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**Kate Chopin's Ecofeminism:
A Dialogue Between *The Awakening* & Contemporary Women**

Someone *else's* words may serve as the best possible preface for my discussion on ecofeminism and *The Awakening*. As Emily Toth put it back in 1976 in introducing "Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* as Feminist Criticism," the title of this essay is bound to annoy some readers. In this case, not only do I bring to the table an assertion that the novel may be read as feminist criticism, but I go so far as to enter Chopin's novel into a discussion of contemporary ecofeminist concerns, placing the work in the midst of one of the most debated and complex arenas facing the contemporary women's movement.

More than 20 years ago, Toth recognized the skepticisms of an audience wary of aligning Chopin's novel with a feminist agenda. She eloquently made a definitive case legitimizing *The Awakening's* potentials as feminist criticism, pointing out that, after all, Edna is a woman, and what happens to her would not have happened to a man. *The Awakening*, Toth rightly argued,"moves us because it illustrates the need for women's psychological, physical, social, and sexual emancipation - the goals of feminists in the twentieth century as well as the nineteenth." (231).

Although nature imagery in the novel has sparked a handful of important commentaries, these have remained relatively distanced from a feminist critical framework. To date, *The Awakening* has not been examined by published criticism specifically in light of its relationship to contemporary ecofeminist concerns.

This “Women at Y2K” conference has been organized thematically around three important questions - questions that, if carefully considered, suggest the relevance of placing *The Awakening* under the ecofeminist lens and opening up a new critical dialogue that ties together the concerns of contemporary theory and activism with scholarship on a 19th century woman’s novel. First, “What have we learned from the *past* centuries of women’s social, cultural, economic, and political struggles?” Second, “What are the critical issues *currently* affecting women’s lives, and how are we addressing them?” And third, “How can we *continue* to work together across differences to shape the world we want to bequeath to future generations?” To place this novel in the context of the contemporary ecofeminist conversation, I believe, is to celebrate Chopin’s work in light of these guiding thematic questions - to make the conversation contemporary, to cross boundaries, to make connections.

Interestingly enough, the publication of *The Awakening* in 1899 roughly corresponded with the event Ardis Cameron cites as the precursor to contemporary ecofeminism in women’s writing. In 1887, New England writer and poet Celia Thaxter wrote an article for *Audubon Magazine* entitled “Woman’s Heartlessness,” decrying American women’s collusion with abuses of nature through the fashion industry. As Cameron has argued, Thaxter’s essay appeared nearly a century before the term ecofeminism was officially coined, but captured two central tensions of the modern ecofeminist movement: the relationship between women and nature and the role of

ecology in feminist philosophy and politics.

Ecofeminism represents a relatively new and a remarkably varied focus issue. And, there is no more “One True Ecofeminism” than there is “One True Feminism.” As Cameron has documented, some ecofeminists refute the female/male, nature/culture dualities of Western thinking altogether, viewing women’s identification with nature as just another potentially negative byproduct of patriarchal domination, while others seek to embrace what they see as women’s unique closeness to nature, viewing that connection as a source of spiritual empowerment and political activism. Some contemporary American women writers, Cameron suggests, have politicized nature by calling attention to careless human behavior, while others have spiritualized nature, seeking ways to live in an increasingly unnatural world. For other writers, nature seems less a stage for social struggle than a center of moral and metaphysical conflict (270).

There exist deeply serious philosophical and theoretical chasms among factions of ecofeminist scholars and activists. Although it is impossible within the scope and context of a conference paper to explicate, engage with, and adequately debate the various philosophical arguments underlying the threads of contemporary ecofeminism, we may recognize that there exist a few shared fundamentals - Ecofeminists generally recognize a parallel between the condition of women under patriarchy and the condition of nature under patriarchy. As Josephine Donovan has argued in the tradition of Karen Warren and Carol Adams, ecofeminist theory generally provides a critique of the Western logic of domination, a mode and practice that reduces living beings to the status of objects, thereby dismissing their moral significance and permitting their exploitation, abuse, and destruction, the patriarchal mode that often relegates

both women and nature to this condition (161). Gretchen Legler speaks *formany* ecofeminists when she argues that nature has been inscribed in the same way that women's bodies . . . have been inscribed in patriarchal discourse, as passive, interceptive, docile, as mirror and complement, as "other."

