The Seneca Falls Dialogues Journal, v. 1, issue 1 (complete issue)

Cover Page Footnote
The Biennial SFD and The Seneca Falls Dialogues Journal are sponsored by Women and Gender Studies affiliates at: The College at Brockport, State University of New York; SUNY Geneseo; Hobart and William Smith Colleges; Monroe Community College; St. John Fisher College; University of Rochester; Greater Rochester Area Branch of American Association of Women; The Women's Institute for Leadership and Learning.

This essay is available in The Seneca Falls Dialogues Journal: https://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/sfd/vol1/iss1/1
EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

We are thrilled to introduce the inaugural edition of The Seneca Falls Dialogues Journal. This multidisciplinary, peer-reviewed, online journal grows out of the Biennial Seneca Falls Dialogues (SFD), a biennial conference launched in October 2008 to celebrate the 160th anniversary of the first women’s rights convention held in Seneca Falls, New York and the 60th anniversary of Eleanor Roosevelt’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The Seneca Falls Dialogues Journal volume I draws from the 2014 SFD conference theme, Ecofeminism: Cultivating Place and Identity, which was highlighted in the keynote address by BLK ProjeK founder and Eco-Warrior, Tanya Fields. Tanya lives and works in New York City’s south Bronx where she deploys urban farming as a strategic tool to tackle social, racial, and economic justice goals. Inspired by Tanya’s BLK ProjeK work, the 2014 SFD conference organizers conceptualized the ecofeminist theme broadly, seeking to consider the social ecologies of person and place as a backdrop to feminist intersections with environmental variables along social and political lines. Conference subthemes included: Gender and the Environment; Politics of Space; Activism; Sustainability, Food, and Nourishment; and Identities and Bodies. Twenty-one authors contribute to this inaugural SFD Journal. These essays, many of them collaboratively written by university students, faculty, and staff, are versions of their SFD conference presentations enhanced by the dialogues in which we engaged throughout the weekend.

The volume opens with “Confronting Student Resistance to Ecofeminism: Three Perspectives,” a provocative essay that explores ways diverse faculty bring ecofeminist strategies into their classrooms. “The Potential of Ecofeminism to Develop ‘Deep’ Sustainability Competencies for Education for Sustainable Development” imagines how to foster social change based on ecofeminist principles.
ecologies of place to ecologies of culture, “Nature, Technology, and Ruined Women: Ecofeminism and Princess Mononoke” interrogates some of the problematic gender tropes woven into anime films about ecological issues. “Unusual Subjects: Finding Model Communities Among Marginalized Populations” centers the volume, turning the environmental focus to the topic of sustainable communities and examining an urban squat, African-American beauty culture, and polyamorous families as paradigms for social transformation. Similarly, “Sisterhood & Feminism: Engaging Gender and Women’s Studies Students in the Community” explores a best practices teaching model that bridges feminist theory and community activism with Gender and Women’s Studies pedagogies. This pedagogical thread links to “Changing an Institutional Environment through Appreciative Inquiry” where authors introduce readers to feminist engagement strategies for organizational change in higher education. Bringing readers back to explicit ecological concerns, “The Disproportionate Impact of Toxins in Consumer Products” addresses the insidious use of toxins in women’s beauty products, positioning women’s collective action as means to reduce environmental contamination. Bookending the volume is The 1848 Declarations of Sentiments: Usurpations and Incantations, a powerful multimedia piece that reimagines the 1848 Declaration of Sentiments by presenting it in contemporary oration. This closing contribution adds visual dimension that carries readers to the Biennial Seneca Falls Dialogues as the foundation for the journal and to the power of place that is Seneca Falls, New York.

In her social justice work, Tanya Fields pioneers urban farming as a device to empower marginalized populations, primarily urban women of color and their families. Her efforts share and expand the vision of women’s rights and responsibilities articulated in the Declaration of Sentiments, first signed in 1848 by 100 attendees of the first women’s rights conventions. Written into the goals of The Seneca Falls Dialogues Journal is the importance of creatively engaging diverse tools for
feminist activism, particularly those that support dialogues across
difference. As so inspired by eco-warrior Tanya Fields, and drawing on
the journal theme, EcoFeminism: Cultivating Place and Identity, The
Seneca Falls Dialogues Journal honors the work of those who came
before us as we build an accessible and inclusive publication in our
continued pursuit of enlightenment and equality.

Co-Editors:

Barb LeSavoy, PhD, The College at Brockport
Deborah Uman, PhD, St. John Fisher College
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- Hobart and William Smith Colleges
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- The Women’s Institute for Leadership and Learning

Cover Art by Sarah Brylinksy.
CONFRONTING STUDENT RESISTANCE TO ECOFEMINISM: THREE PERSPECTIVES

Jennifer Browdy de Hernandez,
Bard College at Simon’s Rock
Holly Kent, University of Illinois at Springfield
Colleen Martell, Moravian College

INTRODUCTION

Teaching ecofeminism is a dynamic, vital practice, which demands a great deal of both educators and students. In our experience, we often feel this endeavor to be experimental and tentative, as we work through successes and failures of teaching ecofeminism within various topics and in different settings. In the discussion that follows, we aim to offer productive, provocative suggestions that will be of use to other students, activists, and teachers working in this rich, important field. Our article examines three specific challenges which each of us has faced in her ecofeminist teaching, and how we have addressed these issues. Jennifer focuses on how to market ecofeminist courses to (often skeptical) students, Holly on how to craft exercises for the classroom which empower students to see themselves as agents of change, and Colleen on how to break through student resistance in discussing the connections between animal rights and women’s and human rights. At the heart of all our discussions is the question: how can we teach ecofeminism effectively?

With much of higher education increasingly designed around hierarchical classroom dynamics, mind/body dualism, and contingent labor as the new faculty majority, our pedagogies have a responsibility to emphasize equality over domination. Lara Harvester and Sean Blenkinsop agree: “A central claim of ecofeminism is that if we are to
behave in an intelligent, logical, and caring way towards each other and more-than-human nature, we need to overcome our ethos of domination” (125). Thus, ecofeminist theory and practice encourage us to creatively rethink the traditional academic format. In addition, Catherine Gardner and Jeannette Riley believe that “ecofeminist theory and practice also dictate that we cannot bring alternative approaches to teaching to the classroom that are too pre-formed; rather, our teaching is something that we learn about and develop as we engage in its actual practice” (24). As we explore liberatory, ecofeminist pedagogies, then, we also want to remember to leave room for fluidity and movement in response to students in the classroom in real time.

Dialogue is central to overcoming our ethos of domination. We need to create the circumstances under which we can have open and productive conversations with students about ecofeminist issues; we cannot have these conversations if, for any number of reasons (from student resistance to the word “feminist” to lack of funding for programs), we cannot fill or even roster ecofeminist courses. We also need to actively maintain an environment where students feel both affirmed and challenged in ecofeminist classes.

Genuine dialogue from an ecofeminist perspective might best be thought of as “a moment when two come together and, without loss of self, are able to hold each other simultaneously with an open heart and mind.” Such a relationship “is built on respect and a deep sense of the intrinsic value of the other being. This is a relation of the both/and, an acknowledgment of the immediate presence of both deep interdependence and the unique autonomy of each being” (Harvester and Blenkinsop 126). Summarizing the work of Carolyn Merchant and Karen

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1 According to Harvester and Blenkinsop, “There are many possible ways to move away from traditional formats, pedagogies, and structures in education. Everything from relationship (e.g., between students, student/teacher, school/community, human/more-than-human) to structure (e.g., external/physical structures of buildings, classroom set-up, sites of learning and internal/cultural structures such as governance, school policies and norms, funding issues, processes of decision-making) and on to practice (e.g., pedagogy, curriculum materials, assessment strategies) are suspect and in need of revisioning.”
Warren, Harvester and Blenkinsop conclude that “when ecofeminists speak of transformed relationships, they are presupposing that these relationships are based on an acknowledgement of human interdependence with each other and the rest of nature” (126). Since this particular vision of relationship is so important in ecofeminist pedagogies, so are the various relationships that go into a successful course: the many moments of negotiation among students, teachers, institutional governance, community, place, and more. How we navigate these many relationships thoughtfully and with care for self and others is an ongoing part of ecofeminist practice.

In keeping with these pedagogical goals—overcoming the ethos of domination, resisting pre-formed approaches that preclude genuine dialogue, and respect for interdependent-autonomous classroom dynamics—the ecofeminist teaching philosophy that we collectively define in this article suggests ways to effectively meet students where they are, as well as ways of navigating complex institutional structures that influence our ability to bring ecofeminism into our classrooms. While our individual experiences reveal the many ways we can use ecofeminist content in the classroom -- from ecofashion to breastfeeding -- together our collaborative project suggests the following ways of catalyzing positive change for students in ecofeminist-themed classes:

- Package classes strategically: Filling seats with courses that center disadvantaged voices may very well be more important rostering courses with the word “feminist” in the title.
- Institutional politics matter. We aren’t just activists as educators, but activists within the structures of higher education. Know and examine your relationship with your institution. Be strategic in terms of filling seats, getting important key terms on the books, leveraging your power, protecting your job.
- Address student resistance in open dialogue by identifying stigmas associated with hot-button terms or avoiding too-controversial terms when necessary. Empower students to make change by providing them with small, concrete, doable actions in order to help them avoid feelings of hopelessness or burnout.
In addition to making ecofeminism relevant to students’ own communities, empower students to make meaning with their own bodies. Traditional pedagogies, and traditional Western dualistic thinking, operate on a mind/body binary. We want students to care about the earth and non-human animals but we often ignore the power of their own bodies in this dynamic. As Fawcett argues, “How our bodies are taught and learn how to sense nature certainly makes a difference to how we know nature” (139).

In this paper, we write about the books and assignments to which we have returned productively, and consider the projects we’ve had to edit and reconsider, given student feedback and responses. We also share some new ideas for pedagogies, approaches, and assignments that emerged from our discussion with one another and with the audience during our Dialogues session. Finally, we analyze how we as teachers have worked to bridge the gap between our classrooms and the “real world” beyond these academic spaces.

It’s important to note that each of us comes from different disciplines and teaches ecofeminism in a wide range of college courses. Jennifer teaches Comparative Literature, Media Studies and Women’s and Gender Studies, incorporating ecofeminism into her courses on global women’s literature and in communications courses oriented around environmental writing. Holly teaches History and Women’s and Gender Studies, and has integrated ecofeminism into her courses on the histories of U.S. fashion culture and U.S. women’s activism. Colleen teaches interdisciplinary Women’s and Gender Studies courses in African-American Studies, American Studies, and Public Health programs, often focusing on the politics of breastfeeding and mothering, and intersectional animal rights issues. We have taught these classes at a range of institutions, including liberal arts colleges, research universities, and state colleges, and with a range of students, from first-year to graduate level. We also have different institutional relationships with academia: Jennifer is a tenured professor, Holly is tenure-track faculty, and Colleen is contingent faculty. As such, we also note that our ability to bring ecofeminism into our classrooms is not only affected by
the size and rank of our colleges and programs, but also by the politics of those institutional relationships. Teaching a wide range of students in these different institutional settings has given us insight into how to make ecofeminist issues meaningful for students from diverse backgrounds, who are engaged in numerous types of study.

“UNDERCOVER ECOFEMINISM: FILLING SEATS WITH STRATEGIC LANGUAGE”
JENNIFER BROWDY DE HERNANDEZ

There were some disapproving stares in the audience at our Seneca Falls Dialogues panel when I told the gathering that after twenty years of teaching Women’s and Gender Studies at my small liberal arts college, Bard College at Simon’s Rock, I had decided to take the expedient route and, when offering courses with an eco-feminist focus, simply not announce in the course title exactly what it was we would be talking about. I teach two classes in particular that include a strong component of eco-feminism—but I do not foreground eco-feminism as a foundational theory for the class until the semester is well underway. I learned this strategy the hard way: at a school of only 300 students, it is sometimes hard to fill elective classes, and getting students in the door of a women’s studies class can be especially challenging in an age when students are reluctant to self-identify as feminists, even when, for all practical purposes, they certainly are. The term “eco-feminist” still carries the connotation of “tree-hugging, Birkenstock-wearing, New Age hippie vegans,” which can make many of today’s technology-oriented young adults want to run screaming in the other direction. To get them to stay in their seats and thoughtfully consider just what eco-feminism is all about, and why it is an appropriate topic to be studying in the early years of the twenty-first century, I have had to package my classes strategically. Here I discuss two of my most successful recent attempts at teaching eco-feminism without explicitly labeling the courses as such.

