

## BOOK REVIEW

**Nature Ethics: An Ecofeminist Perspective.** By MARTI KHEEL. Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008.

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*Nature Ethics*, by the late ecofeminist scholar and activist Marti Kheel, represents a culmination of over two decades of her thinking about the sources of human destruction and the limitations of environmental theory designed to address environmental crises. Kheel focuses her attention on the masculinist orientation that undergirds mainstream attitudes that view the natural world as a resource we are entitled to do with as we will, and she highlights the way that orientation infuses work designed to remedy environmental problems. In *Nature Ethics*, Kheel carefully analyzes the writings of four environmentalists, Theodore Roosevelt, Aldo Leopold, Holmes Rolston, and Warwick Fox, whom she sees as advocates of a holist position that subsumes individuals into larger wholes and accepts, and even promotes, patriarchal violence. In contrast, Kheel argues for an ecofeminist holist philosophy that can attend to both individuals and communities and systems, a philosophy that is nonviolent, caring, and celebrates and respects the lives and experiences of all animals, human and non.

The book begins with a set of important clarifications designed to address the mischaracterizations that have followed ecofeminism since it emerged as a coherent position in the late 1980s. Though there are differences in emphasis and concern among ecofeminists (such as whether ecofeminists should be vegetarians/vegans, how to address native knowledge of living and dying with other animals, and building alliances with environmental justice scholars and activists who do not identify as feminists), ecofeminists are linked by their explorations and criticisms of “the historical and mutually reinforcing devaluation of women and nature with a view of transforming existing forms of exploitation” (8). Early on, Kheel addresses the charge that ecofeminists are essentialists; she engages in a bit of philosophical jujitsu when she suggests that the critics themselves may be promoting essentialism by failing to recognize that addressing a perceived connection between the construction of women, animals, and the rest of nature as “other” is not the same as an endorsement of the connection or a reification of its meaning. Ecofeminists are not making ontological or universal claims about the connections, but are drawing on their standpoints as “others” to offer insights about the workings of “masculine identity” and its demand for transcendence from both women and nature.

This masculine longing for transcendence is a central focus of Kheel's critique in *Nature Ethics*. Kheel draws on Simone de Beauvoir's insights:

What man cherishes and detests first of all in woman—loved one or mother—is the fixed image of his animal destiny; it is the lie that is necessary to his existence but that condemns him to the finite and to death. From the day of his “birth” man begins to die; this is the truth incarnated in the Mother.... [S]uperiority has been accorded in humanity not to the sex that brings forth but to that which kills. (40)

Exploring various symbolic, psychological, and conceptual tools that have been employed to overcome this predicament, Kheel highlights the role that the sacrifice of women, animals, and nature plays in the “second birth” required to achieve masculine identity.

The violent sacrifice that attends masculinity is not merely symbolic or conceptual, however, so Kheel focuses on the way that hunting is valorized by the four ecological theorists she examines in order to show how masculine identity distorts their forms of ecological thinking. “Where hunters such as Roosevelt and Leopold establish their masculine self-identity through sport hunting,” she writes, “the ‘spiritually mature’ Self [of the deep ecologist] renames the same act of violence as ‘spiritual communion with nature’” (186). The longing to connect with nature, that all four theorists believe they are advocating, comes in the form of domination of other animals, bonding with other men, and sacrifice to the larger whole. Kheel argues that the alienation and violence of masculinity is not unique to those with male bodies, nor is it either necessary or immutable. Though Kheel herself doesn't attempt to reimagine eco-masculinities, she does offer ecofeminist counter-narratives to provide ways to loosen the grip of destructive masculine identities in environmental theory and praxis.

In her earlier work, drawing on insights from Iris Murdoch, Kheel analyzed what she called “truncated narratives.” She suggested that many questions about what we owe others are not properly framed: “wrenching an ethical problem out of its embedded context severs the problem from its roots” (Kheel 1993, 255). For example, if someone were to see a homeless woman and her dog on the street, she might wonder what should be done. Perhaps the person may ask herself “what do I owe her, how should I respond, or what is my responsibility here?” Kheel thinks we should be asking larger questions: Is there a homeless shelter for the woman and her dog? Why is this woman and her canine companion homeless on the street in the first place? Is she here because the women's shelter doesn't accept dogs and she just can't leave her companion behind? What are the social and cultural forces that created this situation, and can my putting \$10 into her hat really do any good or does it just make me feel like I'm doing something heroic? This truncated narrative, like many others, sets up a binary in which there is a victim and a hero, obscuring the possibility that the hero may be part of the cause of the larger problem. Kheel believed we could discover the source of various problems, such as masculine identity-formation, and once

we do that, we can prevent the problems from emerging in the first place. When we look at ethical problems from a variety of perspectives and in context and do not frame them in a limiting way that keeps them private and individualized, which is part of a masculine conception of agency and responsibility, we can more fully address them. She wrote: "If ecofeminists are sincere in their desire to live in a world of peace and nonviolence for all living beings, we must help each other through the painstaking process of piecing together the fragmented world view that we have inherited. But the pieces cannot simply be patched together. What is needed is a re-weaving of all the old stories and narratives into a multifaceted tapestry" (Kheel 1993, 261).

Kheel ends *Nature Ethics* with her articulation of an ecofeminist holist philosophy that has six goals: 1) to understand contextually how women and nature are dominated; 2) to acknowledge gender identity in attitude-formation; 3) to explore how metaphor and narratives can both help and hinder ethical awareness; 4) to recognize the importance of feelings of care, empathy, and attention to ethical thought and action; 5) to affirm the value of both individuals and "wholes"; and 6) to support vegan practice as an expression of care toward other animals. Acknowledging that the scale of human destruction of the planet and the other-than-human animals who call it home is so massive, Kheel is keenly aware of the reality that many people become numb and are unable to act. She suggests that we need to create new stories, stories that illuminate not only the ways that we damage our home, but also the ways that our gendered identities are shaped to allow for or tolerate such damage. Narratives of loving, caring relationships with the more-than-human world, and particular individual animals, is one of the ways that we can undo the internal damage and begin to prevent further destruction of nature.

#### REFERENCES

- Kheel, Marti. 1993. From heroic to holistic ethics. In *Ecofeminism: Women, animals, nature*, ed. Greta Gaard. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.