Legler, along with Patrick Murphy, suggests that an ecofeminist literary criticism should include a search for "emancipatory strategies" in the text, the investigation of what ways and to what degrees a work challenges previous constructions of gender, nature, and human relationships *with* nature (230). Legler discusses several "emancipatory strategies" employed by contemporary women writers such as LeGuin and Walker, whom she suggests are textually reimagining relationships in the natural world with their "postmodern pastorals" (232).

I see my discussion today merely as a tentative starting point for what I hope will become a far more extensive conversation among feminists looking at this and other texts. I'd like to briefly apply a few of Legler's ecofeminist philosophies or "emancipatory strategies" to Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, as a sort of preliminary litmus test for the philosophical building blocks of ecofeminism that Legler finds in *contemporary* American women's writing. And, I suggest that in applying Legler's criteria to *The Awakening*, we may find that in some respects the novel sets an early tone for contemporary ecofeminist thematics in American women's writing.

First, Legler specifies that an ecofeminist text "re-myths" nature as a speaking, "bodied" subject (230). In other words, Legler says, "that nature may be conceived of as more than inert matter that is probed and penetrated; that it have metaphorical status as a speaking, feeling, alive subject . . . revising the notion that nature is fixed" (232). Nature may even be configured as a

“desiring subject” in Legler’s criteria, where rich erotic relationships between human and landscape may exist (232).

Throughout *The Awakening*, the sea operates as the most significant natural image, wielding substantial power over Edna as a catalyst for her psychological, emotional, erotic, and spiritual awakening. At times in this novel the sea almost becomes a bodied character within the text, its presence not only mirroring Edna’s condition, but also interacting with her as an active subject. Although Chopin does not go so far as to literally give the sea a speaking voice that is directly “heard” by the reader, it speaks a language that the woman Edna clearly *does* hear. We are told again and again of the “everlasting voice of the sea,” which first moves Edna to tears in the third chapter (49). In chapter five, “the Gulf’s sonorous murmur reached her like a loving but imperative entreaty,” and Edna interacts with the subject sea as in a spiritual communion that yet remains intensely physical, intensely erotic:

The voice of the sea is seductive; never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander for a spell . . . The voice of the sea speaks to the soul. The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close, embrace. (57)

It is when Edna enters relationship with her bodied, speaking lover the ocean that she begins to realize her position in the universe as a human being, and to recognize her relations as an individual to the world within and about her. This way seem like a ponderous weight of wisdom . . . perhaps more wisdom than the Holy Ghost is *usually* pleased to vouchsafe to any *woman*. (57)

Chopin also occasionally gives a personification to natural entities that plays with the border between object and subject, such as when the narrator describes the water-oaks who had

“ceased to moan as they bent their heads,” and when Edna experiences the flowers as “new acquaintances” and approaches them “in a familiar spirit, making herself at home among them” (79, 126).

The Awakening does not, of course, contain the animals of LeGuin or Walker’s fiction, who are clearly given their own subjecthood, voices, and desires. However, Chopin does play with the notion of traditionally objectified nature becoming the bodied subject - and, not surprisingly perhaps, she connects a bodied nature with Edna’s femaleness, blurring boundaries indeed. As Suzanne Jones has noted, Chopin increasingly describes Edna herself with animal imagery as the protagonist’s awakening unfolds, and Jones points out that the references to animals . . . make Edna seem more in touch with her emotions and her body, and therefore more alive (115). Chopin describes Edna’s blooming awareness in terms of the de-objectification of her female body, and this unfolds with a description of Edna as a preening animal:

She bathed her face, her neck and arms . . . She stretched her strong limbs that ached a little. She ran her fingers through her loosened hair for a while. She looked at her round arms as she held them straight up and rubbed them one after the other. (84)

Having thrown off the conventions which restricted her behavior and dulled her vitality, Edna reminds Dr. Mandelet when she returns to New Orleans of “some beautiful, sleek animal waking up in the sun” (123). Again, these descriptions simultaneously reveal the underlying cultural objectification of both woman (and nature) that Chopin rejects, while they also play with these constraints, to make of the woman, and the animal, a self-aware, active subject. Or at least to blur the lines. Chopin repeatedly assigns that which is “animal” to that which is a brave and *naturally* female Edna, that woman once constrained but increasingly freed and de-objectified in

this awakening - Alcee, as we are told, appeals “to the animalism that stirred impatiently within her,” the subject’s own will and desire breaking free of a patriarchally-prescribed domestic mold and taking on a voice of her own (133). Chopin does not justify, soften, or apologize for her portrayal of the consequences of a broken woman, a broken nature.

