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Born from Earth: A New Myth for Earthbounds

Emilie Hache

DOES RECONNECTING to the Earth, (re)terrestrializing oneself, mean reconnecting with the feminine dimension of the Earth? Some slogans seen in demonstrations for the climate, such as “Love your Mother,” “Respect your Mother,” “Protect our Mother Earth,” and so on, openly make this suggestion, and that idea is most certainly associated with eco-feminist perspectives (see fig. 1). The term eco-feminist has come to signify the affirmation of a historical link between the violent disqualification of the female dimensions of existence and the destruction of nature, to which these dimensions have been negatively associated throughout modernity. It is also seen as a call to re-appropriate this female dimension and our relationship with the living world.¹

This is also why eco-feminism still tends to arouse so much mistrust; the criticism levelled at it could be crystallized in the notion of Mother Earth, which at best is labelled “New Age,” and at worst is denounced as cultural appropriation. Either way, it is accused of putting the patriarchal female figure of the mother on a pedestal and stretching it to cover the whole world: “Love your Mother!” But it would be short-sighted not to look any further into it. Even if the expression has aged, or seems like a bad fit, it articulates something that now appears clear but which has taken all this time to be found again and re-named: a bond of belonging to the Earth. Behind these worn-out words, a new myth of humanity’s creation is emerging, a new myth for Earthbounds. To understand it — or rather to hear it — one must find the thread of this forgotten herstory, partly buried under an accumulation of successive and contradictory historical strata, and pull on it. Here, I will outline some possible connections within this long history. These should be fully unpacked and discussed elsewhere, but the short-breathed type of thought we will exercise now is just as valuable in allowing us to recover this past from the centuries throughout which it lies scattered.

The modern history of this cross-disqualification is now beginning to be known and documented, even though much remains to be done, due to our undying habit of compartmentalizing our knowledge between social history and the history of science and nature. The missing thread was found again in recent decades when feminists unearthed the immense witch-hunt that had raged for almost two centuries throughout Europe.²

The ultra-violent and radical reorganization of the social world that occurred at the end of

the Middle Ages and led to the establishment of capitalism was achieved, amongst other things, through the destruction of the female sphere of existence, of which midwives were the main representative by way of the power of life and death they exercised. In order to oust women from any public role in society and to deprive them of all forms of power, they were reduced to their bodies and their reproductive capacity. More generally, women were disqualified or even criminalized as a result of being associated with nature. Their power to give life and death as well as their medicinal knowledge and their spiritual links with the living world were grounds to indict them as irrational, ignorant or heretical. While the disqualification of nature around which women’s nature is wrapped spans the entire history of Western metaphysics, Greek and Christian, its scale and effectiveness changed when the mechanistic revolution imposed a worldview in direct opposition to nature and living bodies.

As noted above, this part of history is now known, or at least recognized, even if the subtlety and complexity of this negative articulation has yet to be properly understood. The much lesser known part of history is the one that followed. The idea that modernity is characterized by the cross-destruction of nature and women may imply that this was not previously the case. Be not mistaken: efforts to disqualify women and nature existed long before the emergence of capitalism, but they existed *alongside* the recognition and affirmation of the value, the authority and the power of the female world and of the living world.

The tragic irony of the situation in which we are stuck since the end of the nineteenth century lies in the fact that the main response to this destruction of nature and of the female world



Fig. 1: Demonstration of the Fridays For Future movement in Bonn, Germany, September 20, 2019.

¹ If I may refer to the preface of my own anthology, see Emilie Hache, ed., *Reclaim: Recueil de textes écoféministes* (Paris: Cambourakis, 2016). This article is drawn from a work in progress, *Still Life: Histoires pour mes fils et autres vivants*.

² See especially Starhawk, *Dreaming the Dark: Magic, Sex and Politics* (Beacon Press, 1982); Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the body and primitive accumulation* (Autonomedia, 1998).



