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Ecofeminism and Experiential Learning: Taking the Risks of Activism Seriously

Jeannie Ludlow

Ecofeminism provides an ideal position for teaching earth within the context of, and more importantly, as a crucial element of diversity education. At the same time, as I learned through trial and error, ecofeminism provides a pedagogical opportunity to engage students in various forms of experiential learning, from service learning to activist learning. Over the course of ten years, I taught six ecofeminist classes at Bowling Green State University, a mid-sized, PhD-granting residential institution with a largely white, middle-class, Midwestern undergraduate student population. This article traces how I changed an "action" assignment from service learning to activist learning over that period. I explore the difficulties the students and I faced at each stage of the assignment's development and discuss some of the risks (both productive and challenging) that attended the action requirements in these courses. Ultimately, I argue that the pedagogical risk of activism is central to experiential learning and is crucial to ecofeminist pedagogy.

Why Ecofeminism?

A comprehensive genealogy of ecofeminist thought and action is well beyond the scope of this paper; interested readers are encouraged to read Noël Sturgeon's Ecofeminist Natures and Catriona Sandilands' The Good-Natured Feminist, both of which present comprehensive (though somewhat different) genealogies of ecofeminism. Here, however, I will emphasize those aspects of ecofeminism that I taught in my courses and which are relevant to this paper, aspects that, I argue, make ecofeminism particularly apt for experiential learning and, simultaneously, for appealing to undergraduate students who are interested in social justice.

Ecofeminism, like all feminisms, is a multivalent politic comprised of diverse perspectives, encompassing sometimes contradictory methods and goals. If there is one unifying element to all forms of ecofeminism, it is attention to the intersection of gender politics and what Sandilands calls "the nature question" (6). Sturgeon puts it most directly: "eco-feminism is a movement that makes connections between environmentalisms and feminisms," between the "ideologies that authorize injustices based on gender, race, and class [and] the ideologies that sanction the exploitation and degradation of the environment" (23). Important ecofeminist concerns include the relationship of patriarchal domination to the poUtution and depletion of the earth's resources; the ways gender, race, class, and sexuaHty shape human constructions of nature and interactions with the environment; and the ways feminist activist strategies can be used to reduce human impact on the environment. From its inception in the mid-1970s, ecofeminism has developed on the level of praxis, working at the intersection of epistemology and action. Karen Warren caUs it a "theory-in-process," simultaneously grounded in material reaHty and conceptual principles and continuaHy changing (66).

On the philosophical level, ecofeminism, like aU feminisms, insists on an examination of the ways hierarchies of domination (often expressed in binaries Hke male/female or
rich/poor) are deployed within diverse cultural and historical contexts in a "logic of domination" that justifies the continued power of some over others (Warren 47). Unlike other feminisms, however, ecofeminism analyzes the culture/nature binary as an equal hierarchy of domination that intersects with all others. When we critique human plundering of nature, Chaia HeUer says, we should remember that "[the majority] of humanity is plundered right along with it" (Gaard, Ecofeminism, Now!). I would argue that this is one of the most important lessons of ecofeminism: humanity is a part of nature, not separate from it. Ecofeminism, Ariel SaHeh argues, "is about engendering a discourse where not only nature is a subject to be emancipated, but women and men - as nature - are too" (29). This understanding leads many ecofeminists to use the awkward phrase "nonhuman nature" when referring to the culturally constructed - and normative - distinction of human beings from all other natural matter.

To say that ecofeminism is grounded in the material is to say that it concerns both matter (bodies, human and nonhuman) and economics. A defining element of ecofeminist analysis is attention to what Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva, in their germinal text Ecofeminism, call "the capitalist patriarchal world system" which, they argue, is perpetuated through systemic "colonization of women, of 'foreign' peoples and their lands . . . and of nature" (2). This critique of global capitalism places ecofeminism firmly in the category of radical feminism - it works toward dismantling inequitable social structures. Because of its dual focus on bodies and economics, SaHeh names ecofeminism "an embodied materialism" (ix). One manifestation of this embodied materialism is ecofeminism's attention to multiple grassroots actions of women working locally which, when considered together, comprise a global movement for environmental, economic, and feminist justice (Sturgeon 158, Li 362-3). In fact, ecofeminism might best be understood not as a unified political, but, Mies and Shiva explain, as a coincidental collaboration (3). Ecofeminist movements and theories emerge from diverse historical and cultural contexts but are connected by a "shared perspective" (3), which has been inspired by activism at the intersections of ecological degradation, economic exploitation, and sexist derogation.

