impacts-industrial-forestry

Agrobiodiversity loss

- **Crop diversity**: 75% of crop diversity lost in the 20th century.

Today, **over half** of all calories come from **rice, maize** and **wheat.**

- Country-level estimates:

China lost 90% of 10,000 wheat varieties
Mexico, lost 80% of maize varieties
USA lost 80–95% of the varieties of apples, cabbage, field maize, pea, and tomato in the 20th century

- **Animal diversity**: Only **four species** account for most meat:

In Europe and North America, almost only Holstein-Friesian breeds

FAO lists > 8800 livestock breeds, 7740 are categorized as local, 590 are extinct, 153 are at risk, one is lost **every month**

Images: Pro Spezie Rara

Sources:
FAO [Food and Agriculture Organization] (2019) The State of the World's Biodiversity for Food and Agriculture. Rome, Italy. *Food and Agriculture Organization.* Rome, Italy: Food and Agriculture Organization. http://www.fao.org/3/CA3129EN/ca3129en.pdf
FAO [Food and Agriculture Organization] (2007) *The State of the World's Animal Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture.* Rome, Italy: Food and Agriculture Organization. http://www.fao.org/3/a1250e/a1250e.pdf

Example fo the mangrove-world of the Colombian Pacific (Escobar, p. 18/19)

«objectivizing» the world

Aim: conversion of «what is there» into «nature» and then «resources»

→

Framing as an «empty» or «worthless swamp»

→

Environmental degradation and «epistemicide»

Conversion of mangrove-world into oil palm plantation or shrimp farm

«plantation» idea emerges from a dualist ontology of human dominance over so-called «nature» understood as resources

→ «Anthropocene → Capitalocene → Plantationocene» (Donna Haraway)

Source: Escobar, A. 2016. Thinking-feeling with the Earth: Territorial Struggles and the Ontological Dimension of the Epitstemologies of the South. Revista de Antropologia Iberoamericana 11:1, pp- 11-32

Exploitation requires «othering»

- **Slavery**: required racial justification and dehumanization: «The birth of the racial subject, and therefore blackness, is linked to the history of capitalism» (Muradian, 2020).
- The colonial expansion of **capitalism** between the 16th and 19th centuries was built on two Western civilizatiory pillars justified by racism and the society/nature divide: natural wealth extraction and the forced work of subjugated groups (Mbembe, 2019).
- **Separation** between humans and nature, nature and culture, humans and non-humans (Escobar, 2015)

→ Connected to the development of **patriarchy**

Sources:
Escobar, A. 2015. Degrowth, postdevelopment, and transitions: a preliminary conversation. Sustainability Science .
Mbembe, A., 2019. Necro-Politics. Duke University Press, U.S. (213 pp).
Muradian, R., & Gomez-Baggethun, E. (2021). Beyond ecosystem services and nature's contributions: Is it time to leave utilitarian environmentalism behind? *Ecological Economics*, *185*, 107038. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecolecon.2021.107038

Agroecology: Science, practice and social movement

Agroecology takes into account the **interconnectedness of life and the complex processes** that take place within nature

The agroecology movement is part of the struggle for the right to produce healthy food and to preserve natural resources: land, water, seeds, plants and all the teeming life that is biodiversity. At the center of this movement are peasant woman, who carry out agroecological practices, produce food that feeds and nourishes the world, and offer a fundamental and unique alternative to transform the current agri-food system (Khadse 2017).

Sources:
Khadse A. 2017. Women, Agroecology & Gender Equality. Focus on the Global South. India:
New Delhi, India
Masiano, T. (ed., 2019). Without Feminism, There is No Agroecology. Towards health, sustainable and just food systems. Civil Society Mechanism (CSM) for relations to the UN Committee on World Food Security (CFS).

United Nations reports: gender blindness and systematic exploitation

~80% of food ist produced by family farmers

→ key role of **women:** Seed collection/storage, land preparation, weeding, livestock rearing, fishing and net weaving, harvesting and sotrage, food processing, cleaning, packaging, trading…