Fig. 2: Eros Sana, Blocking coal mine for climate in Welsow, Germany, May 13–15, 2016. Photograph.

was to abandon both the rural world and (the world of) femininity. Emancipation can no longer come either from the Earth or from the feminine. This was how eco-feminists sidestepped modernity: not by mourning the loss of that world, which is irrevocably gone, but by seeking to reclaim the skills and the power to act that were lost with it.

Having taken this sideward step, the difficulty is to know where to look for this history. There are histories of the peasant world and its destruction, and histories of this lost feminine world,³ but where to find traces of their articulation? The dispersion and disappearance of that articulation requires an unusual research method, itself made of dispersion, trial and error, and reconstructive imagination — the relevance of which can appear only *a posteriori*.

Mining the Earth's Womb

PHILOSOPHER CAROLYN MERCHANT was one of the first to have done this work of exhuming a positive link between women and nature in *The Death of Nature* (1980).⁴ One of Merchant's subjects was the controversy surrounding mining that ran through the ages, from Pliny the Elder (23–79 CE) until it was ended in the seventeenth century. As this controversy is now

picking up again through the struggles of climate activists to close coal mines (see fig. 2), its stakes are being restored *in vivo*, as it is based in part on the same arguments: coal mining is at the origin of the industrial revolution and constitutes one of the major causes of the on-going ecological mutation. But, simultaneously and not unrelated, this debate crystallizes a real conflict of worlds. Its backdrop is the analogy between women and the Earth as Mother Earth, that is, as a living organism, the matrix of all things, giving life to plants, trees, animals, humans, and minerals.

The term “Mother Earth” is now so strongly associated with non-European (mainly Native American) cosmological conceptions that it may seem surprising here. However, this analogy seems to have been very widespread in Europe up until the sixteenth century, and probably beyond. Latin has kept traces of it in expressions such as *terra mater* and *tellus mater*, and disuse of the word only echoes the erasure of the link it signifies.⁵

The analogy worked in both directions: women, as matrices where children are sown and grow before being born, are similar to

³ Amongst others, Henri Mendras, *La fin des paysans: Innovations et changement dans l'agriculture française* (Paris: S.E.D.E.I.S., 1967); Yvonne Verdier, *Façons de dire, façons de faire: La laveuse, la couturière, la cuisinière* (Paris: Gallimard, 1979).

⁴ See Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980).

⁵ It is worth noting that, in the pages each of them wrote about European analogism, neither Philippe Descola nor Michel Foucault mentioned this link between the Earth and women, focusing rather on the correspondences between “man” and the cosmos. See Philippe Descola, *Beyond Nature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), originally published in French as *Par-delà nature et culture* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005); Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York: Vintage, 1994), originally published in French as *Les mots et les choses* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966).



Fig. 3: The spring of the Cetina River (izvor Cetine) in the foothills of the Dinara Mountain is named Blue Eye (Modro oko). Crystal clear waters emerge on the surface from a more than 100 meter-deep cave.

the Earth; and the Earth is like a woman, with its undergrounds forming the uterine matrices in which trees, plants, and stones are in gestation. Caves, caverns, and springs were compared to her vagina, and so were mines (see fig. 3). Merchant fully renders the normative force of this reproductive and nourishing analogy between women and the land by restoring the objections that mining never ceased to encounter and which, for centuries, allowed it to be restrained. The main objection lay with the location of minerals: just as the foetus grows in the depths of the uterine mucosa, that which is in the belly of the Earth is in a state of gestation, and wanting to precipitate the rate of growth and make the Earth give birth faster, as miners do, is an act as dangerous as it is barbaric — or demiurgical — and should only be engaged in with extreme precaution (see fig 4).

Merchant recounts how criticism of these limitations became more and more pressing as the shift from one world to the other progressed: it was no longer a question of respecting what nature hides in her womb, but rather of asking whether a good mother would not give us access to all these riches rather than hide them from us. We see here is the slow process

of deterioration of the relationship between nature and women. The analogy still worked, but gradually changed from virtuous to vicious circle: each stab on the one side led to a stab on the other, until our deep ties with it were totally severed.