The characteristics that make ecofeminism complex make it appealing to contemporary university students who are invested in social justice. The focus on the intersection of gender and "the nature question" appeals to students of traditional college age who grew up being challenged to help their families and institutions "green up." Ecofeminism appeals to their engagement with environmentalism. Many of these same students recognize the importance of feminism to their generation but struggle to figure out what their version of feminism can be; ecofeminism can be their feminism. Niamh Moore writes about the appeal of ecofeminism to so-called Third Wave feminists: "Feminist activism has changed shape — Eco/feminist activism can remind us that feminism is no longer - if, indeed, it ever was - only about women or gender" (138). Ecofeminism's simultaneous attention to culturally specific, local direct action and global economics appeals to students whose sense of social justice has developed within the tension between global awareness and insularity that social networking inspires; many of these students perceive themselves to be activist citizens of the globe, with immediate access to other global activists, even as their mediated lived experience may not lead them to
traditional direct-action politics. At the same time, the strategic methodological agility that characterizes ecofeminist movements appeals to students who want their social justice work to be relevant in multiple contexts.

For many of the same reasons, ecofeminist pedagogy engages faculty who are invested in education for social justice. Lara Jean Harvester states that "[e]cofeminist educators set themselves two principal tasks: to expose the logic of domination and to seek alternatives that replace this destructive way of relating to each other and nature" (45). It is the latter task that makes ecofeminist pedagogy ideal for educators hoping to counter the powerlessness or hopelessness that many students report experiencing in social justice courses. An effective ecofeminist pedagogy, Sean Blenkinsop and Chris Beeman write, would involve "deep philosophical work and substantially extended practice" (85) as well as the "integration of ecofeminists' academic inquiry and the environmental activism of grassroots women" that Huey-li Li calls for (366). For all these reasons, ecofeminism is an ideal stance from which to teach about the earth. Teaching about the earth, however, ultimately reinforces several of the dualisms that ecofeminism strives to deconstruct, including culture/nature and theory/action. I strive to deconstruct those dualisms in order to teach earth, to teach as an element of or a part of earth rather than setting myself apart from it. Jia-Yi Cheng-Levine explains that "[environmental education [should] ask students to study, question, and challenge the history and ideological frameworks that have contributed to the environmental devastation we experience today," frameworks that are characterized by "hierarchical dichotomies" (368-9). I would add in order for ecofeminist pedagogy successfully to shift from teaching about the earth to teaching earth, it must employ a learning praxis that integrates experiential learning with epistemology.

Experiential Learning

Experiential learning is an umbrella concept that includes many varieties of hands-on learning activities, including laboratory experiments, kinetic learning activities, professional internships, and course-related fieldwork. Many, but not all, types of experiential learning involve interaction with the larger, non-campus, community; I have been committed to including this kind of experience in my courses because it provides three important benefits. First, students benefit from experiential learning when they enact the concepts and theories they study. Doing so gives them access to the interconnectedness of epistemology and action. I was convinced that students could not truly understand that theory and activism are not opposites unless they performed theory and activism together, in an integrative experience. I suspected they could not grasp that humans are a part of, not separate from, nature, if they did not move through the space humans call nature, as part of their learning.

Second, students benefit from experiential learning by feeling empowered; Suzanne Rose argues that, in courses in which we teach about social injustice, experiential learning "helps] students translate vague dissatisfactions about 'the way things are' into specific issues and targets" and "teaches] students poHtical strategy" (488-9). Finally, community-based experiential learning benefits the university and the larger community;
universities have a responsibility to become vital contributors to the communities in which they are located, to share their knowledge, assets, and energies with those who are not connected to campus. Community-based experiential learning is one way to meet that responsibility.

One aspect of experiential learning especially relevant to ecofeminist pedagogy is self-reflection. It is not enough for students to complete an experiential assignment; they must reflect on their experience, drawing both on their cognitive and emotional registers in order to have a fully integrative learning experience (Harvester 71). Scholarly work in ecocomposition reveals that selfreflection closes the integrative loop between traditional academic experiences and experiential learning. Ecocomposition has developed into an intellectual "site...in which ecology and rhetoric and composition can converge to better explore the relationships between language, writing, and discourse; between nature, place, environment, and locations" (Dobrin 12). Ecocomposition theory also explains how experiential learning enhances traditional educational skills, too: "students who commit to a service project write better papers, enjoy their assignments more, and develop a greater investment in both the subject matter and their own learning process" (Ingram 211). Harvester argues that "[a]n important part of the ecofeminist education process is consciousness-raising," which by definition includes both "cognitive reflection" and "reflection based on emotion" (71), and I constructed my experiential learning assignment with opportunities for self-reflection, in both personal and academic writing, during and at the culmination of the project because I wanted to encourage consciousness raising among the students.