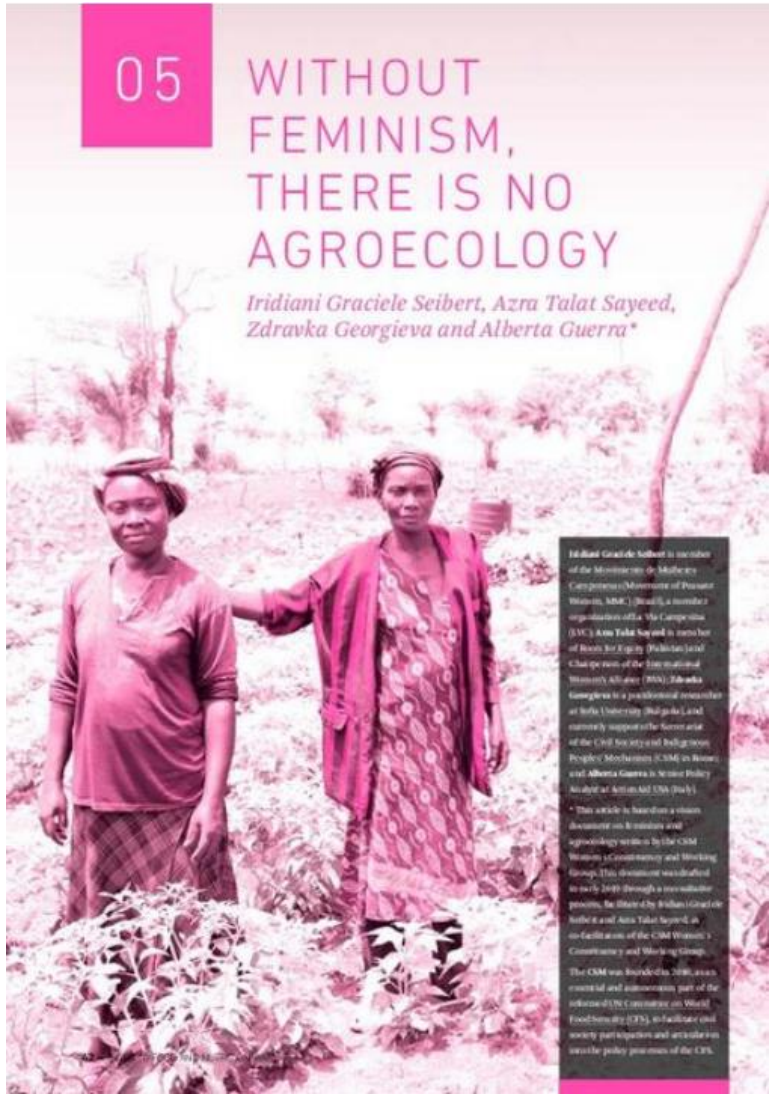
- Household and care activities, often >10h daily (we found 15h in the Bolivian Chaco)
- **Limited access** to land, productive and financial resources, education, health, rural extension, markets, climate adaptation projects, employment opportunities
- Face gender **discrimination** and many social, legal and cultural **constraints**
- Sexual **exploitation**, domestic **violence**
- «Gender blind» agricultural policies

Source: CSM 2019

Source: Masiano, T. (ed., 2019). Without Feminism, There is No Agroecology. Towards health, sustainable and just food systems. Civil Society Mechanism (CSM) for relations to the UN Committee on World Food Security (CFS).

Why a gender perspective in agroecology?

1) Meaningful **work** with diverse tasks, challenging patriachal structures inside the family and work
2) Social **cohesion**, women's collective and creative work
3) Better **economic opportunities** (less risky and more affordable and accesssible than industrial or input-intensive agriculture)
4) Protects **health** of farmers, workers and consumers by eliminating harmful substances and through better diets
5) **Biodiversity** and traditional **knowledge**
6) **Political** dimension to achieve a more just food system



Source: Seibert, I. G., Sayeed, A. T., Georgieva, Z., & Guerra, A. (2019). Without Feminism, There is No Agroecology. Right to Food and Nutrition Watch.

Why a feminist perspective in agroecology?

Declarations of women's rights in agrarian movements and food movements

- La **Via Campesina**: «Women of Via Campesina International Manifesto»
- **MST** Brazil: Declaration of women's rights
- **Zapatista** movement: Laws of the Zapatista Women