After the surprise and the feeling of reparation and healing there is in (re)discovering this carnal link with the Earth, we come up against the relative indeterminacy in which this analogical relationship floats: where does it come from? Since when has it existed? If we are to write the history of the destruction of this link between nature and women and of its participation in the state of hyper-separation from the sensible world into which modernity has plunged us, we must also unearth the history of its articulation, however hypothetical and speculative it may be, lest we naturalize it yet again.

A Greek Myth?

IT IS ALWAYS IMPOSSIBLE to answer questions on the fundamental origins of the world we know and this question is no exception, but traces of them can be found, especially

in societies organized around the cultivation of domesticated plants. This is not to say that this analogy has appeared with agriculture, but rather to note that there are many occurrences of it in agricultural societies. In *Sowing the Body* (1988), Page duBois focuses on the multiple analogies between the female body and the Earth that permeate Greek literature, and shows in particular how these metaphors reflect the importance given to women and nature in the phenomenon of generation (and, ultimately, in society as a whole).⁶ The change in the representation of women's bodies, from something full to an empty receptacle, goes hand in hand with a change in the representation of the Earth, from self-sufficient, barely requiring human intervention to be fertile, to a land that requires sowing and ploughing.

I would like to focus on the ritual of *Thesmophoria*, which was precisely based on this analogy, to show its full ambivalence, and try from there to progress in answering the question we asked in the introduction.

We owe the recovery of this fertility ritual to the reconstruction by American Hellenist John Winkler.⁷ *Thesmophoria* was one of the oldest religious festivals in ancient Greece. It took place in autumn before the rains and the sowing of grain to thank Demeter for having brought the Greeks the sacred laws (*thesmou*) of agriculture and civilization, and to renew the fertility of their soil (see fig. 5). Although men were banned from this Athenian celebration, also called the "Mysteries of Women," it was not a female ritual concerning only women. Rather, it was an official ritual of the *polis*, performed by married women — the only recognized social status for women in patriarchal Greek society. The ritual lasted three days. On the first day, the women brought the remains of sacrificed piglets, feminine symbols, up from the pits of the *thesmophorion* (temple), along with the remains of phallic-shaped cakes. They mixed them with the seeds that were soon to be sown, in order to ensure a good harvest. The second day was a day of fasting and sadness, evoking what life without Demeter and her gifts would be like. The third day, finally, celebrated Demeter's fertility, i.e., female sexuality and fertility, the source of all life and prosperity.

Above all, the positive dimension of this analogy between women and nature, recognized and celebrated in this major rite of Greek society, should not be underestimated. It is the

public, collective, societal affirmation of women's power to give life. This ritual affirmed their value and the fact they are not replaceable. As Winkler points out, the identification between Earth and women is very strong here: the fertilization of seeds during *Thesmophoria* inaugurated several months of seed growth in the soil, much like women carry the new generations for a long time. Women were the ones who "civilized" Demeter's wheat, first transforming it into flour, then into bread, just as they were the ones who fed and raised children.⁸

While this rite affirmed and paid tribute to the crucial role of women in the process of (re)production, it is precisely this combination of woman = wife = mother = fertility that is problematic. Women seem trapped in this reproductive function, the only power given to them while they are denied all other forms of power — be it political, intellectual, or financial. How can we re-engage with this link, that is, this feminine, generative dimension, and the value that comes with it, without once again being bound, or binding this dimension, in this fertility-maximizing political arrangement? Not by retreating, but by sinking even deeper into the paths of collective memory con-

tained in language, so as to reclaim its meaning.

In the introduction, I pointed out the polysemy in the figure of Mother Earth, which may explain that it persists in spite of its ambivalence. Now is the time to take a deeper look at it. Underlying this analogous link between the Earth and women is a relationship of generation between the Earth and us. Not just a link of similarity between nourishing, fertile Earth and fertile, nourishing women, but a link of belonging of humans to the Earth; living beings among the living beings of the Earth.