My analysis of the successes and failures of the experiential learning assignments in my ecofeminism courses is indebted to the work of Anne Bubriski and Ingrid Semaan, whose recent article, "Activist Learning vs. Service Learning in a Women's Studies Classroom," provides a model by which to identify and evaluate different types of experiential learning as well as to understand how my students and I, mostly through trial and error, honed the experiential learning assignment that I had written for my first ecofeminism course. Bubriski and Semaan distinguish between service learning and activist learning. Service learning, they explain, "incorporates traditional academic classroom knowledge with public or civic engagement within a selected community," mostly by placing students in "community agencies or ongoing community projects in which they work a certain number of hours [per] week and then reflect on their experiences through classroom presentations or written papers" (92). Service learning has a well-established reputation in both preprofessional programs and social justice education, and many colleges and universities have established offices whose primary purpose is to enhance service learning in the academy. Bubriski and Semaan are clear that, when students' service to the larger community becomes a vital part of the academic curriculum, it "benefits students, communities, and colleges and universities" (94); however, they note, those working in social justice education have critiqued service learning. The critique most relevant to this paper is that because service learning works through volunteerism or "charity work," it does not empower students to work toward systemic social change; it "does not focus on challenging social structural inequalities" (93).
Bubriski and Semaan charge that because service learning "does not significantly ameliorate social problems . . . faculty should encourage projects that target social structures that perpetuate social inequalities and injustices" (94). This "activist learning," they explain, is similar to service learning in that it is community-based and works to integrate experiential learning into the curriculum. Unlike service learning, however, activist learning "incorporate[s] social change," focuses on "social structures rather than interpersonal relationships," and begins from the assumption that "social structures need transformation" (93). Because ecofeminism is a radical feminism, activist learning is an ideal pedagogical strategy for ecofeminist courses. Borrowing from Bubriski and Semaan, I argue that as an ecofeminist educator I have a responsibility to include activist learning in my courses (97).

Action Projects

The first two years I taught the course, "Ecofeminism in the US," I included in the syllabus an "action project" that was intended to help the mostly white, suburban and small-town students break down the theory/activism binary. From my 1998 syllabus:

**Action Project**

- this is the project in which we put our learning to practical use. You will (with my help, of course) research environmental action projects in this area and choose (a) project(s) on which you would like to work. You will be expected to be able to articulate how the project you are working on is relevant to ecofeminist issues. Each person should expect to spend at least fifteen hours on the action project over the course of the semester; please note that several class sessions have been set aside for independent work on these projects. The important things about this project are that it not be academic but application, and that it be local (either to the university or to your home). If you would like to locate projects to take on together - as a class, or in small groups - that will be fine. One of the most important skills in activist work is delegation of tasks; you should work to apply your own strengths and skills to the overall project on which you are working. You should log your time and activities toward the action project in your journal (in addition to regular entries).

In the first year, the assignment was twenty percent of the students' final grade and twelve students were enrolled in the course, about half of whom were Women's Studies majors; most of the rest were American Studies majors. The primary obstacle we faced was the students' (and my own) inability to figure out exactly what I wanted from them. Could they really do volunteer work? Yes, but it didn't have to be volunteer; they could design a project. Did it have to be about the environment? Yes, and feminism. And where did one find environmentally-based feminist volunteer work within walking distance of campus? Did I mention they could design a project?

Only a few of the students that first year came up with their own projects. One student, whose mother had just undergone a lumpectomy and radiation for breast cancer, designed and gave a presentation on breast cancer and the environment to authences in her residence hall and in her home church. The presentation was remarkably well researched, particularly given that the action project assignment did not require research,
and the student's mother wrote a short response to it in the student's action project journal. Three students worked together to try to get the student apartment complexes to offer recycling; they produced a survey showing that students living in the apartment complexes wanted recycling, took photos of trash dumpsters filled of empty beer cans and soda bottles, and presented their surveys and photos to the different rental agencies, asking the owners to institute recycling programs. To their great disappointment, none of the agencies showed any interest, and they had a difficult time linking the project to feminism in their final reports. Several of the students put off the assignment until it seemed too late to complete it successfully and were saved at the eleventh hour by a local ditch cleanup effort.

In retrospect, the assignment outcomes demonstrate that I was still struggling to deconstruct several binaries myself. Although my original intention for the assignment was to encourage students to deconstruct the theory/activism binary, the assignment description reinscribes that binary; phrases like "put our learning to practical use" and "not be academic but application" only reinforce the idea that academic learning is not practical. This may well have been why several students seemed not to take the assignment seriously. In addition, the students' struggle to connect their projects to feminism demonstrates that we had not adequately explored the ways the philosophical underpinnings of ecofeminism (including the deconstruction of binaries) are inherently feminist because they refuse a patriarchal, mainstream epistemology.