The first course is a mid-level Women’s Studies seminar called “Women Write the World,” which I’ve been teaching for about a decade. I decided in the spring of 2014 to offer a version of the course with an eco-feminist theme, but I didn’t use the “f-word” in the course description,
choosing instead to call the special focus of the course “Women Writing Environmental Justice.” I don’t think it’s an accident that I ended up with three young men in the class, in addition to seven women, even though it’s often a struggle to get any men to take classes with the word “women” in the title. The course description informed the group that we would be exploring “how women have used the power of creative expression to advance their goals of building environmental awareness, creating social movements for social and ecological justice, and impacting public perception and public policy in order to change the world for the better.”\(^2\) The reading list included Julia Butterfly Hill, Wangari Maathai, Mary Daly, Joanna Macy, Vandana Shiva, and Terry Tempest Williams, along with selected essays, short films and a number of invited speakers. Our class had thoughtful, in-depth conversations about the approaches to “environmental justice” taken by each of the writers, both in their writing itself, and in their work in the world. Did the students get less from the course because I didn’t identify it explicitly as “eco-feminist”? I don’t believe so. It was clear from the reading and from our discussions that these writer/activists are part of the larger environmental justice movement, and that in this movement, strong women’s voices are essential and valuable. At the early undergraduate level, I think that’s enough of a lesson to impart, in the hope that having gotten the students in the door and around the seminar table to seriously consider a whole semester’s worth of eco-feminist voices, their minds will be opened to further forays into the eco-feminist movement in their future studies and activist explorations.

I also bring an ecofeminist approach to one of my media studies classes, “Media Strategies for Social and Environmental Justice.” Again, I’ve found that students respond better to the gender-neutral moniker “environmental justice,” at least when it comes to the course title. This was a two-credit, half-semester course, followed by a second half-

\(^2\) I’m happy to share the syllabus with readers on request. If you are interested in seeing a copy of the syllabus, please e-mail me at Browdy@simons-rock.edu.
semester course called “Leadership, Writing and Public Speaking for Social and Environmental Justice.” Students could elect to take either course independently, or both in sequence. In the Media Strategies course, we read two books: Bill McKibben’s *Oil and Honey* (2014) and Eve Ensler’s *In the Body of the World* (2013). Taken together, they offer an outstanding window into the ways that eco-feminist practice moves quickly out of the academy into real-world action.

Both are personal narratives. McKibben’s book tells the story of how he founded the climate-change environmental advocacy group 350.org with a small group of Middlebury students, and how together they built 350.org into the powerful organization it is today. In a media studies class, the many short films and interview clips available to illustrate the book, as well as the brilliant media advocacy work 350.org is constantly doing, make this an especially great choice of text. The same is true for Eve Ensler’s cancer memoir, *In the Body of the World*, which deftly weaves together Ensler’s personal battle against cancer with her work with the V-Day organization, fighting violence against women in some of the most dangerous places on earth. Ensler’s TED Talk, “Suddenly, My Body,” provides a hard-hitting 13-minute introduction to the ways in which she comes to see the poisoning of her body by cancer and by chemotherapy as analogous to the poisoning of the Earth by human over-consumption and toxic contamination.³

In this cultural moment, at my very small institution, teaching eco-feminism under the guise of social and environmental justice seems to be the best I can do to advance the essential work of helping students to

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³ Ensler, Eve. “Suddenly, My Body.” TED Talk uploaded on August 5, 2011, available on You-Tube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bHLgTUV0XWI. I teach this book because its style works so well with undergraduate students, while I also acknowledge the problems that Ensler’s campaign has had in recent years. For indigenous women’s critics of V-Day and its racism, see http://www.racismreview.com/blog/tag/eve-ensler/ and Lauren Chief Elk, http://chiefelk.tumblr.com/post/49527456060/an-open-letter-to-eve-ensler
become more conscious of the very real environmental challenges of our time.

“BRINGING ECOFEMINISM HOME: ASSIGNMENTS TO HELP MAKE THE GLOBAL FEEL LOCAL”
HOLLY KENT

Like Jennifer, one of the primary challenges I have faced in teaching ecofeminism has centered on bringing ecofeminist issues to a student population sometimes suspicious of anything involving the “f-word.” Discussing ecofeminism in my class on U.S. women’s activism, for example, has at times proved difficult as it is a general education course, open to any students who need to fulfill the requirement in United States-focused classes at my university. While this also represents a tremendous opportunity as it brings students into my classroom who might not otherwise sign up for a course about gender or activism, it has also presented some challenges. Chief among these is the fact that some students come into the class with negative stereotypes about activism generally, and about feminism and ecofeminism specifically.

One way I have worked to address these difficulties is by having students articulate at the beginning of our unit on ecofeminism what they think common cultural attitudes towards environmental and animal rights activists are, and what mainstream perceptions of ecofeminism are in contemporary American society.4 This exercise has proved useful, as it has enabled me to get a sense of the specific stereotypes which my students associate with ecofeminist activism. The activity accomplishes its goal in a way which does not make students feel “put on the spot” or singled out or stigmatized for their own attitudes, as I am asking them not to say what they feel personally, but rather what

4 I am aware that not all environmentalist or animal rights activists define themselves as ecofeminists, and that definitions of what constitutes ecofeminism differ widely among those involved in the movement. In my course on women’s activism, we focus on environmental activism and animal rights activism as part of the broader ecofeminist project, but I am also sure to emphasize to my students that definitions of what does (and does not) constitute ecofeminism are by no means universally agreed upon.
they think broader cultural understandings are. Taking this approach helps students feel more comfortable in expressing any negative perceptions which they may have come into the class with.

The most common stereotypes articulated by students about ecofeminist activists are that they are out-of-touch extremists, who engage in ineffective and irrational forms of activism (with students most frequently referencing the freeing of animals from research laboratories and the throwing of paint onto those wearing fur coats). Once my students have outlined these understandings of ecofeminists, we can then engage in a broader discussion about what animal rights and environmentalist activists’ goals are in engaging in the types of activism that they do, and why many Americans have stigmatized such actions as “extreme” and dangerous. We also do readings from female environmentalist and animal rights activists themselves, so that students can encounter women’s own explanations of the ideals and principles undergirding their activist work, and explore the actual activists behind the stereotypes. I seek to make these readings as diverse as possible in terms of activist approaches and ideological perspectives to demonstrate to students that there is no one unified approach that ecofeminists take to their activism. Doing this in my course has helped to provide students with a more nuanced vision of how ecofeminists put their principles into action.

In my course on U.S. fashion history, the primary challenge I have faced is a sense of hopelessness on my students’ part about the possibility of ever successfully reforming the fashion industry’s environmental practices. In the course, we discuss ecofeminism primarily in terms of the production of clothing in sweatshops, and the rising trend of organic fashion. The students read about how the majority of retailers have their garments produced through ecologically unsound processes, and about how efforts to reform the fashion industry have resulted in many resolutions on the parts of designers and companies which have not yet translated into widespread change. We

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5 Please see our Works Cited page for these recommendations.
also examine the rise of ecofashion, considering how despite the eagerness of businesses to be part of the trend for sustainable fashion, the criteria for labeling garments “green” are often unsystematic and misleading, with ostensibly organic fashions being created in environmentally damaging ways.

As is often true for students who are analyzing systemic injustice for (in many cases) the first time, reading this literature often proves dispiriting. The lament that “things will never change!” is frequently heard during our unit on ecofashion and clothing production. In our session at the Dialogues, I posed this issue as a question for our audience, and the resulting discussion provided me with tremendously useful insights about how to productively push past this sense of hopelessness. The audience recommended that I send students to my university’s bookstore, to investigate whether the apparel sold there was created through sweatshop labor, and if it was, to start a movement on campus to buy apparel from another (ecologically-sound and worker-friendly) company. They also noted that it might be of value to have my students go to local vendors who sold organic clothing, and research whether the garments sold in these shops matched the criteria for sustainable fashion. If they did, students could encourage vendors to make this sustainability a larger part of their marking strategy, and if they did not, the vendors could be encouraged not to carry these products. When I next teach the class, I look forward to implementing these suggestions and feel sure that they will help to address my students’ desire to take positive steps forward on ecofeminist issues.

In my classes on the history of U.S. fashion and U.S. women’s activism, I include several different assignments that take students out of the classroom to reflect on ecofeminist issues in the “real world.” In my history of U.S. fashion class, on the first day students are assigned to select one item of clothing which they are then wearing, and to find out as much as they can about where this garment was made (and under what conditions) before the next class. I do not give students any specific guidelines about where to go to find this information, simply telling them to see what kinds of data they can find, based on what they know about
the garment. In our second class, we discuss what they have found out about how and where their garment was created, and the impact that its production had on workers and the environment.

This assignment is initially a frustrating one for students, as they begin it confident that they will be able to readily locate information about their garments and where and how they were produced. Very often, however, they hit a dead end early in their research, as most clothing companies are far from transparent about providing comprehensive information about the conditions under which their garments were made and the environmental impact of their production. This frustration about not knowing the specifics about how their garments were made provides a useful introduction to the issues we discuss all semester about the intersections between environmentalism and fashion culture and the ecological impact of the global fashion industry.6

In my course on women’s activism, one of our class assignments is for students to identify a local activist and interview her about what motivated her to become an activist, the nature of her work, and challenges and opportunities which she has faced in her activism. Each student selects a different unit in the course, locating an activist involved in that unit’s specific form of activism. As such, each semester several students interview activists involved in ecofeminism (most often, in environmental advocacy.)7 Students present to the entire class about

6 Once students have worked on this assignment, we discuss the efforts of organizations and activists to hold companies and designers accountable for where and how their clothes are made, and talk about how such groups have sought to make these processes transparent (frequently very much against the wishes of fashion businesses and manufacturers). Two prominent organizations that work to ensure fashion is created in an ethical way, with workers working in safe conditions and being paid fair wages, and the environmental impact of production being low and well-monitored, are the Clean Clothes Campaign (at http://www.cleanclothes.org/), and Fashion Revolution USA (at http://www.fashionrevolutionusa.org/).

7 Perhaps because the town where my university is located (Springfield, Illinois) is the state capital, we have several active environmental organizations where my students have been able to successfully make connections. Among
Their interviews; hearing multiple students discuss how a range of activists define ecofeminism and engage in ecofeminist practice vividly underlines the reality that ecofeminism is not a monolithic ideology or strategy.

I have also found these interviews and their associated presentations to be extremely beneficial for students, as they help to reinforce the reality that activism is ongoing, doable, and local. Since my class is a history course, focusing mainly on the “great women” of the American past (such as Fannie Lou Hamer, Sojourner Truth, Alice Paul, etc.), I am always eager to assign projects which give activism a contemporary face, stress its ongoing importance, and make it clear that activism is accessible to all women (and all people) today. There is always a danger in discussing the history of activism and the women who engaged in it that students will think of activism as always happening elsewhere, and being engaged in by people are in some way “special” and unlike themselves. Talking to activists from their own community helps to put a human face on contemporary ecofeminist activism, making it more accessible for my students.

“From Cow’s Milk to Breastmilk: Teaching Animal Ethics through Human Infant Feeding”
Colleen Martell

My experiences teaching animal ethics in a range of interdisciplinary classes, along with my experiences teaching maternal and child health classes, have inspired me to think through one question in particular about confronting student resistance to ecofeminism: might greater awareness of human biological birth processes, which remind us of the extent to which humans are indeed animals, potentially create greater empathy with other living beings?

For the past five years I've taught units on food politics, often with an emphasis on animal ethics, in classes such as feminist theory, Black feminist thought, American Studies, and Introduction to Gender Studies. In my experience, the topic of animal rights is almost always met with resistance and defensiveness. These are classes in which we discuss sexual violence, the prison industrial complex, gay, lesbian, and trans* parenting, and contentious economic issues with relative respect and open-mindedness. But the ethics of animal consumption is frequently a fraught and tense conversation.