NADA SIN NOSOTRAS

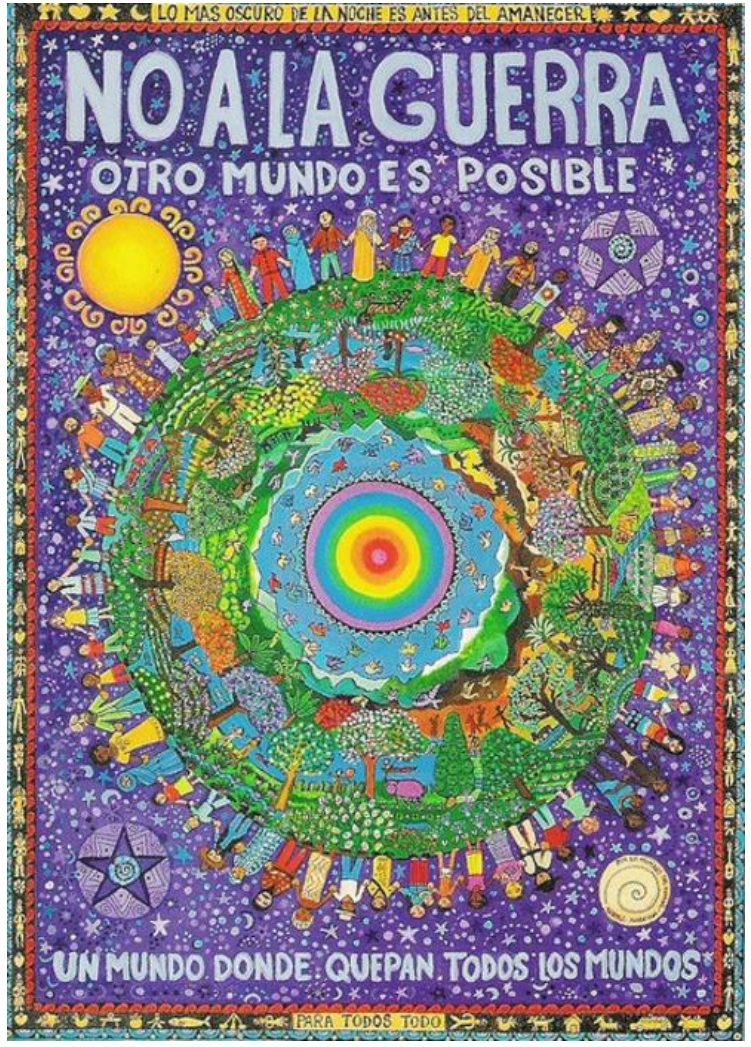
The Zapatista Movement in Mexico

NAFTA 1994 included cancelling art. 27 of the Mexican constitution that protected indigenous communal landholdings from privatization, which was seen as an obstacle for investment.

Poverty rose, smallholder maize production collapsed, migration to the US strongly increased.

Indigenous farmers called NAFTA a «death sentence» and declared war on the Mexican government. A signed peace negotiation that was not implemented led to the occupation of an autonomous territory in Chiapas with five «Caracoles» (governance centers) and agroecology as the production basis.

Indigenous and women's movement, international conferences, delegation to Europe in 2021



WORDS OF THE ZAPATISTA COMMUNITIES AT THE MARCH AGAINST THE DESTRUCTION OF NATURE
Vienna, Austria. In the voice of *compañera* Libertad, September 24, 2021.

There is a woman.

The color of her skin does not matter, because she has all colors.

Her language does not matter, because she understands all languages.

Neither her race nor her culture matter, because all ways of being live in her.

Her size does not matter, because she is huge and nevertheless fits in one hand.

Every day and at all moments that woman is assaulted, beaten, wounded, raped, mocked and despised.

A male exerts his power over her.

*Every day and every hour, she comes to us [nosotras, nosotros, **nosotroas**].*

She shows us her wounds, her pain, her grief.

And we only give her words of consolation and pity.

Or we ignore her.

Perhaps as alms we give her something with which to treat her wounds.

But the man continues his violence.

We all know how this ends.

She will be murdered and with her death everything will die.

We can continue to give her only words of encouragement and medicine for her wounds.

Or we can tell her the truth: the only medicine that can cure her and heal her completely is for her to confront and destroy the one who is hurting her.

Knowing this, we too can unite with her and fight by her side.

We Zapatistas call that woman, "Mother Earth."

As for the man who oppresses and humiliates her, give him whatever name, face, or shape you want.

We, the Zapatista peoples, call that murderous man capitalism.

And we have arrived at these geographies to ask, to ask of you:

Are we going to go on thinking that we can treat today's blows with salve and painkillers, even though we know the wound will be bigger and deeper tomorrow?

Or are we going to fight alongside her?

We the Zapatista communities have decided to fight together with her and for her.