The next year, I increased the weight of the action project from twenty to twenty-five percent of the final grade, hoping to inspire students to take it more seriously earlier in the semester, and added a required project proposal, which was intended to counter students' tendency to perceive "final project" as something one does only finally. I also put together an extensive list of local environmental organizations that would welcome volunteer work from students. This was a much smaller class, and several of the students were already volunteers in local organizations; for many of these, the action project ended up being mostly a grade for a journal produced about work they were already doing. Three of the projects, however, were created especially for the course assignment. These were particularly inventive and demonstrate both the ways the assignment had improved and the need for further honing. One small group was drawn to the arguments for animal rights that we read in class, so they created a brochure about a recently established mega-dairy in our county. Emblazoned on the front of the brochure above a cartoonish photo of a dairy cow were the words "Bessie has feelings too!" Inside, they listed facts about CAFOs (concentrated animal feeding operations) and their environmental impacts. Another inside page was perhaps most encouraging to me; inspired by our reading of Susan Griffin's comparison of the patriarchal treatment of women to the commercial treatment of livestock in Woman and Nature, they tried to make a concise and legible ecofeminist argument for why women should oppose dairy CAFOs. Unfortunately, they ended up reinscribing comparisons of women to animals, rather than challenging the treatment of animals, in part because their writing was a bit clunky. The students placed copies of this brochure around campus and in town. Within a week, all the brochures were gone.
Another student created an individual project around a controversial land-use situation in our region: a cluster of health problems led to the discovery that a local school was near an old toxic waste disposal area. As the mother of two school-aged children in that school district, this student wanted to raise awareness about this situation. She created a table tent - a small, folded cardboard stand placed on tables in cafeterias and restaurants to provide diners with information. On one side, the tent said, "I could be having coffee with my best friend today"; the other side said, "but she's in treatment for cancer," and then fisted information about the school and the toxic waste site. She placed these table tents in restaurants and diners in her town as weU as in campus eateries. The third project was called "Toxic Tampons" and was based primarily on the students' reading of Whitewash by Liz Armstrong and Adrienne Scott. This book describes the environmental problems associated with the production, use, and disposal of menstrual tampons and pads and disposable diapers, particularly those related to chlorine bleaching of wood/paper pulp and to ground and water pollution caused by the plastic applicators and other components. Whitewash lauds the success of activists in Britain who, through grassroots direct action, challenged manufacturers to stop bleaching with chlorine and urges North American women to do the same (147-9). The students created a one-third page broadside of information about bleaching and dioxins which they taped to tampon dispensers and women's restroom doors across campus.

I learned a lot from both the successes and failures of these three projects. The most important lesson was to have students submit their work to me for grading prior to distribution. All three of these projects were creative and strong in many ways, but contained problematic information that probably could have rebounded unpleasantly on the students. The cafO brochure, as noted, ended up reinscribing sexist comparisons of women to livestock in a way that Griffin's work fineses; if I read the brochure before it was printed and distributed, I could have worked with them to make their argument clearer. The toxic waste site table tents impHcldly linked the site to cancer, which was not among the health concerns being raised at that time. By connecting the toxic waste to cancer in her brochure, the student not only deflected attention away from the actual concerns of the community, she risked setting up her project for dismissal by naysayers. And, finally, the students who created the "toxic tampons" broadside included two unsubstantiated claims: one was that hydrogen peroxide whitening was proven to be safer than chlorine-based whitening; the other was from an urban legend that said tampons contained asbestos (I still see this urban legend in my email box about once a year). Because they also included a statement that their broadside was "created for Ecofeminism in the US," I got a call - before I had even seen their work - from a colleague in Chemistry whose research was on hydrogen peroxide. He suggested that I share some of his work with the students and recommended that, in the future, I hold the students to a higher standard of academic accuracy.

This phone call demonstrates the second lesson I took from these projects: to require students to identify themselves as creators of the information and to identify me as the academic contact for people who have questions or concerns. These three projects (and the two the previous year) had provided no mechanism for accountability or feedback. I realize now that this oversight was connected to my failure adequately to distinguish - for
myself as well as the students - between giving something to the community (a service learning method) and working to change social structures (a trait of activist learning). These projects demonstrate that neither I nor the students had clear goals: were the students supposed to be providing information, calling for community involvement, or some combination of the two? If the pedagogical goals of the assignment had been more theoretically informed and if the course readings had included information about activism, I could have articulated for the students the ways their projects were meant to intervene on behalf of social justice by "targeting] social structures that perpetuate social inequalities and injustices" (Burbiski and Semaan 94).