When I assigned Carol Adams’s *The Sexual Politics of Meat* in an undergraduate Introduction to Gender Studies course, our discussions exploded into a defensive, angry dynamic. My students’ conclusion was that Adams was precisely the kind of crazy person who gives feminism a bad reputation. When I assigned Raj Patel’s *Stuffed and Starved*, an investigation into the global food network, to an American Studies graduate seminar, our discussion turned into a guilt-ridden three-hour apology for consuming meat, with responses such as, “I don’t want to eat meat, but I can’t stop.” I assigned Michael Pollan in a first-year writing course and the consensus was that Pollan was going to put a lot of people (specifically factory farmers) out of work and besides, people need to eat meat to live. In an otherwise totally engaged class entitled “The Politics and Poetics of Black Feminist Thought,” a few days connecting race, gender, and animals through a discussion of the Sistah Vegan Project ([http://sistahvegan.com/](http://sistahvegan.com/)) by A. Breeze Harper fell flat. They just weren’t inspired, the students told me.

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8 The asterisk denotes all identities that fall outside of the gender binary. For more on its use, here's a good primer by Hugh Ryan on Slate. [http://www.slate.com/blogs/outward/2014/01/10/trans_what_does_it_mean_and_where_did_it_come_from.html](http://www.slate.com/blogs/outward/2014/01/10/trans_what_does_it_mean_and_where_did_it_come_from.html)

9 In the interest of full disclosure, I am a lifelong vegetarian and have been vegan for the past seven years. Early on in my ecofeminist teaching experience, I started to wonder if I was the reason my students couldn’t talk about animal ethics without feeling defensive or bored or apologetic. At that point I stopped outing myself as a vegan, and even worked hard to create a supportive environment for meat-centric arguments. Nothing changed. Food seems to be
Over the last two years, I’ve had the opportunity to teach courses on breastfeeding and maternal and infant health. My course, “Breastfeeding and Public Health,” 10 examines breastfeeding from an interdisciplinary public health perspective. We consider historical and social contexts that shape our understanding of this practice, from breastfeeding in public to commercialization. We cover many topics, including: pleasure in breastfeeding and why that isn’t used in public health campaigns, media representations of breastfeeding, family and medical leave, milk banks and the economics of breastfeeding, and the politics of leaky, messy bodies. We also consider health concerns for mothers and infants (including emotional and psychological as well as physical), health disparities, and strategies for supporting freely chosen breastfeeding practices.

I have practitioners come in and talk to students: RNs, lactation consultants, La Leche League Leaders, and more. In those sessions we discuss the ingredients of breastmilk, the health benefits, the pros and cons of formula feeding, the carbon footprint of breastfeeding versus formula, as well as the politics of birth and fun things like baby poop. The course also includes an experiential learning component in which students individually or in groups work on a semester-long project to support communities in reaching their infant-feeding goals or to educate communities about infant-feeding issues. Students have worked with our local city breastfeeding coalition to make pamphlets and websites, they have encouraged local businesses to display “breastfeeding friendly” signs, have raised money for local La Leche Leagues, and have done projects at our local WIC office, to name a few projects.

quite a controversial topic for discussion, which makes sense, really, considering how personal our food choices feel most of the time, and when paired with feminism, food politics can be a recipe for inflammatory in classroom discussions.

10 As far as I know, this is the first class of its kind – in the U.S., at least. It has been a successful class for public health and Women’s and Gender Studies programs. I would be happy to share my syllabus and discuss the class with anyone interested in learning more about it.
I’ve taught the course a couple of times now, both online and in person, and in every discussion, students themselves came to question the ethics of animal consumption. They’d ask, if human milk is so perfectly suited and important to human infants, why do we drink cow’s milk? Isn’t cow’s milk then perfectly suited to infant cows and not meant for humans? If so, are we stealing it? In the same way, we discuss the labor and economics behind producing human breastmilk. In addition to this, my students repeatedly find that the environmental reasons for breastfeeding rather than formula feeding are the most compelling.

After years of finding that readings on the ethics of animal consumption only lead to classroom arguments and disagreements, I’ve been surprised to find that a class centrally focused on the human body, seemingly not at all connected with non-human animals, repeatedly opens up an engaged and curious discussion about animal welfare and rights.

While many animal rights campaigns emphasize animal bodies’ suffering, hoping to shock or guilt readers into making lifestyle changes, the rhetoric of birth and breastfeeding classes and support groups emphasizes the beauty of what bodies can do when they interact lovingly with other bodies. For example, we hear of skin-to-skin contact, instinctual bodily sounds and movements in labor and nursing, trusting one’s body to know what it needs to do. Breast milk is described in the ways in which it is perfectly suited to human infants.11 In other words, while animal rights brings up defensiveness in students -- when I eat or wear this, I cause suffering -- breastfeeding encourages them to feel empowered: Look at what I am capable of doing! How might this inform an ecofeminist turn toward non-human animals and the environment? It seems that attentiveness to human bodies potentially connects us with the material world around us in dynamic ways. I’m not suggesting that ecofeminist pedagogies “return to nature;” we know from history that

11 Breastmilk is produced without waste; in each nursing session the milk itself contains a beginning, middle, and end – light like an appetizer at first, heavier like an entrée in the middle, and sweet like a dessert at the end.
this essentializes women, human bodies, and humans giving birth. In addition, pedagogies of maternal and infant health must be cognizant that ideas about birth, breastfeeding, and baby wearing are steeped in issues of race, socioeconomics, location, religion, bodily capacities, and more. It is not some perfect, conflict-free topic. On the contrary, it is mired in controversy and debate. And yet, I’m suggesting that in general, a move toward recognizing the power of bodies, the power of touch, and the power of physical connection for human health and happiness, particularly in our Western dualistic mind/body patriarchal culture, might be an important part of revaluing non-human animal bodies and the earth/environment. The current popular rhetoric about breastfeeding and skin-to-skin touch might be one way to show this value, to show our connectedness.

At the very least, it seems to be a compelling entryway to bring students to ecofeminism. If they can see themselves and their own bodies as meaningful and, simultaneously, as connected to non-human bodies and to the earth, they might themselves take the next step of seeing the political and ethical implications between gender and the environment. By seeing human bodies as central to the discussion, students aren’t immediately on the defensive. This is about them and for them. It’s not, on the surface, threatening their food habits or their food-based traditions. Breastfeeding shows students the processes and potential of human bodies, and potentially allows them to come to the question: If we are like animals -- instinct-driven, embodied -- how might animals be like us?

**Conclusion**

Participating in the Dialogues shaped our thinking about our ecofeminist pedagogies and practices in profound and meaningful ways. Engaging in conversation with one another and with our audience members powerfully reinforced our awareness of the need for sustained, continuous dialogue about ecofeminist education across disciplines, and between activists and academics. All too often, those of us who teach and work in the field of ecofeminism are isolated from one another and
lack the opportunity to fully engage in in-depth discussions about the successes, failures, and challenges of our work inside (and outside) of the classroom. Specifically, many educators who teach ecofeminism face significant structural challenges, as a high percentage of Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies departments and programs struggle for funding, and many WGSS instructors are contingent faculty members who often need to create courses with few resources. These factors often lead to those of us who teach ecofeminism being isolated from our colleagues. Given this reality, we perceive the need for more opportunities for ecofeminist educators to share ideas and approaches with each other. Having participated in the Dialogues, we even more clearly recognize the need for there to be institutional, systematic spaces for ecofeminist discussions to take place, through the development of professional networks, online listservs, and ongoing in-person meetings and conferences.

Our session additionally leaves us with several ongoing questions about how to be the most effective possible ecofeminist educators. Some of these questions center on how we can best bring students into our classrooms in the first place. What are the advantages and disadvantages of including (or removing) the feminist label from our course titles, descriptions, and syllabi? What do we gain and lose when we make the feminist nature of our classes explicit, and when we do not do so?

Other questions focus on what happens once students have made their way into our classes. How can we break through students’ (often powerful) resistance to the complex, challenging material which our courses cover? How can we give our students the necessary tools to engage with difficult texts in productive ways? How can we successfully challenge some students’ tendency to see the “animal world” and the “human world” as separate from one another (and as hierarchically related to one another?) How can we best break down the divisions between the “ivory tower” of the academy and the “real world” of activism, and ensure that our students bring the ideas they learn in our classes into their daily lives and political choices? How can we make our
classrooms empowering, hopeful places which inspire students to fight for change, while also fully reckoning with the depth and scope of local, national, and global anti-feminist, anti-environmentalist structures of power?

We do not have definitive answers for all of these questions, nor do we believe that definitive answers are possible. Instead, we hope that by sharing our personal experiences of teaching ecofeminism, we can facilitate a broader dialogue about best practices in ecofeminist pedagogy, and provide ideas, inspiration, and insight for our colleagues in the academy and outside of it, working within this important, ever-growing and changing field.

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INTRODUCTION

The seeds of the contemporary sustainability movement in U.S. higher education go back to environmental activism in the 1960s and 1970s. The first Earth Day in 1970 was a student-led effort (Calder and Clugston). However, not until the Talloires Declaration of 1990 (Association of University Leaders for a Sustainable Future), did university administrators articulate a commitment to environmental sustainability in higher education; a Campus Earth Summit held in 1994 at Yale University yielded Blueprint for a Green Campus (Calder and Clugston). Over the last two decades, environmental activism has continued to make inroads into higher education, institutionalizing sustainability efforts on campuses across the U.S. Efforts range from “greening” facilities to “minimize the ecological footprints of universities” (Tilbury 97), to curricular developments that require “educating about and for sustainability” (98). The latter -- education for sustainable development (ESD) -- calls for restructuring courses and entire curriculum to yield “graduates with the personal and professional knowledge, skills and experience necessary for contributing to sustainability” (Tilbury 98).

As ESD grows, little attention has been given to understanding or defining learning outcomes, or rather, what competencies for
sustainability students should develop and be able to demonstrate through their learning in informal and formal settings (Barth, Godeman, Rieckman, and Stoltenberg; Torres-Antonini and Dunkel). Students have been “raised on recycling” (Dungy 272); however, recycling and volunteerism will not, in and of itself, address the fundamental challenges facing our environment. Educators, then, must identify approaches to ESD that will move students beyond basic competencies for sustainability, to what I refer to as deep sustainability -- the capacity to extract and apply meaning (Warburton). In this paper, I ask (and answer) the question, “What might be gained by bringing a feminist lens, and specifically an ecofeminist perspective, to ESD?” Many educators have brought a feminist lens to bear on their work; these efforts, however, have largely been situated in feminist-identified communities and women’s studies programs. I argue the potential for ecofeminism to reach beyond women’s studies; that the time is ripe to bring a feminist perspective into a broader discussion of ESD.

Many seemingly intractable social problems face citizens today, and part of higher education’s mission is to prepare citizens to participate in debates ranging from health care to education, from hunger to the environment. Some disciplines, such as women’s studies, are rooted in social movements (Kimmich) and thus, feminist educators are well-equipped to engage the socio-political debates and action needed today. However, disciplines outside of women’s studies -- those not strongly influenced by “good feminist theory” -- may fall short in their emphasis on, and development of students’ competence for, “practical political action” (Brookey and Miller 140). Stemming from MacGregor’s critique that environmentalists have “yet to take the central feminist values of gender equity and justice onboard” (“No Sustainability” 121), the aim of this paper is to illuminate the transformative potential of an ecofeminist perspective (Gaard; Warren) in the service of sustainability efforts, or more specifically to yield “deep” sustainability competencies. In what follows, I provide an overview of feminism, and ecofeminism in particular. Next, I offer a description and critique of sustainability in higher education. Finally, I explicate how ecofeminism can serve as a
theoretical strategy for developing sustainability competencies for social change.

**Ecofeminism**

Ecofeminism has “its conceptual beginnings in the French tradition of feminist theory” (Glazebrook 12). The term, coined in the 1970s, is attributed to French writer Françoise d’Eaubonne and her call “for women to bring about ecological revolution” (12). In North America in the 1970s, feminist scholars too were calling for the “unification of feminist and ecological interests in the vision of a society transformed from values of possession, conquest, and accumulation to reciprocity, harmony, and mutual independence” (Glazebrook 13). Ecofeminism was advancing the argument that environmental issues are feminist issues, but what makes an issue feminist?