Agroecological territories of autonomy and resistance

Agoecology as the alternative or even opposition to the agro-industrial agri-food system
Agroecology as a counter-hegemonic agenda

Altieri and Koohafkan, 2015

Eco-feminist approach

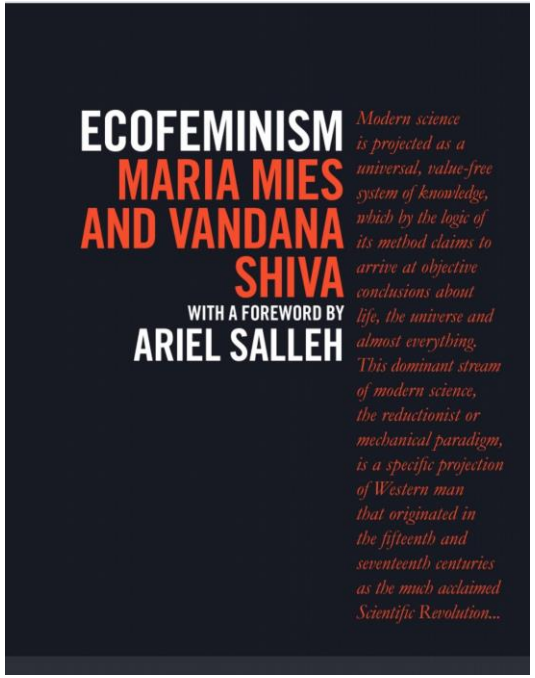
Two major tasks of our times:

1)Preserve and promote biodiversity

→ Good agriculture means caring for the land, and for its life

→ Good eating is based on diversity

2)Reconnect social justice and ecology



Mies and Shiva 1993
Ecofeminism

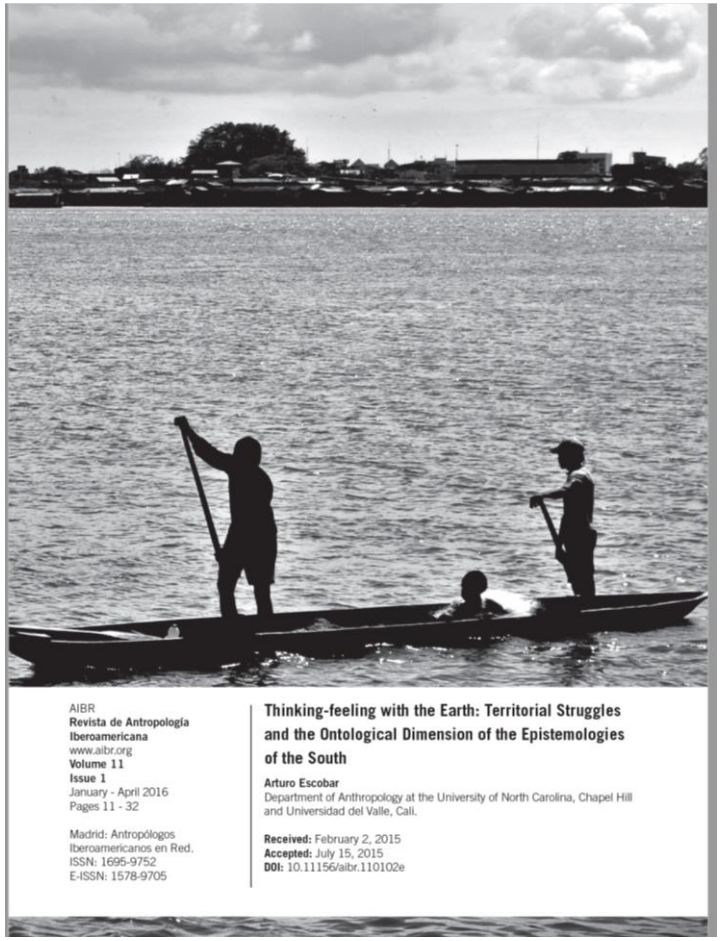
...everywhere, women were the first to protest against environmental destruction.
(Shiva and Mies, 1993)

The «anthropocentric divide» (Arturo Escobar)

- Bible (Genesis 1 Vs 27-28): God gave humans «**dominion**» over «**every living thing**»
- Human as «naturally» competitive, individual, rational, liberal, rational, secular, instrumental and aggressive → this is who we are today
- This **dualism** flows down to all kinds of separations
- **Patriarchy** is a cosmovision/vison of life or ontology that **privileges separation**, the control of others (women in particular but also other living beings), the approapriation of resources and reproduction, and violence in general.
- We can see it in **governance** of patriarchal leaders: Separation, control, destruction
- Patriarchy is **not about blaming men –** it is a systemic structure to which the whole society contributes
- We can **understand** where it comes from, how pervasive it is and what we can do about it
- What types of **responses** can we provide/strengthen etc.
- Escobar: «**reinventing the human**» (or rediscovering? Remembering?)