Action /Research Projects

In those first two years, I was encouraged by the students' enthusiasm for their topics and, particularly in the second year, their ability to come up with self-designed projects when they based them in research. The next time I taught the course, in fall 2001, I changed the final project from an "action project" to an "action/research project." From my 2001 syllabus:

Action/Research Project - For this assignment, you will choose an issue related to ecofeminism that you can address both theoretically and practically. You will do research on this issue and find some way to address the issue through your own actions within the community. The "action" element of this assignment is quite loosely defined and will be supported by your research. Then, as your final project for this course, you will present to the class a report that tells what issue you chose, what you learned about the issue doing the research, what your action was, and how your research and your action enhanced one another. You may choose to collaborate with another student on this assignment.

The assignment included four graded components: a written proposal, an annotated bibliography of research, a written report completed after the action, and an in-class presentation of their research, the action itself, and self-reflection. That semester, a majority of the thirty students were environmental studies majors or minors. For the first time, I added some introductory feminist theory to the readings, and I could count on more sophisticated understanding of the science behind the environmental issues we discussed. The course curriculum was planned to move us from more philosophical and historical works (Warren, Rachel Carson, Griffin, Ynestra King) to analyses of concrete problems and actions (Mies, Shiva, Adams, Armstrong and Scott). My hopes for the class were nearly derailed by the events of September 11, 2001. The class met that day at eleven o'clock, and when they entered the room, most of the students had not yet heard about the attacks. I turned on the TV only after telling the students what I knew about the events of that morning. Next door, the classroom erupted into shouts; the instructor had just announced that, terrorists or not, the class would take their scheduled exam. One of my students got up and left the room without comment (he returned later to report on a friend who had an internship in the WTC). Several were visibly upset. I announced that students were free to leave if they preferred. Most of them sat, stunned, and watched CNN with me the entire hour. I recognize now that the class was irrevocably changed that day. Reading assignments were seldom completed, and when they were, students didn't
respond well to them. As a class, they deemed Carson's Silent Spring "boring" and "irrelevant" (an accusation I had not heard before - nor since) and argued that Karen Warren's claim for ecofeminism as a "philosophy that matters" was hard to understand. I changed the syllabus in October to include a section on the environmental impacts of war, thinking this would be more relevant to them in light of the news stories that predicted a war in the Middle East; that adjustment was ineffective. The students grew surly, then silent, and when the due date for their Action/Research Project proposals came, over half did not turn theirs in.

My lesson plans from that semester show that I responded to their disengagement by devoting several class periods to examples of effective ecofeminist activism. We revisited Silent Spring with a guest speaker who talked about the long-term impacts of Carson's work. We read selections from Carol Adams' The Sexual Politics of Meat and analyzed advertisements in class. We looked at alternative-news websites (Ecofeminist Visions Emerging, Rachel's Environment and Health Weekly), 'zines, and magazines (Ms., Utne Reader, Mother Jones), which I hoped would inspire students to see activism as worthwhile and effective. I gave them issues of Adbusters and assigned them to create alternative advertisements based on the ecofeminist critiques we read in class. None of this seemed to reach the students or challenge them to see themselves as agents of change in the world. Harvester reminds us that "[t]o work for change is an act of hope" (45); she sees hope as an essential element of ecofeminism. Unable to inspire hope in the students, I gave up and took them to the woods; frankly, I didn't know what else to do. We met for class in a tiny wooded nature preserve about three miles from campus on a cold October day. Several students failed to show up. We walked through the mud to a dry place, where I tried to lead discussion but mostly lectured. Students were silent, and I began to feel silly. It is easy to equate my decision to have class in the woods with my inability to engage the students in the potential for empowerment that ecofeminism offers. It is less obvious to see that, when I moved the class into the woods, I was (albeit accidentally) shifting from teaching about the earth to teaching earth; Harvester explains that "[e]cofeminist pedagogy requires direct contact and communication. . .with more-than-human nature" (67). Although I was not thinking in these terms at the time, I did put the students into direct contact with nonhuman nature. Slogging through mud and sitting in grass, even grudgingly, is a form of experiential learning.

Perhaps this inadvertent experiential moment is why, on our walk back to the preserve entrance, a student noticed a sheet of paper tacked to an information board. It announced that the city had been unsuccessful in securing funds to buy land to enlarge the nature preserve; a local developer had purchased the land instead, and soon construction would begin in the wooded areas immediately adjacent to the preserve. The very next session, I felt a change in the class. When I walked into the room, they were already talking to one another, and I had to work to get their attention. As I introduced the topic for the day, hands went up. "Can we talk about the woods instead?" they asked. Several students had begun to research the city's attempts to purchase the land, the developer who had bought it, and the kind of construction planned for the area. As they described the "McMansions" that would be built and the habitat that could be disrupted by the construction, the class grew animated. One Women's Studies student asked questions that revealed her lack of
knowledge about general land use planning, zoning laws, and the science of biodiversity (issues I had excised from the syllabus in order to focus on war). I stayed out of the discussion and let the students teach each other. It was one of the best class periods of my career.