Feminism is a movement striving for the political, social, and educational equality of women with men. Its basic assumptions are that gender is central to the structure and organization of society; gender inequality exists; and gender inequality should be eliminated (Allan). Feminism, while often treated as a unitary category, is not a monolithic ideology. Numerous branches of feminist thought each offer distinctive views and explanations for women’s oppression (Flax; Lorber; Tong). For instance, liberal feminism asserts that “female subordination is rooted in a set of customary and legal constraints blocking women’s entrance to and success in the so-called public world” (Tong 2). Liberal feminists “use traditional lobbying techniques to influence legislation and incorporate women fully into the mainstream of contemporary society” to obtain the same opportunities and benefits that are given to men (Berman 15). One might point to the role of Rachel Carson’s controversial *Silent Spring* (1962) in bringing about the Clean Air and Clean Water Acts of the 1960s and the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency as evidence of liberal feminist action. For a more recent example of a liberal feminist achievement, and illustrative of the continuation of the movement, one can look to the grassroots political action that ultimately led to the landmark New York fracking ban (Mufson).
Critics argue that liberal feminists -- specifically “white women” -- striving for equality with white men, have become so focused on individual achievement that they became “wholehearted supporters of the very structures we most wanted to contest” (Heywood and Drake 12). In contrast, radical (or structural) feminists are primarily concerned with structured power relations and systems of oppression and privilege based on gender, race, class, and so on (Tisdell). They insist that the sex/gender system is the cause of women’s oppression, and to eliminate sexism (and heterosexism and patriarchy), we must advance women’s ways of knowing and being (Alcoff; Firestone; Jaggar). It is from this branch of feminist thought, Hessing argues, that ecofeminism stemmed. Ecofeminists argue that feminist and environmental concerns are inextricably linked (Carson; Griffin; Merchant; Warren), and that “no solution to ecological crisis [will be realized] within a society whose fundamental model of relationships continues to be one of domination” (Ruether 204). Women, Merchant argues, hold the potential to “bring about an ecological revolution ... [that] would entail new gender relations between women and men and between humans and nature” (100). Rooted in the radical feminist tradition, ecofeminism argues that “since the same social and economic structures produced wide-scale environmental damage, then women ... were therefore better placed to argue on nature’s behalf” (Buckingham 147). For instance, exploitation of female reproductive power, yielding excess of births and overpopulation, also has exploited and depleted natural resources (Glazebrook; Leach). Thus, an alliance between feminism and ecology reveals that “there can be no liberation for [women] and no solution to ecological crisis within a society whose fundamental model of relationships continues to be one of domination” (Ruether 204).

Yet, while being a woman has been and continues to be powerful for mobilizing action, a critique of this field of thought argues that women cannot be reduced to a “female essence” that possesses a way of thinking and being enabling (only) women to know and speak for the Earth (Buckingham; Goebel; Rose), and suggests political risks and negative implications in reifying women as caring (MacGregor).
In my brief overview of feminist thought and ecofeminism, readers might note that strands of feminism are not necessarily discrete from each other. Case in point: My examples above of liberal feminism are really evidence of liberal- and eco-feminism. Other scholars provide a more thorough overview of the critique and complexity of feminist thinking (Buckingham; Flax; Tong). My aim through this brief overview is to introduce feminism, and in particular, ecofeminist thinking, for my argument that it is an overlooked theoretical tool in the sustainability movement in higher education.

**Sustainability and ESD**

In the last 25 years, sustainability has become increasingly pertinent to higher education. In 1992, during the Rio Earth Summit, the term “education for sustainable development” (ESD) entered the academic vocabulary (Calder and Clugston), and in the decades that followed, campuses have initiated both “formal (e.g., classroom-based) and informal (e.g., student activities)” ESD (Barth et al. 416). Such efforts range from sustainability degree requirements (Rowe), to out-of-classroom education (such as residence hall programming) through which students “learn from what we do rather than what we teach” (Cohen 90).

For my purposes, sustainability is comprised of three dimensions: environmental, economic, and equity. The first, *environmental*, tends to dominate discussions. It focuses on the reduction of negative human impact on the ecosystem, and yields efforts such as greening campus facilities, recycling campaigns, and energy reduction initiatives. Increasingly, these environmental efforts illuminate *economic* concerns and benefits. For instance, programs to reduce energy usage produce economic gains in addition to being good for the environment. Thus, campuses focus on the effects of individual lifestyle choices and spending patterns; the impacts of institutional, national, and global economies; and the exploitation of resources for economic growth. Finally, the intersection of environmental and economic concerns reveals the relationship between human rights, environmental justice, and corporate
power, yielding a focus on equity. Educating about this trilogy of sustainability is described by some as EcoJustice Education, an “emerging framework for analyzing the deep cultural roots of and intersections within social and ecological violence...[and] the destructive effects of a worldview organized by a logic of domination” (Lowenstein, Martusewicz, and Voelker 101).

Fueled by this more equity-minded ESD, educators are asking questions about students’ learning outcomes, or what some describe as sustainability competence (Barth et al). The competency movement continues to gain momentum in higher education (Schejbal); it is shaping everything from entire programs (e.g., College for America) to particular knowledge areas (i.e. multicultural competence). Broadly, competency models emphasize three domains: knowledge, awareness (or attitudes), and skills. However, critics of competency-based models assert that graduates may not have the skills to take “action that upsets the status quo” (Reason and Davis 7), and that in our changing economic and educational times, individuals must develop skills in advocacy, policymaking, negotiating, and organizing; graduates do not have “the capacity to enact resistance” (Theoharis 250). I argue that infusing ecofeminism into ESD can move us beyond individual level change to thinking and acting systemically; it can develop critical consciousness, activist skills, and deeper sustainability knowledge. Resonating with Susan Griffin, achieving such learning outcomes would develop graduates as citizens who would “have cause to feel deeply” about sustainability, and more specifically, “this matter of woman and nature” (xvii, italics in original).

**Ecofeminist Sustainability Competencies**

In this section, I elaborate on the three dimensions of competence: knowledge, awareness, and skills, and I argue for an expansion of each dimension, grounded in ecofeminist thought.

*Expanding Knowledge*

Knowledge about sustainability can risk having a reductionist focus on only the environment. I indicated above the importance of knowledge about (and the relationships between) economics, equity, and
environment. Yet, knowledge must be further expanded to include an understanding of anthropocentrism, the “pervasive belief that nature is solely a resource for human use” (Russell and Bell 173). It must also include knowledge about the role of ethnocentrism, “the belief that some ‘races’ or cultures are morally or intellectually superior to others and therefore hold the right to exploit and oppress the ‘lesser’ ethnicities” (Lowenstein, Martusewicz, and Voelker 102). And, knowledge about sustainability must critique androcentrism, the belief that men are superior to women. An ecofeminist perspective ensures this expanded knowledge through its purposeful “analysis of the systemic oppression of women and nature essential to social transformation” (Russell and Bell 173). In this way, ecofeminist knowledge reveals “sexist tendencies” and the overlooking of gender and other dimensions of identity that circulate in dominant understandings of sustainability (MacGregor, “No Sustainability” 106).

An ecofeminist perspective brings explicit attention to power relationships at work in the environmental, institutional, and sociocultural contexts in which sustainability work occurs. This “politcized ethic of care,” as Russell and Bell describe it, enables students to identify and address issues that are “personally meaningful” but also to examine “the structures that contribute to the problem and our own role in perpetuating these structures” (175). Such expanded knowledge thus calls upon students to ask whose voices are heard and whose are silenced in ESD? Who makes the sustainability decisions and by what criteria? And who benefits from such decisions and who loses?

Notably, the infusion of “care” is not intended to “privilege caring and other values associated with the private sphere that has allowed ecofeminism to be relegated to the margins” of the sustainability movement (MacGregor, “No Sustainability” 106). Rather, as students acquire knowledge of and begin to care about environmental problems, and they internalize a private (and individual) sense of responsibility, they must also understand how “a gendering of environmental duty” is socially and politically constructed, and that change will only be fully realized when the source of responsibility is situated in the public
(political) realm (MacGregor, “No Sustainability” 117). This expanded knowledge brings blind spots into focus.

**Expanding Awareness**

It is argued that our knowledge about and relationship with nature is tied to our sense of identity and self-awareness. Thus, sustainability competence involves the development of one’s awareness of his/her own assumptions, biases, and values. ESD cannot involve teaching about the environment, as if it is separate from us. Dominant approaches to teaching sustain distance between the learner and the content; knowledge is “mediated through books, theories, and laboratory equipment” (Russell and Bell 176). Instead, to argue the inverse of the feminist adage, “the personal is political,” students must *feel* the problem; “the evidence of our own experience” (Griffin 7). In order to do this, students must engage in “inquiry of self” (James 164); they must engage in self-examination as a means of achieving greater consciousness of the multiple identities we perform, and our relation to others so that we might act more justly in the world (Greene).

Those who occupy privileged categories (i.e. whites, males) may be resistant to critical self-reflection, and educators must recognize that developing such awareness is a process (Kirk). Yet, by becoming “privilege cognizant” (Bailey, 1998), individuals are more prepared for the feelings of guilt and shame that may be induced by ESD (Chizhik and Chizhik; Choi-Pearson, Castillo, and Maples). Students must “confront their own, often deeply-seated, aims and beliefs about social and ecological relationships” (Lowenstein, Martusewicz, and Voelker 105).

Ecofeminism places emphasis on such consciousness raising (CR). An essential feature of feminism, CR groups, which blossomed in the late 1960s and early 1970s, are a mechanism by which individuals gain awareness and through which they can organize, strategize, and act (Keating). CR “moves to both awareness and action” (Bickford and Reynolds 240, emphasis in original) through its facilitation of self as an agent of change; CR contributes to commitment and the internalization of a sense of responsibility to dismantle causes of inequality.
(Rosenberger). This contributes to individuals asking the question “how?” (Lowenstein, Martusewicz, and Voelker 105), and thus, ESD must include opportunities to apply one’s knowledge and awareness.

**Expanding Skills**

Sustainability skills (or rather, skills for sustainable development) risk being conflated with training that has more instrumental connotations (Jickling). Students, by example, might develop skills for recycling or energy reduction, but have little opportunity or capacity to influence collective action or change on their campuses. Ecofeminism, rooted in activism, invites the theoretical and practical possibilities for expanded skills that emphasize action and prepare students to be change-agents. ESD must develop skills that will prepare individuals to effectively intervene at not only individual levels (e.g., my personal decision to reduce, reuse, or recycle), but also the capacity to confront systemic factors and operate as a change agent at organizational levels. Further, skills must address not only environmental concerns, but also equity and economic sustainability.

The development of students’ knowledge and awareness will (hopefully) fuel commitment, what Eyler and Giles describe as the “urgency to do something” (162), but educators too often do not require students to act on that commitment or practice/develop skills enabling them to act (now or in the future) on that commitment. Thus, educators must adopt pedagogical approaches that enable students to practice and demonstrate skills, and experiential education is one curricular strategy for cultivating such skills (Lowenstein, Martusewicz, and Voelker). However, approaches vary and yield different outcomes. Feminist scholar-educators argue that “service-learning and community engagement do not place sufficient emphasis on larger social issues and social responsibility and that few students understand their service as a contribution to structural change” (Iverson and James 15; also Bickford and Reynolds; Naples and Bojar). Too often political and activist approaches to civic engagement are viewed as “troublemaking” (Pudup 127) and are eclipsed by the “patronizing role of charity” (Eyler and Giles 47). Feminist activism enables individuals to develop a deeper
understanding of sustainability issues and promotes the development of skills necessary to work toward social change (Iverson and James; Kirk; Russell and Bell). Rather than connecting social justice work to service-learning so it can “seem less politically charged” (Broido 16), educators must find ways to foster students’ political interests and desires to engage in ecojustice advocacy (Kirk; Nilsson and Schmidt).

The capacity to confront systemic factors and operate as a change agent at organizational levels includes skills such as advocacy, policy-making, negotiating, and organizing (Reason, Broido, Davis, and Evans). Reason and Davis, for instance, argue for “action that upsets the status quo” (7), and Theoharis similarly advocates for leaders to develop “the capacity to enact resistance” (250). The skills necessary to carry out ecofeminist work, Kirk found, involves the development of skills, such as “building movements,” “forging alliances,” and facilitating public debate (16).

**Possibilities and Challenges**

In sum, ESD informed by an ecofeminist perspective has the potential to deepen sustainability competencies by bridging the divide between theory and practice and yielding praxis; by raising consciousness about our embodied and gendered connections with nature; by empowering students to foster resistance; by encouraging students to question and challenge, and in turn amplifying and privileging marginalized voices (Gough); and by disrupting power demarcations, language, and dualistic and hierarchized thinking (Kirk). To illustrate, consider the question of recycling. It is ubiquitous with the sustainability movement on campuses. Yet, individuals should not only be spurred to individual acts of recycling, or even to collective calls for institutional recycling. Rather, recycling viewed through an ecofeminist lens can spur students to critically engage the ubiquity of recycling; to ask questions about consumption and use on campus as part of the systemic problem. The solution of recycling fails to ask questions of the root problem, and thus individuals are lulled into “a sense of citizen responsibility” (MacGregor, “No Sustainability” 114) without any pressure on industry or government to solve “unsustainable and unjust
social and economic relationships” (115). Further, an ecofeminist perspective positions gender as a focal point in the analysis. We are called to ask “how women are socialized or disciplined to perform work that benefits others” thus feeling responsible, as MacGregor attests, to “make endless trips to the recycling center because they care” (“No Sustainability” 116).