This generation link is unravelled for its own sake in one of the texts on which Merchant draws to explain the terms of the debate about mining. In a study of the mythologies surrounding the birth of metallurgy, Mircea Eliade relates of a very old myth about the creation of humanity. Humanity, much like everything else on Earth — water, minerals, plants, animals — emerged from the great Chthonian matrix.⁹ Everything that lives thus has its source in the Earth. Eliade points



Fig. 4: Georgius Agricola, *De re metallica* (Basil: Hieronymus Froben & Nicolaus Episcopus, 1556), 103.

⁶ See Page duBois, *Sowing the Body: Psychoanalysis and Ancient Representations of Women* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

⁷ See John Winkler, *The Constraints of Desire: The Anthropology of Sex and Gender in Ancient Greece* (New York: Routledge, 1990), esp. chap. 7: "The Laughter of the Oppressed," 188–209.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 189.

⁹ See Mircea Eliade, *The Forge and the Crucible* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1957). Originally published in French as *Forgerons et alchimistes* (Paris: Flammarion, 1956).



Fig. 5: Francis Davis Millet, *Thesmophoria*, 1894–97. Oil on canvas, 63.5 × 127.6 cm.

out that this myth was very widespread in Europe. Although he does not provide an example of it per se, he shows that there are still many traces of it in traditional Russian songs and Lappish, Estonian or Finnish myths, where children come from the bottom of the Earth, from caves, caverns, and cracks, as well as from ponds, springs, and rivers.

This myth tells however of something quite different to a connection between two distinct things: it claims not only that minerals grow in the belly of the Earth like children grow in the belly of their mother, that the Earth gives life like women give birth, but also that humans come from the Earth, that humans have also grown in the belly of the Earth. This myth asserts an organic, generational link between humans and the Earth. Humus, humusity. By definition, this relationship of belonging to the land does not concern women only: Earth genitrix is *genitrix of all humanity, men and women*. And it is this point that ultimately posed a problem in the analogy between the Earth and women. It was accused of signifying a relationship between the Earth and half of the human race: the Earth

was fertile like the female half of women, and humanity. Hence it was accused of essentializing the feminine, women and nature.

Auto-cthon

WHAT HAPPENED? How did a shift occur, from a relationship of belonging to a relationship of analogy? Here again, while we may never be able to answer this

question, we can look for traces of this transformation, as speculative as they may be. In this sense, this research resembles what Jan Assmann calls a work of “history of memory,” which consists in finding forgotten parts of our past whose truth lies mainly in their actuality.¹⁰ If referring to Eliade might be problematic, at least because he relies indirectly on European sources of this myth,¹¹ we can also turn to the Greek myths of humanity’s creation, especially with an updated reading such as the one that Hellenist Nicole Loraux proposes.

As she points out, two mythical versions of the origins must be distinguished: there is a myth of the creation of humanity and a myth of the creation of Greek man.¹² The former tells us that human beings were born from the Earth: *auto-cthonous* humanity emerged from the Earth as a plant comes out of the ground or a child comes from the matrix.¹³ But a second myth is added to this one, stipulating that true man, the Greek man, is born of men and not of the Earth: the ancestor of the Athenians is Erichthonius, born of the (involuntary) fertilization of Gaia by Hephaestus.¹⁴ This must be understood in its literal sense: the Greek man was born not of a woman, but of an original man, himself born of the fertilization of the Earth by a male god. What about women? It’s a well-known story: the origin of women is distinct from that of men but, above all, the first woman, the ancestor of the “race of women,” Pandora, was not engendered but rather *made* by Hephaestus, on Zeus’s orders, to punish men for being in possession of fire.¹⁵

This is one of the myths of humanity’s creation that we inherited, wrongly neglected by Christianized modernity; a myth to add to the list of exclusively male myths of origin that have followed it. Only men (*andres*) were born from the Earth, women merely imitate them.¹⁶ Not only were the Greeks not born

¹⁰ See Jan Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), see esp. 12f.

¹¹ Mircea Eliade mostly relies on American references, and especially on the cosmogonic myth of Zuni, also called the story of emergence, see David Abram *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (New York: Vintage, 1997).