A week later, about half the class submitted one collaborative proposal for a research/action project "to save the woods." I must admit I almost blew it. "It's supposed to be a small-group project," I said before catching myself and accepting the proposal. The students worked hard planning their "day in the woods." They hoped to draw the community into the preserve, where the students could share with visitors information about the planned development. In an effort to attract an audience, they planned a party. They lined up some African drummers and a local woman who practiced alternative spirituality and had been involved in the city's attempt to purchase the land, and they asked one of the preserve rangers to do a workshop on edible plants. Concerned that their plans enacted a form of ecofeminism that has been critiqued for stereotyping and essentializing the earth and nonwestern cultures, I assigned Beth Brant's essay "Anodynes and Amulets." In this essay, Brant criticizes what she calls "New Age" Western movements for "appropriating] symbols and histories" of other (Indigenous) cultures and for stereotyping human relationships to nonhuman nature (30, 26). We discussed the ways their planned events reflected the ethnocentric appropriation that Brant described, and I asked the students to consider this carefully before finalizing their event. After this attempt to inform them, however, I declined to veto any of their plans; I believed - and still do - that my role as antiracist instructor is to educate about racism, not to intervene when a student is about to do something racist.

As the project neared completion, the research component remained thin, at best; a few students produced annotated bibliographies that included a number of ecofeminist resources or resources on environmental planning and policy, but most did not connect these to their day in the woods. Some bibliographies contained only websites about the development company or state and local construction codes. Still, I was energized by their excitement and began to feel that an action-heavy project was just what they needed after the despair of the semester. They posted publicity about their activity in town and placed ads in the local and campus newspapers, but the turnout was poor. It was a cold, sunny late-October Saturday. Several members of the campus environmental action club and friends of students in the class were there, and the drummers and the woman speaking on alternative spirituality spoke to us. Students presented in small groups about the local ecosystem, habitat preservation, and sustainable development. The ranger had withdrawn from participation after learning that the event was a protest. The students put on a good party in spite of being unsuccessful in reaching out to the community at large.

Rereading the project description from my 2001 syllabus, I note the absence of any sense of "authenticity" for the project. Contrary to the principles of ecofeminism and activist learning, this version of the action/research project was to benefit students, not necessarily the community. As the students listened to their presenters, I made mental notes toward a redirection of the project; how could I better configure the assignment so the students could recognize the larger contexts within which they worked?
As the "day in the woods" was winding down, a group of middle-aged people approached us. One woman held a copy of the students' publicity poster in her hand; she said she was a neighbor to the preserve and asked who had planned the event. Two of the students stepped forward immediately and said that their class had. The woman and her companions began to scold to the students, telling them that their event was insulting and their publicity unfair. They called the developer a positive contributor to our community and accused the students of maligning a good man for no reason. I thought about interrupting but didn't. I would like to say that confidence in the students stopped me, but to be honest, I was working to calm my anger before speaking. In the meantime, the students replied, saying they respected those opinions and did not intend to malign anyone. Sometimes speaking over one another, they explained that they disagreed with the planned use of the woods and had hoped that others in our community would join them in that disagreement. They remained polite and poised through the whole encounter, maintaining a focus on the woods and not on the developer as a person. As the people turned to leave, one of the students stepped forward to shake hands and thank them for coming. He said, "you are good friends to support [the developer] like this." After they were gone, the students sat down to talk about what it meant that these people, some of whom were prominent in our community and lived in very nice homes near the preserve, felt it necessary to address them. They began to boast a bit about the effectiveness of their class project. At this point, the students adjusted their action project from a service learning to an activist learning experience; with the help of a critical authentically, they were beginning to perceive the structures of power behind the planned development and to imagine their ability to intervene in systems of hierarchy and justice.