Yet, ESD informed by an ecofeminist perspective also faces some challenges. For instance, as this theoretical perspective situates gender as the point of analysis, and thus challenges the ungendered innocence of the sustainability movement, it risks essentializing women. Further, it may unwittingly advance a white ecofeminist perspective (Kirk). Educators, thus, must ask: In what ways does the sustainability movement re/produce gender (and race and class) inequalities within the academy (and community)? Adopting theoretical hybridity, meaning to work at the intersections of two or more theoretical perspectives, such as ecofeminist and indigenous perspectives, can minimize colonialist risks.

As an ecofeminist perspective foregrounds intersections between women and environment, it risks reinforcing dualisms (man/woman, culture/nature, mind/body, reason/emotion). Additionally, it may reify women’s ways of knowing. MacGregor, for instance, cautions against the conflation of women with caring because it may have the unintended consequence of relegating women to private spheres and undermining efforts to involve women as political actors. Educators, then, must ponder: What are the benefits, and costs, of celebrating caring, compassion, and empathy, both in how such ‘celebrations’ may reify women’s (real and perceived) roles, and may enable men to keep cultural distance from these characteristics?

Finally, since the backlash of the 1980s, the “F” word (feminism) has been a lightning rod. Bashir and her colleagues observed negative stereotypes applied to activists may reduce social change influence. Bashir et al. refer, by example, to feminists and environmentalists who are viewed as “aggressive,” “confrontational,” “militant,” and “eccentric” (625). This, consequently, can reduce people’s willingness to engage in activist work and contribute to resistance to involvement in social
change. I do not believe we should shy from the application of ecofeminism to the work of sustainability; rather, I advocate for open dialogue regarding why students (as well as educators and administrators) might embrace sustainability, but balk (or be offended) at the idea of ecofeminist activism (Stuart, Thomas, and Donaghue).

**Considerations and Conclusions**

In closing, I offer a few considerations for adopting an ecofeminist perspective for ESD, and the implications for developing “deep” sustainability competence. First, educators must consider the developmental readiness of their students (Gayles and Kelly 204). Students bring a range of learning styles and levels of cognitive and affective complexity to every educational experience. Educators should design their courses in ways that cultivate greater maturity in students’ critical thinking and ensure curricular sequencing such that more advanced sustainability competencies can build upon prerequisite knowledge, awareness, and skills. Failure to assess students’ readiness may lead to student (and instructor) frustration. Further, ongoing assessment of students’ affective capacity is important. As one gains awareness of the deep and intersecting structures that produce and sustain eco injustices, the presence of despair, sorrow, and anger can grow, leading to apathy, resistance, and disempowerment.

Finally, an ecofeminist approach to ESD may yield increased student activism on campus, and this is not without risk. Helms observed that campus administrators and policymakers are not likely to support revolutionary change, and students (and educators) may abandon their efforts if they are viewed as too controversial or face negative stereotypes or repercussions (Bashir et al.). Thus, strategies must be developed to sustain individual and collective action, such as developing alliances and solidarity-building, and cultivating an “armor of allies” (Iverson 79). Stuart, Thomas, Donaghue, and Russell describe the identity and group development process by which activists acquire a “sense of ‘us’... [by being] both ‘ordinary’...but also ‘extraordinary’” (27-28); cultivating a
“positive and unifying” network (28) that reduces “danger to an individual” (29).

In this position article, I have advanced the potential for adopting an ecofeminist perspective on ESD in an effort to yield “deep” sustainability competencies. Such competencies, inclusive of expanded knowledge (e.g., a politicized ethic of care), awareness (e.g., critical consciousness), and skills (e.g., embodied activism), are necessary to address in order to engage the socio-political debates facing citizens today and to promote an agenda for ecojustice and social change. These competencies will not be developed in one course in one semester; as Case notes, engaging in critical self-reflection, dismantling oppressive structures, and taking vigilant action toward social change are lifelong processes. I am hopeful that the ideas advanced here might fuel future scholarship and lively debate for how an ecofeminist approach can deepen and enrich education for sustainable development.

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INTRODUCTION

To Western audiences unfamiliar with the genre, the Japanese film genre of anime might at a first glance look like a children’s program. Certainly the visual style of the genre, including the hand-drawn animation, the often fantastical settings, and many colorful characters and anthropomorphized non-human characters are reminiscent of Disney cartoons and other films directed at prepubescent audiences. However, unlike most animated features in American culture, Japanese anime often tackles serious, adult themes in a more careful and nuanced way. While American cinema has at times tried its hand at animated features targeting adult themes and audiences, Through a Scanner Darkly (2006) being a recent and highly-awarded example, Hollywood (and American animation in particular) is “notorious for its happy endings even when those are improbable” (Levi 10). Where American animated cinemas, Levi argues, often use sadness or grief as a smaller piece of an ultimately heroic narrative for main characters, Japanese anime more commonly deploys grief, loss, and death as the centerpiece of their narratives. Indeed, Levi describes Neon Genesis Evangelion, one of the most popular anime series in America, as “a celebration of sadness and loss” (12). Furthermore, Shinobu Price explains that anime, in contrast to much of what we see from feature-
length animation in the West, has a “much freer palette from which to choose its audience and subject matter” (153). It is true that there are many anime made for children, including the wildly popular *Ponyo*, but an equal (or possibly greater) number of anime films address serious issues from a mature perspective, not shying away from death, heartache, and pain.

The film *Princess Mononoke* is an excellent example of the depth and complexity that anime has the potential to convey. While *Mononoke* features a fantastical story with talking animals, a dashing young hero, and a princess, it is as far from a traditional Western cartoon as one can get. The film deals in nuanced ways with the conflict between the natural world, represented by the intelligent animal spirits of the wood and their champion San, and industrialization and technologies, represented by Lady Eboshi’s weapon-producing Iron Town. The personification of nature within the film is both obvious and vibrantly alive; the forest itself is ruled by a creature dubbed “The Great Forest Spirit” who rules over both life and death within the realm and maintains the forest for all the inhabitants. And even though there are a slew of human characters who have their own important stories, the story of the forest and nature itself is an important backdrop to the film and is what contains the overall message about how to respect nature, even in the face of advancing technology and civilization.

The increasing popularity of anime in America, coupled with the complex and weighty subject matter they often tackle, makes the genre an ideal focus for analysis. In this essay we explore the classic and highly successful *Princess Mononoke* from an ecofeminist perspective. While the film has often been praised for its strong female characters and its positive environmental message, an ecofeminist reading shows us how *Princess Mononoke* problematically recreates some troubling archetypes related to women and their connection with nature. In particular, *Princess Mononoke*’s portrayal of Lady Eboshi and San ultimately reflect subconscious anxieties about women in positions of power.
It should, of course, be noted that like most anime, *Princess Mononoke* was initially produced in Japan with a Japanese audience in mind. While many anime now enjoy world-wide popularity, there are substantial elements of the cultural context of many anime that may be missed by viewers outside the culture. Anime has become an extremely important industry both in Japan and outside of it, a fact that may lead to some confusion as various films and TV series are often edited specifically to “Americanize” them. Often these attempts to minimize Japanese cultural influences go hilariously wrong: in one of the first anime shown on American television, *Starblazers*, a character is shown eating an onigiri (a rice ball wrapped in nori) while the dialogue refers to the food item as chocolate cake (Levi 7). However, more common than these intentional alterations are simple misunderstandings or missed allusions. Indeed, Samantha Nicole Inëz Chambers argues most audiences in America are “oblivious to the pervasiveness of Japanese culture in what they watch” (94). Levi uses *Ghost in the Shell*, a popular anime about a cybernetic woman in a futuristic world, as an example of how this obliviousness often manifests itself in contemporary anime. She notes that the main character, Kusanagi Motoko, is not visually marked as Japanese in any way. The futuristic struggle of *Ghost in the Shell*, ultimately questioning what it means to be human in a world filled with technology, certainly applies broadly to audiences in America and Japan. Nonetheless, there are a number of subtle references and cues that, to audiences unfamiliar with Japanese culture and mythology, will go unnoticed. Most notably of these, the character’s very name “references the fabled kusanagi sword of Japanese mythology” (Levi 4).

Levi has noted that American audiences of anime in particular have a tendency to interpret elements of Japanese culture as merely another part of the fantastic, a tendency perhaps encouraged by the fact that anime narratives often contain elements of science fiction or fantasy (16). Thus, while the spirits and aspects of nature depicted in *Princess Mononoke* are “unabashedly Shinto,” Western audiences are likely to interpret the emotive creatures and personified forest spirit as
fantastical elements of the plot and not question their historical or religious significance (Levi 10). Western audiences will most likely miss other elements of Japanese culture inherent to anime. Like *Ghost in the Shell*, many of the names in *Princess Mononoke* provide further insight into character motivations and/or context. For instance, many viewers outside Japan might not know the meaning of the title and usage of the word “Mononoke,” and the connotations that are associated with the word. Takako Tanaka explains some of the symbology that Japanese viewers would likely be familiar with, but other audiences would not:

As it is used in the Heian period, *mononoke* is something highly elusive, intangible, and unfathomable. In the film, however, it assumes a very concrete form, often appearing as an animal, such as a great wolf or wild boar. It is unclear why Miyazaki chose the word *mononoke*, but partly due to the influence of the film, the term has recently come to be used to refer to any concrete thing with a strange or eerie aspect, and is sometimes used interchangeably with *yôkai*, a monster, ghost, or apparition (“Understanding Mononoke”).

Within the film, the eponymous “princess” is formally named San. For a viewer ignorant of both the Japanese language and the cultural context, it may seem peculiar that she should have two names.

We highlight these distinctions and slippages because, in this paper, we interpret the film from the perspective of a Western audience—a perspective we argue is warranted given the film’s incredible popularity for non-Japanese audiences. As Chambers and Levi have demonstrated, a lack of familiarity with cultural contexts has not prevented either the increasing prevalence of anime in American culture or American audiences’ ability to find their own meaning and connection with the genre. While a fuller examination of the historical and mythological references is outside the scope of this analysis, Takako Tanaka’s “Understanding Mononoke Across the Ages” provides a thorough overview of how the film connects both with Japan’s history and with the “Japanese perception of the spirit world.”
Princess Mononoke follows the struggles of two women, women scholars and fans often read as strong female characters. Certainly both characters are seen to be powerful women who defy traditional gender stereotypes and roles at the outset of the film. In many ways, they are foils for each other. San, the eponymous Princess Mononoke, lives wild in the forest and is more comfortable in the presence of the various animal spirits that live within. Lady Eboshi, the warrior-like ruler of Iron Town, champions progress at nearly any cost and has little care or compassion for the natural world. Nonetheless, they are similar in their defiance of conventional roles. Indeed, many characters throughout the film refer to both women as unnatural: Eboshi for her leadership of the town and “masculine” ways, San for her wild nature and apparent lack of civilized behavior or appearance. While, as previously mentioned, both women are commonly referred to as strong characters, the conclusion of the narrative complicates this reading. Eboshi is maimed and removed from her position of power, replaced by the male hero Ashitaka, and San essentially exiled to the forest.

The Perils of Preforming Strength: Lady Eboshi’s Fall

Lady Eboshi, the main antagonist of Princess Mononoke, demonstrates how many “strong” women who oppose traditional gender tropes often ultimately pay the price for challenging those gender roles. While the narrative introduces her as a strong character, both politically and emotionally, she is physically maimed and forced to resign from her place of power by the conclusion of the film. Though some critics have read Eboshi’s character as a positive representation of a woman’s authority, using ecofeminism as a lens illustrates how her character follows a common character arc in films about nature and natural disasters, an arc that reflects deep-seated anxieties about women, nature, and power.