¹² See Nicole Loraux, *Born of the Earth: Myth and Politics in Athens* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000). Originally published in French as *Né de la terre: mythe et politique à Athènes* (Paris: Seuil, 1996).

¹³ See Plato, *The Statesman*, in *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, vol. 12, trans. Harold N. Fowler (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1921), 270e.

¹⁴ See Homer, *Iliad*, trans. A. T. Murray (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1924), II, 545f.

¹⁵ See Hesiod, *Theogony*, in *Homeric hymns and Homerica*, trans. Hugh G. Evelyn-White (London: William Heinemann, 1914), 570f.

of a woman, and thus did not need the feminine to be born, but women were excluded from their original myths. The analogy between the Earth and women is part of this history, of this sharing between the female matrix (which is unfortunately necessary, despite “the dream [of the Greeks] of living and reproducing without [women],”¹⁷ but is thus restrained to its most minimal expression) and male (pro)creation of humanity, of the city and, of course, of philosophy.

To shed light on all the grey areas or even on the contradictions of this Greek story is beyond the scope of this research. The aim here is rather to give a sense of how our present is “haunted” by the past,¹⁸ and how it calls for us to reopen everything. To reopen the myth that only men were born from the land — and from the land of the fathers, the *patris*, rather than from Mother Earth — which created a joint between autochthonousness and fatherland that would survive for centuries. To question, also, this estrangement with our Chthonian origin; as Greeks, the Greeks were “not born of an oak or a rock,”¹⁹ but came from the founders of Greek cities, inevitably emphasizing the very same distance that the latter sought to put between them and the female gender.

Mother Earth, on the contrary, expresses and *reclaims* this Chthonian origin, this link of generation with the Earth, not only of women but of all human beings, living among the living. In its own language, this new myth for Earthbounds tells of this deep feeling of sharing the same condition, a vital link of entanglement with all the living, which the many eco-etho-bio-geo-climato sciences that are now endeavouring to describe Gaia are all unearthing in their own way. In so doing, this myth reopens the long history of the appropriation of human and extra-human generation that we have inherited, both by claiming the feminine dimension of the latter and by starting to re-examine our culture of fertility, perhaps the most naturalized of all (see fig. 6).

To our stories we should therefore add one narrative that goes thus: the deadly devaluing link between women and nature, which structured all of modernity, masks a powerful, transformative analogy with the Earth, which itself carries within it a bond of generation with the land from which we



Fig. 6: Suzanne Husky, *La Noble Pastorale*, 2017. Tapestry, 202 × 243 cm.

have been expropriated. The strength of this analogy comes from the fact that it both expresses a bond of belonging and reclaims our participation in the renewal of the world, through our practices of care, healing, speculation, life, and death. In a world where the very idea of a link between women and nature had come to raise suspicious — much like the link between humans and the Earth — any attempt at drawing them together had become folkloric or limiting. But the radicalness of the current change is washing these poisoned resistances away and (re)exposing the intimate and crucial links tying together the bodies, sexualities, and politics of the Earth. The fact that the maternal qualifying adjective disappears, that we are now talking about the Earth more than about Mother Earth, testifies to this ongoing reinvention, depatriarcalization of begetting on the one hand and re-indigenization of the Earth and its inhabitants on the other. Chthulucene, Critical Zone, Queer Nature. Our earthly futures are, I hope, just (re)beginning. It's time to start weaving again.

Translated from the French
by Liz Carey Libbrecht.

¹⁶ “For it is not the country that imitates the woman in the matter of conception and birth, but the woman the country,” Plato, *Menexenus*, in *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, vol. 9, trans. W.R.M. Lamb (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1925), 238a. As Loraux points out, “that such a remark, in itself surprising ..., should create unanimity [leads one to] contend that ... one cannot repeat this affirmation as self-evident truth without anticipating some enormous imaginary benefits,” Loraux, *Born of the Earth*, 83.

¹⁷ Loraux, *Born of the Earth*, 6.

¹⁸ Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian*, 9.

¹⁹ Plato, *Apology of Socrates*, in *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, vol. 1, trans. Harold N. Fowler (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966), 34d.