In spite of - or probably because of - the challenges of the semester and of the project, this was the class I learned the most from. I learned to let students take more control of their projects. In addition, I learned that when I require activism in a course, I am requiring students to take a risk. When I analyzed my angry response to the people who challenged the students, I realized that it grew out of my sense that these people were interlopers - not authentically - to my students' project, that they were potentially ruining the students' hard work. I had not prepared myself to accept external challenges and risk-taking as part of the assignment even though I understood them to be an integral part of activism. I was uncritically assuming the role of "protector" of my students, even as I required them to take on the role of agents of change in my course. In other words, I was reinscribing a hierarchical model of teacher/learner in a course based on trying to understand principles of nonhierarchy and deconstruction of binaries. Even as I recognize this, I simultaneously recognize and accept responsibility for my authority as faculty; I do not believe an instructor can resist the systemic hierarchization of US institutions of higher education simply by saying that she does not have power over the students. Rather, the principled instructor, like the ecofeminist, must use her power to critique and challenge the system that confers it. In Talking Back, bell hooks places this negotiation in the classroom, writing about how important it is for her to push her students "to work at coming to voice in an atmosphere where they may be afraid or see themselves at risk" (53); as an instructor, I needed to learn to refuse to protect my students if I was going to continue to require activism in my course.
"Taking It to the People"

The next time I taught ecofeminism, in 2004, I placed the action/research project within a theoretical context that I hoped would encourage students to perceive their activism as addressed to the community, rather than individualized and for a grade. Although the bulk of the assignment description remained unchanged from its 2001 iteration, I contextualized it on the syllabus in this way:

Final Action/Research Project: Taking It to the People - In "Educating Women: A Feminist Agenda," bell hooks challenges feminists to take feminist messages to those outside of the universities, to make feminism relevant to the community (Feminist Theory 110-12). That is the challenge of this project. For this assignment, you will choose an issue related to ecofeminism that you can address both theoretically and practically.

From 2004 through 2008, I taught three ecofeminist courses using this assignment description, with mixed results. Each time, I struggled to get students to define their action in their proposals; they seemed to think of a proposal as something one writes before commencing research, rather than as a document based in knowledge. Still, I believe that the new theoretical contextualization of the assignment helped students to see their work as relevant to the larger community and to recognize their responsibility as change agents.

In 2008, I taught a section of eighteen students, almost all of whom had worked with me in other courses. Because the course had begun to be offered in a regular rotation, its requirements were known to many of the students before they enrolled. A group of about ten students, mostly Women's Studies majors and my advisees, proposed a collaborative project; they wanted to take information about the negative health effects of our car-addicted culture to automobile salespersons, researchers, and afficianados who would attend an International Auto Show at our state capital's convention center. The students researched long- and short-term health risks associated with automobile production, disposal, and use, in the US and abroad, and made a tri-fold brochure that informed people about these risks and called for community activism to decrease reliance on automobiles and increase support for alternative forms of transportation, which they planned to distribute to people at the auto show. Although I had promised myself that I would not try to protect them from the risks attending activism, I did schedule class time for talking about what those risks might be. I sympathize with Suzanne Rose, who worries that a faculty member who requires activism be responsible for "gauging the consequences of the [activism] for both the student and her/himself" (489), but I am more convinced by Bubriski and Semaan, who argue that risk-taking is an integral part of activist learning. Faculty who wish to assign social change learning projects (as compared to service learning projects) should, they advise, "[w]ork with students to push them to come out of their comfort zone - to try something new and potentially scary" (97), echoing hooks. Rather than teaching them about potential risks of their project, I asked the whole class to brainstorm possible risks as well as responses and strategies for handling them. The students talked about how they could respond to hostility, what they...
would do if they were asked to leave the convention center, what they would do if journalists approached them for interviews, and what they could say if an official of the auto show or a representative of an automobile manufacturer challenged them. They decided, based on our reading of Suzanne Lacy and Leslie Labowitz's "Feminist Media Strategies for Political Performance," that two students would be designated "go-to" people for media interviews (305, 310). They planned what they would wear ("business casual"). One senior pre-law major researched the state and local laws for public space use and dissemination of information and made some revisions to their brochure, including a statement that the health effects described were associated with automobiles in general and not with any one auto manufacturer or distributor. At my insistence, the back page of the brochure stated that it had been created in partial fulfillment of our course and under my supervision. It also included a web-based e-mail address which readers could use to ask for more information or to refute the students' claims, as well as my own campus e-mail address. Thus prepared, the students spent three days of their spring break at the auto show. As I look back on that preparatory discussion, I can see that, by balancing respect for the risks students would take as activists with a student-directed strategy session for handling those risks, I avoided the pedagogically safe position of protector without abdicating my responsibility to the students.

When they returned, they were disappointed. They had been welcomed into the convention center and given prime places from which to hand out their brochures. Almost everyone they met was nice to them and several people thanked them for being there. One person stopped and talked to them at length about the relative environmental benefits of hydrogen and electric cars. They gave out all their brochures but were unhappy to see how many ended up on the floor or in trash barrels. Only a few people were overly dismissive of or resistant to their material. As they processed their experience in class, one of the students said that she had to wonder if "how we look" had anything to do with their almost challenge-free experience. She posited that, had they not all been white, female, able-bodied, and nicely dressed, or had their brochure not identified them as college students, perhaps people would have been less receptive to them. What if, instead, they had appeared to be poor or working class, she asked. "Would it have been more difficult for us?" When the rest of the class took up this line of inquiry, I knew that they were working to place the experience of activism not only within the larger context of the community in which the activism took place, but also within the context of the capitalist patriarchal world system that we had been working to critique, via Mies and Shiva and hooks, all semester.