Lady Eboshi is the leader of Iron Town, a place she helped to build and make thrive. She was able to take her role at the head of Iron Town because she led a ruthless attack against Nago, a boar god and protector of the mountain with her warriors. This fierce display secured her role as Iron Town’s unquestioned leader. It is her continued displays of
dominance and brutality toward nature, both in the form of resource acquisition/destruction and though physical violence against the living embodiments of the forest’s spirits, that help her hold that position. It should be noted here that, while her attitude toward nature is violent and uncompromising, she treats her own citizens with care and compassion. Thus, Eboshi’s character is one that is a constant contrast between her words, actions, and appearance. In many ways she is at war with her own self, as well as the rest of the natural world, as she tries to maintain a leadership position in the face of limiting societal ideals that value men and masculinity as superior. Eboshi continuously makes efforts to maintain her power through a mask of masculine behaviors and leadership style, though she does visually perform aspects of a feminine presentation through her elegant clothing, styled hair, and make-up. Thus, while her physical gender presentation is not by any means androgynous, her behavior and interactions with her townspeople continue to reinforce a masculine persona.

In *Princess Mononoke* technology is clearly associated with masculinity and destruction through Lady Eboshi’s defiance of (and ultimate submission to) gender expectations. Indeed, while Eboshi’s character might at first glance seem to challenge traditional gender roles, she is in fact a perfect demonstration of the “natural disaster heroine” archetype, as described by Cynthia Belmont:

The disaster films, which in some cases overtly connect the destructive power of nature with a disapproving view of women in positions of authority, portray the trouble with nature as being tied to the dissolution of traditional gender roles: as they foster a fear of and drive to conquer nature, they also feed cultural anxiety about women’s empowerment and suggest that meekness and passivity are required of women if order is to be restored to a chaotic, unstable world (350).

Even as the ruler of Iron Town, Eboshi must operate in a patriarchal system; she must perform gender on both ends of the spectrum to maintain her place. She plays her emotions close to the chest and is even careful not to allow herself a wide range of facial expressions. Even when
her words might echo pity or sympathy, her actions and expressions seem nearly void of emotion at all. She wants the men under her control to see her as machine-like, as cold and hard as the iron itself. It is precisely because she outwardly denies any character traits that might be read as feminine, that the men in the village respect her. However, as Belmont suggests above, this is ultimately an untenable situation; Eboshi’s “unnatural” drive toward leadership must be cowed if order is to be returned to the chaotic world. Belmont states “women with authority - - including the construct of Mother Nature -- are dangerous and must be contained” (370). Recounting how she destroyed Nago, one village man states excitedly, “She isn’t even afraid of the gods, that woman!” (Princess Mononoke). It is important to note that she is the only respected woman within the fortress that is Iron Town. This is because of her presentation of masculinity that projects her feelings that she cannot be contained and her determination that she will not be stopped.

Minnie Driver, who voiced Lady Eboshi in the English version of the film, was interested in "the challenge of playing [a] woman who supports industry and represents the interests of man, in terms of achievement and greed". Driver is using “man” here to refer to the standard “human versus nature” conflict that many environmentally themed/natural disaster movies portray, however her words are especially telling given that it is truly Eboshi’s “masculine” will to power that causes her downfall.

We see Eboshi possesses big ambitions with her industry of iron. She seeks to perfect technology--not just the billows used to manufacture the iron--but the resulting product: Eboshi’s weapon of choice is her specialized guns. The film makes a point of demonstrating to viewers that Eboshi will not be content simply as Iron Town’s leader. Instead, she seeks power on increasingly larger scales; she already took over the valley and she wants to destroy the mountain, though her long-term goal is to rule the world. In hopes of accomplishing this, she drives her people to continuously perfect her designs. Interestingly enough, in destroying the mountain to gather the iron within the terrain and continue the production of her weapons, we see a symbolic destruction of that which
represents femininity and nature, so that she can secure her place as Iron Town’s head and her masculine mask may reign. She is war, she is destruction and she is power. Her poison bullets spread her violent and destructive influence, first against Nago and now Ashitaka. And yet, in her efforts to destroy nature, the oft-viewed feminine opposite of masculine technology, she claims women are superior to their male counterparts. This is clearly seen when Jigo presents a letter from the emperor to Lady Eboshi, granting them permission to slay the Great Forest Spirit. Eboshi sarcastically remarks that it is “impressive, for a piece of paper.” She goes on, showing the letter to two of her village women, saying that the letter is from the emperor. Their responses are, “That’s nice, who’s he?” and “Is he supposed to be important?” Feeling that she demonstrated her point that she does not even acknowledge the power of men, not even the emperor himself, Lady Eboshi dismisses the women

At the same time, Lady Eboshi is a walking contradiction; she balances the public performance of her aggressive and masculine leadership necessary to keep her position of power, while expressing her more characteristically feminine traits in secret. She looks for increasingly dominant, more powerful roles so that she can be a woman, but must give up measures of her femininity to do so. She must compromise, keeping most of her feminine behavior hidden away from the public sphere. Eboshi’s traditionally feminine behaviors show in the fact that she has taken in “her girls.” Lady Eboshi rescues the women who work the iron billows and who bought out their brothel contracts. The women are given free rein and allowed to eat as much as they like. Eboshi affectionately refers to these women as “her girls,” and she places nearly all of her trust in them and only what she must in the men of her town. For display only it seems, Lady Eboshi nearly always has Gonza at her side, a sort of right-hand man. However, it becomes obvious that he is simply for show and her true right-hand is Toki, a former brothel girl. Still, the women are worked hard, with shifts of working the billows that run four days long at a time. Though they remain safely inside Lady Eboshi’s fortress, unlike the men who risk their lives to travel and
deliver iron, Eboshi still utilizes the women and puts them to work. This helps to dilute suspicions of Lady Eboshi being soft-hearted. Any evidence of her coddling or acting truly soft are kept from public eye, away from the able-bodied males of her town.

It is in secret that Lady Eboshi allows herself to fully take up caretaking, loving, and almost maternal behaviors. In her private quarters, she reveals to Ashitaka her “secret” in the form of a room full of handicapped lepers. These people are treated strictly in a compassionate manner. As much as Eboshi seems to want to embrace herself as a fully feminine, powerful woman, the softer she is the more hidden away she keeps her actions. She speaks of wanting to destroy the Great Forest Spirit, for this will allow her town and her influence to grow. Yet, she goes on to express that the blood of the Great Forest Spirit might be the key to “cure [her] poor lepers”. It is interesting that she is out to kill that which is part of nature, the feminine opposite of technology, in order to maintain her femininity as well as her masculinity.

Eboshi knows that the world views men as those worthy of power. She plays along, though she does not share this mindset. When plotting with the women of her village, Eboshi stresses, “Remember, you can't trust men”. In private, she asserts her belief that women are superior, and yet her femininity is her downfall by the end of the film. It is, as Belmont says, “In general, while the male protagonists rise to heights of physical, intellectual, and emotional fortitude, achieving national/international recognition for their victories over nature, the heroines degenerate from strong, capable professionals to disoriented, dependent weaklings” (364). While she is initially presented as a strong woman who is coded as masculine, she is undermined and manipulated by Monk, Jigo, and his men. The climactic scene of the film finds her removed from power and reduced to a classic damsel in distress, ultimately rescued by Ashitaka. She must go on in a way that completely contradicts her character from the beginning of the film, being punished for behaving in an unwomanly fashion and for her pursuit of technology at the expense of nature. “By making the character [Eboshi] a woman, and one who can both destroy and rebuild, the film problematizes the
facile stereotyping of technology, armaments, and industrialized culture as evil... [Eboshi]’s tragedy is that she is not actually evil” (Napier 185).

In the end, the real tragedy is not that she is evil but that she is female. The technology is not destroyed completely nor is nature destroyed; Eboshi is destroyed for trying to alter the social and natural order. Ashitaka takes over, declaring that Iron Town is to be rebuilt in a way that works in harmony with the natural spirits and the forest. Eboshi must submit to the leadership of a man. Napier argues that the film “is a wake-up call to human beings in a time of environmental and spiritual crisis that attempts to provoke its audience into realizing how much they have already lost and how much more they stand to lose” (Napier 180). This is especially true for Eboshi. The hyper-aggressive, uncompromising persona she must adopt in order to defy the patriarchal power dynamic of her time ultimately proves to be her undoing, as she is unable to compromise without endangering her position in Iron Town; she is engaged in a losing battle. It is not enough that she is removed from power in the film, but she is crippled as well and can no longer operate her machines. She is powerless, losing both symbolic and physical parts of her being.

Being the “Bad Mother”: The Exile of Princess Mononoke

In many ways San, the eponymous Princess Mononoke, is Eboshi’s opposite. Both are, in different ways, “bad” women, but they exist at opposite ends of the spectrum. Where Eboshi embodies the strong, masculine woman usurping male authority, San becomes a cipher for nature as “bad mother”. San is clearly coded as feminine, but she displays characteristics of the savage, unrefined and uncontrolled femininity of nature, a femininity that cannot remain within the cultural system and must be either dominated and controlled or exiled. She is depicted as the princess of the forest even though she is not specifically a spirit of the forest. San is human; her human parents gave her as a sacrifice when the wolf goddess, Moro, attacked them for damaging the forest. However, while it seems they expected the wolf goddess to kill her, Moro instead raised San alongside her wolf children.
Catherine Roach explains that the concept of Mother Nature can often be split into two categories: good mother and bad mother. In her good mother guise, Nature is a true representation of the idealized mother in a patriarchal system: “providing, caring, self-sacrificing, and inexhaustible. Mother is she who feeds and cleans and comforts and warms us, she who satisfies our wants” (Roach 40). Ecofeminism has often looked at the problematic connection between nature/nurturing/woman. However, in her bad mother form, which Roach argues we still recognize inherently female, “nature is dangerous, cruel, and torturous, as she attempts to drown, burn, freeze, and blow us away” (76). This is precisely the version of nature we see in *Princess Mononoke* and, as Roach observes, the fear of Mother Nature as bad mother is directly related to “the anger in general of a woman who has been crossed” (76).

When we first meet San, it is in this role of avenging Mother Nature. With her two brothers by her side, San intercepts Eboshi and her men moving exposed through the forest and mountains, outside the safety of technology in Iron Town. While Eboshi’s guns and troops protect her from the assassination attempt, they are able to completely disrupt the procession, reinforce their role as an ever-present threat (bad nature lurking and waiting for the weaknesses of technology to become apparent), and injure two of Eboshi’s party. San and the rest of her clan are dressing their wounds by the river when they first encounter Ashitaka, who is immediately stunned by the sight of the wolf goddess and a girl about his age standing across from him. Thus, in her first appearance, we see San as wholly savage. While we do not yet understand either her motives or the situation, this depiction immediately “links her to premodern archetypes of ferocious femininity—the shamanesses, mountain witches, and other demonic women who are the opposite trope of the all-enduring, all-supportive mother figure” (Napier 245).

Eboshi, San’s rival, tells both the viewer and Ashitaka the story of San and how she came to be in her unique position as savage woman among the nature spirits. Hearing her story, Ashitaka “[leaps] into the
romantic, ecological drama, becoming "ecoknights" ready to protect and save helpless "Lady Nature" from the big, bad dragon of human irresponsibility" (Heller 219). When he next meets San, Ashitaka attempts to take up this role as savior, intervening in Eboshi and San’s fight and walking out of the town with San over his shoulder in order to keep her from being harmed by Eboshi or the other townsfolk who are openly hostile toward San. Despite repeated demonstrations of San’s strength and prowess, in this scene, she is robbed of her agency as Ashitaka attempts to both subdue and protect her. However, while Ashitaka may attempt to take on the role of stalwart savior and defender, San’s savagery and ferocity as the embodiment of “bad Mother Nature” will have none of it.

When San recovers her senses she is instantly on the defensive, retrieving her knife and pointing it at Ashitaka’s throat. The following descriptive scene is from the official *Princess Mononoke* screenplay, translated into English by Fiona M. Smith:

“Why did you interfere?” she growled.
“Because I didn’t want to let you die,” he replied.
“I’m not afraid of dying! If the humans are driven away I don’t care about my life!” she yelled.
“Live,” Ashitaka feebly said as he gasped for breath.
“You’re still talking? I don’t take orders from humans!” She retorted.
“You are... beautiful,” Ashitaka gasped. At these unexpected words San jumped back as though she’d been struck (Miyazaki 29).

Here we clearly see Ashitaka attempting to fulfill classic medieval romantic tropes, which Heller argues is a common theme in broader conversations about ecology by politicians and activists. We see a clearly “courtly” theme to Ashitaka’s actions: while he has saved and admired his lady, his love is a chaste and protective one. San’s rebuffing of these advances continues to demonstrate the savagery of nature.