Arturo Escobar: Relational ontologies

- Limits of Western (scientific) worldview: the current crisis is the crisis of a certain, **dominant worldview** and world-making («one-world» logic), positivism
- **Dualistic conceptions** (eg., dividing mind and body, nature and culture etc.) have caused **wide devastation**
- Not the only way to see things, «experience with the eyes of relationality» → things and beings **are through their relations**
- Can the «one-world» logic be changed into a **plurality of worlds**? («Pluriverse»), totally different from modernization theories and similar approaches
- Thinking beyond academic science: peoples-territory, intellectual-activists, humans-more-than-humans
- Transitions-to-post-extractivism-framework



«There is no agroecology without feminism»

*"Social peace, social justice gender justice and solidarity economies are **essential pre-conditions** for realizing food sovereignty. […] It calls for a society that **rejects discrimination** in all forms – caste, class, racial and gender – and urges people to fight **patriarchy and parochialism**. […]*

*Peasant women and other oppressed gender minorities must **find equal space** in the leadership of our movement at all levels. We must sow the **seeds of solidarity** in our communities and address **all forms of discrimination** that keep rural societies divided.*

*Food sovereignty offers a manifesto for the future, a feminist vision that **embraces diversity.** It is an idea that unites humanity and puts us at the service of **Mother Earth** that feeds and nourishes us"*

Source: Calvário, R.; Desmarais, A. A. (2023) The feminist dimensions of food sovereignty: insights from La Via Campesina's politics, The Journal of Peasant Studies, 50:2, 640-664, DOI: 10.1080/03066150.2022.2153042

What can eco-feminist thinking offer?

Learning from nature:

Diversity

Synchronicity (interdependence and reciprocity)

Symbiosis

Creativity

Homeostasis

Equilibrium

Circularity

Fractals

Source: Navdanya, 2023. Making Peace with the Earth Through Diversity, Mutuality, Non-Violence & Care. An Ecofeminist Manifesto.

Image credit: Marion Bessol

What can eco-feminist thinking offer?

- Re-framing the human-nature relationship
- Go beyond Ecosystem Services, Natural Captial and Nature's Contributions to People (NCPs)
- Define un-negeotiable things
- Overcoming dual, anthropocentric and utilitarian conceptions of nature
- «Reinventing» the human being

We have (almost) no indigenous thinking in our sciences and policy-making in Europe (?)

- What responses can we find

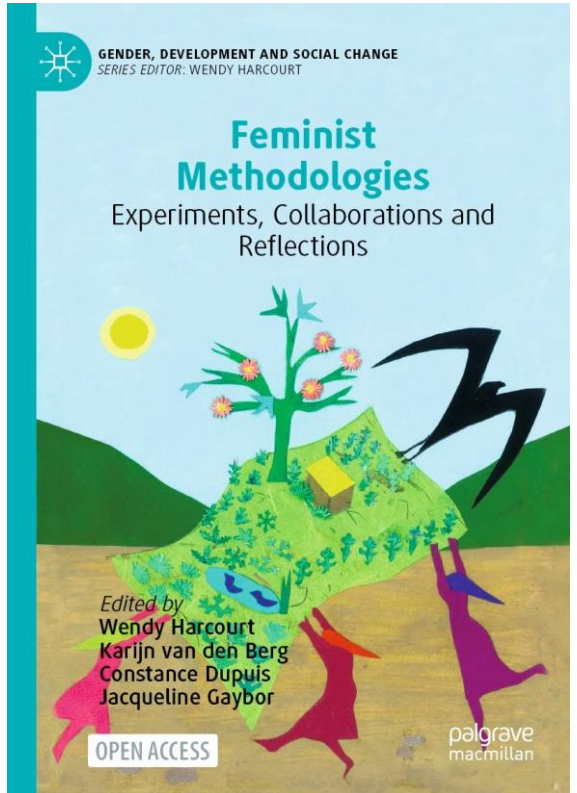
We have almost no feminist thinking in our Western sciences and policy-making («one-world-world») (?)

- What could be some answers?

Want to dive deeper?

- Podcast: https://www.cidse.org/2022/03/08/new-podcast-a-journey-through-feminist-agroecology/

- Feminist methodologies (open access book): https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-030-82654-3



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Thank you!