Beyond Legler’s first ecofeminist criteria of “re-mything” nature from conquerable, passive object to speaking, bodied subject, she also cites contemporary women writers who erase or blur boundaries between inner landscapes (meaning emotional, psychological, and personal) and outer (meaning natural and geographic) landscapes, or who blur distinctions of “self vs. other” (230). Although critics such as Douglas Radcliff-Umstead have argued that Chopin structures this novel on an *opposition* between interiors and exteriors, with the novel turning on “Otherness” in the physical and social worlds, we may yet find Legler’s ecofeminist philosophy at play (127).

As even Radcliff-Umstead has himself argued, the progress of the natural seasons, a major structuring device of the novel, eases the boundaries between Edna’s inner and personal self and the outward, natural world (135). I suggest that her social and psychological realities are so closely in relationship with natural patterns that the device goes beyond simplistic metaphor to dissolve a boundary between Edna and her natural world. Radcliff-Umstead has rightly called the seasons in this novel “qualities of human experience rather than an objective recounting of temperatures and climatic conditions that . . . express the drama of a woman coming alive to a physical world that she must quit rather than accept the daily compromises of society” (135). The novel’s blistering summertime is both natural condition and state of mind for Edna,:

An indescribable oppression, which seemed to generate in some unfamiliar part of her

consciousness, filled her whole being with a vague anguish. It was like a shadow, like a mist passing across her soul's summer day. (135)

The blurring between the psychological landscape and the natural landscape continues in the novel through a period of lingering glow in autumn, extremes in winter, and a drowning in the ambiguous chill and sunshine of an early spring day.

The role of natural light in the novel represents another blurring of the line between inner and outer landscapes. Edna communes with light as if light is subject, and as if the boundaries between human body and natural body have been eased. The sun is associated with Edna's release of free sexuality, and with her creative impulse to paint. We are told that at times, She was happy to be alive and breathing, when her whole being seemed to be *one* with the sunlight, the color, the odors, the luxuriant warmth of some perfect Southern day. (138)

She learns to swim, the metaphor for her psychological and social awakening, in a moonlit pastoral that parallels her fragile but palpable sense of inner peace, coupled with what we might call empowerment. The outer and inner landscapes run together when the narrator tells us of Edna's swim in the moonlit gulf, when "There was no weight of darkness; there were no shadows" (138). As several critics have suggested, the moon in Chopin's writing is often an emblem of Woman, and also here of enlightening personal truth (Dyer 199, Radcliff-Umstead 139). The female "other" and the natural "other" have entered relationship as subjects in communion here.

This blurring of inner and outer landscapes culminates in Edna's last rendezvous with the sea, when she stands naked in the breeze and goes into the ocean. Woman and Nature merge here, with the lines between Edna's personal landscape and the outer landscape moving in and

out of their boundaries. It is in this moment, as Radcliff-Umstead writes, that “Woman’s free role in or outside society must acknowledge that She is part of a natural order with birds, horses, the ocean, the sun, moon, and waving meadows” (143). With the blowing of the breeze and the sight and sound of the tumultuous waves, the narrator tells us that Edna “felt like some new-born creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never known” (175). She swims on and on, thinking of the blue-grass meadow “believing that it had no beginning and no end.” In Edna’s last moments, filled with her memories and sensations, the inner and outer landscapes have merged - after the lovers and the children are remembered, the final lines of the novel tell us that “there was the hum of bees, and the musky odor of pinks filled the air” (176).