As she holds the knife around Ashitaka’s throat she explains that she does not trust him, and displays confusion about having a human choose
to help her succeed in something that would potentially be bad for him as well as other humans who live in a technological age. She is even more confused and angry when he explains that he did this because any human, even her own parents, has never valued her. Her confusion causes her to lash out at Ashitaka and explain, in a sense, that she is fearless and willing to risk her life for the greater good of the forest. In the interaction between San and Ashitaka, we see two common tropes of nature colliding with each other: “Lady Nature”, as defined by Heller, who needs to be shielded and protected from the horrors of technology, and “Bad Mother Nature”, whose savagery and power threaten to overwhelm and engulf humanity.

San’s fierce independence and strength leave her permanently outside of human society, and while this is sometimes read as a positive, it’s important to note that neither of *Princess Mononoke*’s strong female characters are able to be part of human society while they remain active agents of their own. San embodies what it means to be one with nature, but in her wild strength, she must live forever outside of culture. Belmont argues that having a woman closely associated with nature while portraying a hostile, unpredictable character, is not good for environmentalists or ecofeminists. “...their representations of gender in the specific context of a vision of nature as a threatening, destructive force that must be subdued by authoritative male figures and masculinist institutions reinforce the ideologies responsible for environmental degradation and social injustice - issues which are of the utmost importance to ecofeminism” (351). This pattern of a woman becoming too wild, and thus needing to be restrained and controlled by a male figure, has become far too common in disaster films and films in general. This is not a recent phenomenon, nor is it one that is no longer applicable to our modern media, *Taming of the Shrew* (1593), *Kiss Me, Kate* (1953), and *10 Things I Hate About You* (1999) all have something in common. Each film features a wild woman who needed to be tamed by a male in order for them to be happy because the male protagonist was able to bring them into civil society. The man is seen as a hero for
“taming the beast” and is celebrated at the end of the film when the woman is revealed as “tamed”; when it was her will that was broken.

San ends this pattern of a strong woman who must always be tamed by a man, but is only able to do so by remaining entirely outside of the human system of culture and society.

Ashitaka, the bold knight defending “Lady Nature,” manages to save the city of Iron Town, but he is not able to convince San to return to Iron Town with him after the ecological disaster is thwarted. Heller notes that “romantic ecology often veils a theme of animosity toward woman under a silk cloak of idealism, protection, and a promise of self-constraint”, and Ashitaka’s invitation to San attempts to play out this narrative. Kozo Mayumi, Barry D. Solomon, and Jason Chang read this primarily as a statement about her feelings and her traumatic past, explaining her decision was made because “her hatred toward humans never disappears” (5). We argue that San’s exile at the conclusion of the film holds two important meanings, both of which demonstrate that Princess Mononoke participates in some problematic ideology: “in reinforcing masculinist institutions, [natural disaster films] operate counter to both feminism and environmentalism” (Belmont 370). First, by remaining outside of the cultural system, San reminds us that Mother Nature, vengeful and powerful, is ever-ready should humanity/technology overstep its bounds. Second, we see that a powerful woman, in control of her own body and destiny, has no place in polite and ordered society. San’s options are simple: submit to Ashitaka’s courtly love, a love built on the sexist desire to shield, control, and protect, or remain independent but exiled.

LOOKING FORWARD

The central tenant of this argument is certainly not to imply that Princess Mononoke is in some way a “bad” film. Indeed, Princess Mononoke is one of the most highly regarded anime of our time, and for good reason. Napier notes that, in its native Japan, the film’s appeal “seems to extend to all parts of Japanese society... despite its complex, ambiguous, and often dark text,” and it was the highest grossing film in
Japan until Miyazaki’s next film, *Spirited Away*, overtook it (176). Further, *Princess Mononoke* addresses an increasingly important topic, the impact of human intervention and technology on the world we all share, in a complex and nuanced way. This is a topic Miyazaki himself is committed to, and he has said “I’ve come to the point where I just can’t make a movie without addressing the problem of humanity as part of an ecosystem”, highlighting just how essential this topic is to him as a creator and director (qtd. in Smith and Parsons 27). Indeed, in the more child-focused *Ponyo*, Miyazaki tackles similar environmental concerns (impending destruction stemming from the incompatibility of nature and humanity) from a different perspective. The mother figure in *Ponyo* strongly echoes Roach’s definition of the sustaining, nurturing “good mother nature”, while *Ponyo*’s father challenges gender roles in his effeminate appearance, emotional behavior, and his unique ability to bridge the nature/human dualism.

Still, ecofeminism as a critical lens helps to illuminate some of the more problematic ways the film depicts gender in connection with nature and technology. As discussed above, Eboshi nearly perfectly conforms to the problematic model Cynthia Belmont explores in “Ecofeminism and the Natural Disaster Heroine”, as a one of so many “heroines who are initially characterized as “modern women”—capable, intelligent, and employed—are quickly returned to the domestic sphere and to helpless dependence on masculine physical prowess and technological know-how” (350). Thus, like so many heroines in the natural disaster genre, both live-action and animated, Eboshi is hobbled both physically and socially. Similarly, San acts as the literal personification of nature, and it is through her character that viewers experience “nature as iron bitch”: “Nature is an evil “bitch” because she is an overwhelming female entity who threatens humans and fights with frustrating strength against their efforts to escape from and subdue her” (Belmont 359). While Anthony Lioi reads San’s rejection of Ashitaka’s advances as a demonstration of Miyazaki’s commitment to strong female characters, arguing that “Miyazaki tends to disrupt such [marriage] expectations – his male and female protagonists often are not allowed to stay together, or choose to
separate – creating a lack of closure from an American perspective” (np),
an ecofeminist perspective suggests otherwise. If, as Smith and Parsons
have suggested, environmentalist films directed at younger audiences
are indeed attempting to use “children’s popular films as a form of public
pedagogy”, it behooves us to think not only about what these films may
be teaching viewers (both young and old) about environmentalism, but
also to consider what they say about the complicated relationships
between technology and nature, between male and female.

These problematic depictions also aren’t limited to either Princess
Mononoke or to Miyazaki’s films. The complicated relationship between
nature, humanity, and technology is frequently explored in
anime. Christopher A. Bolton describes another classic anime, Ghost in
the Shell, as a visually evocative film that “explores the boundary
between information, human, and machine,” highlighting in particular
the fluidity the film experiments with by both “transcending and
endorsing fixed gender roles” (730). The narrative of Ghost in the Shell,
which is explored through a variety of media, tells the story of a
cyberpunk future in which technology is directly integrated into the
human body. Thus, the series often explores the tension between the
“dream of a natural world”, often problematically coded as feminine,
“free from technology’s monstrous encroachments,” often coded as
masculine (731).

Looking at anime through the lens of ecofeminism provides a rich
and evocative means of enriching our understanding of both. Anime,
often more narratively complex than their Western counterparts,
frequently tackle issues regarding the intersections between humanity,
nature, and technology. Sometimes they do so in a direct, nearly
evangelical manner, as Miyazaki does in many of his films. Other times,
this tension is a subtle undercurrent that runs through the larger
narrative, as in Ghost in the Shell. In either case, using ecofeminism as a
lens with which to approach anime helps us to move toward a more
critically reflective interpretation of these media. Likewise, as anime
becomes increasingly popular in the living rooms across mainstream
America, these films can help us see how environmental issues and feminism often intersect.

**Works Cited**


UNUSUAL SUBJECTS:
FINDING MODEL COMMUNITIES AMONG MARGINALIZED POPULATIONS

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INTRODUCTION

The 2014 Seneca Falls Dialogues’ theme “Ecofeminism” could not have come at a more timely moment. From the publishing success of Naomi Klein’s This Changes Everything, to the huge turnout at the Climate March for Justice, signs are accumulating that decades of inertia and climate change denial are coming to an end. Or are they? While with every passing year we get a clearer picture of the dire scenario that awaits humanity unless major polluters change the way they produce and consume, in the United States a few climate skeptics still exercise political power out of proportion to their numbers.

This paper is inspired by the questions that we have asked ourselves since we first met at Schenectady County Community College. What is it, we wondered, that keeps so many of our fellow Americans seemingly wedded to a political economy that is sustainable only at great cost? Could we use our academic work to help spread awareness about people who dared to demand different lives? And might our studies suggest strategies to work for change?

We currently each pursue different projects, but we share a belief that one obstacle to progressive change in the United States is our investment into an ideology that posits individualism and consumer
capitalism as the only real pathway to success and happiness. Visions of a society based on solidarity, community, and a more sustainable economy, by contrast, are cast as naïve and unachievable pipe dreams. In this paper we argue that one does not have to search for long to find examples of communities that have rejected the status quo, embraced counter-hegemonic values, and thrived in spite of scarce resources and adversity. By drawing on our research on an urban squat, African-American beauty culture, and polyamorous families, we hope to contribute to a dialogue about how we today can work constructively for progressive social change.

PART I.
Babette Faehmel
“THE HAMBURG HAFENSTRASSE SQUAT”

As the first of three separate case studies, this essay will take the reader outside the United States and back to the 1980s. As a teacher of politics and history in a community college, I am often astonished by my students’ skepticism about the potential of especially socio-economically under-privileged people like themselves to mount a successful challenge to entrenched economic and political interests. Wondering where my own contrasting outlook comes from, I found the answer in the fact that, when I was young, I saw precisely such a case unfold in my hometown of Hamburg, Germany. Having by now spent two summers conducting research in archives and libraries and interviewing witnesses, I believe that the case offers intriguing insights into the dynamics of social movements.¹

The story in brief: In the early 1980s, in the midst of a severe economic recession, a group of about one hundred youth and young

¹ With the notable exception of Katsiaficas, the case of the Hafenstrasse is not yet well documented in the English literature about urban squatting. Most of my research is therefore based on German language publications, my research in local archives in Hamburg, Germany, and on oral history interviews with participants in the squat.
adults took possession of a block of houses on one of Hamburg’s major commercial arteries, the “Hafenstrasse” (harbor street). This was a diverse group of people, composed of single mothers, gays, lesbians, punks, a few foreign-born, and political radicals. Thrown together by happenstance, they were united mostly by the fact that they had problems. Almost all were unemployed, and many had a history of addiction and delinquency (Anonymous Participant, Personal Interview, 26 July 2012; Küllmer 75-76.).

To say that this diverse group became a community easily would be an overstatement. There were frequent outbursts of verbal and physical violence sparked by clashing views on gender, sexuality, ethnicity and politics. In the process of negotiating the challenges of poverty and of life in a squat, however, these diverse people learned to appreciate what each of them in their own way was able to contribute. They formed a fierce attachment to the houses they occupied and demanded from the city the autonomy to live here as a self-managed community (Borgstede 128-130; Anonymous Participants, Personal Interview, 14 June 2012).

For the city of Hamburg, the squat created a problem right away. As the economy was in recession, the center-left mayor was under great pressure to present an economic recovery plan. Struggling to hold on to a fragile majority, the governing coalition adopted key elements of so-called “neo-liberal economics” that include the privatization of public services, cuts to social programs, and the opening of domestic markets to foreign capital. Most importantly for this case study, this economic turn also had profound consequences for urban planning (Schütte and Süß 15-25).

The way in which urban development figured in Hamburg’s economic recovery was part of a transatlantic pattern. From Hamburg to Berlin, New York to Detroit, municipalities offered generous tax benefits to keep businesses from relocating elsewhere, and to attract new ones. But corporations also expect access to real estate in appealing locations; their executives and employees demand modern condominiums. And in Hamburg such space was not just limited, the neighborhoods of greatest interest to developers were still dominated by public housing built after...
the Second World War. Originally built for skilled German workers and their families, these tenements had become home to students, the working poor, and the foreign born. This low-income population would need to move to make room for a financially more affluent class (Sippel 49-57; Twickel 16-18, 27-30). But as West-German law featured strong tenant protections and allowed for the demolition of old housing stock only if the costs for preservation exceed a certain threshold, this was quite a challenge. It was possible to circumvent existing law, however, by adopting a policy of “planned shrinkage,” which entailed the withholding of essential repairs to speed up the progressive dilapidation of old housing stock and to create incentives for current tenants to leave.