The students could, as a result of their activist learning experience, speak to their collective experiences with racial and class privilege as well as to the importance of their efforts to make change. This was the goal of the action project all along, although I could not have articulated it as such at the time. Huey-H Li writes that ecofeminism "center[s] on transforming women as victims of ecological destruction into political activists and moral agents" (366). Similarly ecofeminist pedagogy must work to transform students from victims of dissatisfaction and disempowerment into political activists and moral agents. Because these students were empowered to accept risks and able to reflect on and analyze their experiences afterward, I could see that the
action/research project that I had designed as a capstone for my ecofeminism courses had finally begun to teach them as much as it had taught me.

Final Thoughts

Warren defines ecofeminism as a "theory-in-process"; similarly, an ecofeminist pedagogy is always in process, responding to challenges, changing with each iteration. If I teach a course in ecofeminism again, I will include activist learning in the curriculum. With the understanding gained from Bubriski and Semaan's analysis, I plan to construct an assignment with a clearer sense of purpose. For faculty interested in activist learning, Bubriski and Semaan offer five recommendations: 1. Contact local organizations first to see if there are social change actions they might be interested in working on; 2. Before the project, teach the students the difference between providing services and fighting for social change; 3. Work with students to encourage them to take risks and to be prepared for risk-taking; 4. Participate in brainstorming sessions as they plan their projects and push them toward social change; and 5. Require that students in their written reflections answer whether their project was more social change or social service, and in what ways this was so. My next activist learning project will follow these recommendations. Ecofeminism, with its attention to deconstructing dualisms that justify domination, provides a rich body of knowledge from which to teach about the earth. If instructors of ecofeminism want to deconstruct these dualisms in our pedagogy as well as in our knowledge, we must incorporate activist learning for a truly integrative experience of teaching earth. This, however, is not always a simple task. Activist learning requires instructors and students to take risks in several ways. Activist learning, like service learning, challenges students to move outside of the relatively comfortable realm of the classroom, to take their learning process into the community. In addition, activist learning's focus on transforming social practices and challenging power structures requires students to act against the status quo which, in some social and institutional settings, may mean increased risk of social censure. Activist learning also carries a risk of failure; if the activist learning experience does not achieve measurable social change or fails to enhance the students' learning process, both students and instructors may perceive the assignment as a waste of time or effort. My intention in sharing my own successes and failures has been to demonstrate that even a "failed" assignment can teach both students and instructors something.

Finally, activist learning also carries professional risks for the faculty person(s) involved, possibly in terms of tenure, promotion, or professional respect. Rose notes that the ability of a faculty member to take the risk of activism seriously in her courses is in some ways related to the faculty member's relative privilege within the academy (490). Although all the experiential learning assignments described here were completed while I was a non-tenure track instructor, I had a relatively privileged experience for several reasons: I worked for very supportive program and department heads; I worked under a permanent contract; and I worked for an institution with a demonstrated commitment to service learning - in fact, it established an Office of Service Learning right before my students went to the car show. Faculty who do not have the protection of tenure, a good union, or
a permanent contract will need to think very carefully about the risks that activism poses for them, as well as for their students.

Ultimately, the knowledge I took away from my experiential learning assignment is that ecofeminist pedagogy should embrace all the risks of activist learning. Bubriski and Semaan write, "At a time when gender, race, and class inequalities continue to run deep ____ It is also important for students to learn and implement an intersectional approach to activism, one which focuses on eliminating multiple forms of oppression" (96-7). Harvester, Sandilands, and Sturgeon all emphasize that ecofeminism is, by definition, intersectional, and Li describes this intersectionality on two different levels: its honoring of the diversity of women's varied experiences (especially through the lens of understanding their local grassroots actions); and its focus on "[t]he interconnections among world peace, human rights, participatory democracy, indigenous peoples' rights, and the protection of endangered species" (Li 363). As SaHeh explains, ecofeminism adds a particularly important element to our understanding of intersectionality: that "(nonhuman) nature is a subject to be emancipated" along with humans of various gendered, raced, national, and socioeconomic positionabilities (29). Ecofeminist pedagogy enhanced with activist learning may well be a combination that allows us to teach earth in order to eliminate oppression; if so, the results will be well worth the risks.

Works Cited