Legler’s criteria for the contemporary ecofeminist text also include the writer’s attempt to unseat intellectual or rationally-dominant “mind” knowledge from a privileged way of knowing, or positing a notion that “bodies” know (230). Throughout *The Awakening*, Edna comes to listen to her own “knowing body,” listening to the initially mysterious inner self that questions rather than the socialized outer self that conforms. This inner self of Edna’s, this female “body” that knows, is often realized in her encounters with the natural landscape, such as Edna’s first unexplainable tears that come as she listens to the owl hooting, the “voice” of the ocean, and the trees, early in the novel (49). We are told that Edna’s new unfolding knowledge of herself and her place in the world comes from “some unfamiliar part of her consciousness,” and that “She could not have told why she was crying” -- But it is most visibly triggered by her sensory, physical female self (49). Edna’s knowing body, not her intellectual “mind,” apparently leads her to a first-refused, then-embraced, moonlight swim with Robert in chapters five and six. Edna’s body “hears” the Gulf calling to her, and we are told that Edna cannot intellectually explain to

herself her choices, but that “A certain light was beginning to dawn dimly within her” (57). Edna tries to convey the sense of her awakening knowing body to Adele when she says, “Sometimes I feel this summer as if I were walking through the green meadow again; idly, aimlessly, unthinking and unguided” (61). A key turning point in Edna’s psychological and spiritual awakening comes at the moment when she learns to swim, and again, her knowing, her awakening, is of a new kind, first of the body, not solely of the intellect:

She did shout for joy, as with a sweeping stroke or two she lifted her body to the surface of the water. A feeling of exultation overtook her, as if some power or significant import had been given her to control the working of her body and soul . . . She wanted to swim far out, where no woman had swum before. (73)

Edna’s unusual sleep patterns mark another realization of Edna’s “knowing body.” She begins to sleep on her own time, listening to the wisdom of the body, which Levine calls her “striving for a sleep which exhibits control and free choice” (79). This knowing body revolts against the church service on the island just as it had fled the constraints of the church as a child in Kentucky - Edna’s knowing body takes her from the embodiment of social constraint symbolized in the mass to the natural goodness of the breeze, the cool water, and the shade of the orange trees when

A feeling of oppression and drowsiness overcame Edna during the service. Her head began to ache, and the lights on the altar swayed before her eyes. Another time she might have made an effort to regain her composure; but her one thought was to quit the stifling atmosphere of the church and reach the open air. (83)

The female body awakens to cast aside that *fictitious* self (108). Edna is increasingly guided by a body that, as we are told, leads her to “blindly follow whatever impulse moved her, as if she had

placed herself in alien hands for direction, and freed her soul of responsibility” (79). The constraints of Edna’s world have indeed made her own knowing body, her own hands, feel alien when not commanded by a patriarchal script.

Of course, we know that within Edna’s cultural and historical context, her awakening, so connected to natural landscape, is doomed. A vision recognizing the implications of a linkage between the natural world and the social, gendered landscape, was not so far off for Chopin. Her work does begin, at that early moment, to play with a new vision of woman and nature connected and caught up in the politics of patriarchy.

As Linda Vance has noted, “A man-against-nature thematic resonates throughout the dominant white culture of this country, including in fiction, poetry, art, and popular literature” (119). Legler, in defining the ecofeminist text, ultimately looks for the writer to historicize and politicize nature, revising this traditional model (230). In that Chopin has indelibly linked Edna’s social and cultural, as well as psychological and spiritual, condition to that of the natural world throughout this novel, she places the politics of gender and the politics of ecology side by side. We might then look back to texts such as *The Awakening* with new eyes, recognizing the novel’s place in an aesthetic and political tradition, placing it as a vital part of the conversation on contemporary women’s writing and feminist politics.

Linda Vance’s comments on ecofeminist scholarship and activism may help to place this discussion of *The Awakening* in a larger, meaningful, context for this Y2K conference:

Important for women is our need to know our own experience with nature more fully. Many of us are separated from everything that is natural - including our own bodies - by centuries of patriarchal domination. Even those of us who wander or work, (or write), in the nonhuman

environment do so in the context of . . . patterns that have been established by men. We need to explore women's ways of knowing" - past, present, and future.

In 1976 Emily Toth called for us to look at *The Awakening's* place in an ongoing literary tradition of feminist social criticism, suggesting that we may thereby better understand "its meaning for us as part of our widening knowledge of women's past" (241). I again raise Ms. Toth's suggestion that *Because it expands our field of vision, The Awakening is the best kind of feminist criticism* (241).