By 1981, the tenements in the Hafenstrasse were on the brink of being declared uninhabitable. The management company in charge of the buildings had long been neglecting repairs, and deteriorating conditions had caused most legal tenants to move out. Planning was already underway to turn the highway into a promenade lined with high-end condos and business buildings. But when squatters moved in, this plan, which the city expected to yield significant economic benefits, was derailed. As even official housing inspectors admitted later, the repairs they conducted saved the houses for future occupancy (Herrman et al. 17-23). This not only made it a lot harder for the city to justify demolition, it also became the basis on which the squatters claimed to have acquired a right to the buildings. By investing their sweat and labor into repairs, they argued on a pamphlet, they had earned just as much of a right to the property as if they had made a financial investment (“Frieden den Hütten”).

Whatever one might think about the squatters’ argument, the odds were not in their favor. Their claim, while based on their sense of justice, lacked the force of law. Hamburg’s conservative media and politicians

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2 “Planned shrinkage” seems to have first been applied as an urban planning strategy by New York City’s housing commissioner Roger Starr in the 1970s (Berman 62) I was unable to ascertain whether or not the city of Hamburg drew inspiration from this, or developed a similar policy by itself.
missed no opportunity to label them criminals, thugs, and violence-prone radicals, thereby creating pressure on the center-left government to assume an uncompromising stance. But in spite of the fact that urban renewal plans were backed by powerful interest groups, the occupation did succeed. After a prolonged struggle lasting more than a decade, the city sold the houses to a cooperative controlled by the former squatters and sympathizers. The plans for a promenade lined by shiny corporate headquarters and condos are still not realized, and radical activists across Europe regard the houses as visible reminders that resistance to the combined power of political and economic elites is possible (Katsiaficas 124-128).

While space constraints do not allow a detailed analysis of how this outcome was possible, I want to highlight two factors. The first one is the role of militant resistance. At the height of the conflict, the occupants defended their right to remain in the houses with a ferocity that astonished observers. In the winter of 1987 the squatters faced eviction by more than 4,000 police. Bulldozers to tear down the contested buildings stood ready. In response, the occupants erected barricades, set them aflame, and fortified the houses with barbed wire and nets. Public commentators foresaw casualties should the city proceed with the eviction. This willingness of the squatters to put their bodies on the line is all the more astonishing considering that they had repeatedly been offered substitute housing on the outskirts of the city. By that time, however, housing itself was no longer the issue. Rather, it was the desire to continue living under the conditions that they had themselves created that motivated the occupiers (Katsiaficas 126-128; Anonymous Participants, Personal Interview, 14 June 2012).

To understand this willingness to defend the houses at all costs, we need to look at the life created by the people within. Early on, the squatters established a communal kitchen. Non-profit bars, a café, and various workshops followed. As long as children were present (parents with children moved out when the fight for the houses escalated) the responsibility for their care was shared. In addition, the squatters also established a radically democratic and inclusive form of self-government
that gave every individual a voice and equal share of responsibility. As a public forum to plan protests and political strategies, and to organize day-to-day operations in the houses, they created a “plenum.” Having never felt adequately represented by West Germany’s representative democratic system they adopted direct democracy and a horizontal, leaderless, structure of self-government (Küllmer 77-78).

Life inside the houses thus bore little resemblance to that outside. At a time when conservatives blamed the nation’s economic woes on escalating costs for social and welfare programs, and, ultimately, on their beneficiaries, Hafenstrasse squatters took care of one another’s existential needs without judgment which enabled everyone, regardless of means and personal circumstances, to participate fully in the life of the community. The political institutions created by the squatters gave each individual an active and equal voice in decision-making. Moreover, as members collectively met basic needs like food, drink, shelter, and entertainment, they eliminated economic pressures that ordinarily would have forced them to accept monotonous or otherwise unfulfilling work to survive. The political institutions they created thus empowered the squatters on an individual level, while their communal organization gave them the time and the freedom to discuss politics and to engage in activism. It should thus no longer surprise us, that the squatters were fiercely committed to defending their control over the space that enabled them to live as fully empowered and equal members of a community.

The question remains what this case study suggests about the dynamics of social protest. I believe that several lessons can be drawn. For one, the dynamics of the squat suggest the political potential of radically inclusive and participatory democracy. In spite of the problems that affected this community, its members realized that they had been given an opportunity to build on their own experiences to create a different kind of society than the one in which they – as minorities, delinquents, misfits, and welfare recipients – had been marginalized, ostracized, and regimented. Left to their own devices, they took care not to reproduce the same structures they had found at home, in schools or jails, at low wage jobs, or in the welfare office. Knowing that by leaving
the houses they would have to return to the status quo ante, they stood together against seemingly overwhelming force. Hafenstrasse squatters were thus willing to put their bodies on the line because once they had gained control over the conditions of their existence they were unwilling to surrender it again.

The case also, however, suggests that in confrontation with a state that puts the interests of economic and political elites before the existential needs of people, militancy might be necessary. This is a disquieting prospect for a country like the United States where the use of deadly force by law enforcement, especially against racial minorities in the inner cities, is not uncommon. It will thus be all the more important, I would argue, for us to create broad alliances of the poor, the discontented, and the alienated, and to give all the people affected by policies a role in shaping the conditions of their existence.

PART II

TIOMBÉ FARLEY

“RACE AND SUSTAINABILITY SEEN THROUGH THE LENS OF AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN’S HAIR”

Being a non-conformist has its challenges, especially when it’s perceived as a threat to the status quo. As the previous case study of urban squatters has shown, however, a nontraditional way of living and behaving may open up new possibilities of sustainable community building. This brings me to another topic that is controversial at its core, African American women and their choice in favor of natural hair. This subject historically is deeply rooted in racism that is pervasive to this day.

The exploration of African American women’s perspective on hair that follows was inspired by the dialogue that ensued after my girlfriends and I viewed the documentary “Good Hair” (2009). This film, along with the data it presented, inspired us to “go natural” and led me to conduct further research. In doing so, I pondered the ecological implications of racism through the lens of African American women’s hair, and focused specifically on how normative assumptions about “good
“Good hair” have been used to destabilize communities, by dehumanizing Black women and limiting their access to upward economic mobility.

Social and economic mobility has long been regarded as central to notions of American citizenship. However, as my focus on black women’s hair reveals, in African American communities, this type of mobility often remains elusive. Instead, many African American women have to navigate structural racism and sexism in their daily lives. Moreover, they oftentimes confront an added degree of stratification based on the texture of their hair. The consequences of this can be isolation and internalized racism.

In what follows, I will offer a brief historical overview of African American women and their relationship with their hair. The “good hair” issues date back to the time of slavery. African Americans were classified/categorized by the color of their skin (lighter or darker complexion), which determined where they would work and how they were treated. For example the darker complexioned slaves usually worked in the fields doing hard manual labor, unprotected from the sun, and exposed to the environment, while the lighter complexioned slaves worked in the masters’ homes, where they cooked and tended to the masters’ children. These latter tasks were still highly demoralizing, but they did not entail the same degree of exposure to environmental hazards as fieldwork.

A darker complexion typically meant that a woman’s hair would be “kinky,” “coiled,” or “nappy,” terms often used to describe natural or non-chemically altered hair. A lighter complexion, by contrast, not only suggested white blood, but also tended to mean finer and softer hair (Tate 301). Appearance translated into privilege. Slaves who had the lighter skin tone were able to work in the homes shielded from sun and other cruel environmental factors. This treatment reflected a racist assumption that they were better than those with darker complexion because their lighter skin tone resembled that of their enslavers. Standards of beauty based on a dominant European American patriarchal culture in African American communities already suffering from oppression created the aggravating factor of classism (Tate 307).
In the context of a society deeply invested in maintenance of a racist and sexist system, phenotype became just another handy justification for the idea that Africans were an uncivilized primitive population that needed to be ruled. Cultural anthropologist Agustin Fuentes, author of *Race, Monogamy, and Other Lies They Told You: Busting Myths about Human Nature*, reminds his readers of the work of the early taxonomist Carolus Linnaeus, who believed there were different species within the human population, and that these were evolutionary differences that occurred on different continents. On this assumption Linnaeus developed the taxonomy for human segregation or so-called different races. According to Fuentes, Linnaeus’ taxonomy was ranked from purebred humans to the primitive humans; in other words, white is pure and civilized, while black is impure and primitive:

\[h\]omo sapiens americanus [was] “red”, ill-tempered, subjugated... paints himself with red lines, ruled by custom....Homo sapiens europeaus [was] “white”, serious, strong, hair blond, flowing, eyes blue, and active, very smart, inventive, and covered by tight clothing, ruled by laws....Homo sapiens Asiatic [was] “yellow”, melancholy, greedy, haughty, desirous, ruled by opinion” (Fuentes 74).

And last (and obviously least)

domo sapiens africanus: “black”, impassive, lazy, hair kinked, skin silky, nose flat, lips thick, women with genital flap; breasts large, crafty, slow, and foolish, anoints himself with grease, ruled by caprice (74).

This ideology became deep-rooted in American psyches and mores. It has been and it continues to be part of the fabric of perception for European and African Americans, as can be seen in the recent police killings of unarmed men in Ferguson and New York City. It appears as if Linnaeus’s taxonomy for human segregation can be linked to the justification for slavery and the idea that “white” is superior to “black,” in other words, Europeans are superior to Africans and other non-Europeans. Therefore, it is understandable that under such conditions, some slaves may have believed this to be so. Post slavery, these
circumstances laid the path for many generations to desire, and work towards, becoming and looking similar to images that have been deemed socially acceptable, which in essence translates into a mandate to alter one’s physical appearance, such as one’s natural hair.

Today's media continue to reinforce the value of “finer” (straight) hair. For instance, a recent article, “Good Hair Days” by Kathy Davis, discussed the meaning of hair in the African American community and how it differs from that of Caucasian women. Davis refers to two different books that she had recently read, *Styling Jim Crow* by Julia Kirk Blackwelder and *Rapunzel’s Daughters* by Rose Weitz. In *Styling Jim Crow*, the author offered a historical perspective of African American hairstyling techniques and methods used to care for it. Many of these hair styling techniques were shared among African American women in each other’s kitchens because of limited resources. This was unlike the European American counterparts who had access to beauty salons.

Understanding that desire to achieve “good hair”, black entrepreneurs like Madame C.J. Walker (born Sarah Breedlove) and Annie Turnbo developed hair care products for black hair and thereby achieved economic success as pioneers (Davis 14). Their individual success came, however, at a social cost. Although black entrepreneurship helped the growth of a small albeit significant middle-class, African American women learned from an early age and from members of their own community, that their natural hair was undesirable and socially unacceptable. Internalizing these racist assumptions, they learned, and may have even perfected, the art of straightening their hair to get rid of all “naps” and “kinks,” and to approach a look that was considered visually pleasing.

In modern times, African American women continue to alter their appearance in hopes to achieve an unrealistic ideal of beauty and by extension, perpetuate self-loathing. This is reinforced by Davis’s point when she stated that it is not uncommon that beauty industry promoted the use of their product for well-kept hair, code word for straightened hair, because it would help women avoid racial insults or slurs, so to
“embodying black women’s sense of identity and what they could
accomplish in their lives” (14). This is a direct contradiction to self-love
and acceptance.

There are authors who have argued that black women’s relationship
with their hair and outer appearance is no different from that of other
women. Rose Weitz, for instance, addresses this issue in her book
Rapunzel’s Daughters: What Women’s Hair Tells Us about Women’s Lives
and argues that (regardless of race or ethnicity) women have been
socialized to strive to achieve unachievable standards of beauty. Weitz
explains that any woman’s relationship to her hair reflects “internal
struggles and external pressures” (xi). Although this may be true, I
would argue that Weitz failed to understand the historical and racist
origins of African American women’s struggles that differ profoundly
from those of their European American counterparts.

The difficulties faced by those black women who refuse to conform to
white standards of beauty illustrate my point. Historically, many African
Americans who have embraced their natural hair have been
marginalized. Images of strong empowered African Americans were, and
are, seen as threatening to the dominant population. Factors such as
these can adversely impact the economic, educational, and social
mobility of African Americans and by extension their community.
African Americans have learned, and history has shown, that conforming
to what is socially acceptable and non-threatening to the dominant
culture allows you to, as the saying goes, play it safe and stay under the
radar.

The politics of black hair remain an issue today. Currently, the black
hair industry grosses over $185 million yearly with many of the products
used for altering the state of natural hair (Harris-Perry). The individual
health and environmental risks pose great concerns as well. Ongoing
studies suggest chemicals such as sodium hydroxide, calcium hydroxide,
lithium hydroxide, thioglycolic acid, and carbonate are detrimental to the
endocrine system, disruptive to the fertility process, and are possible
contributors to cancer (Chimerunga). The environmental implications
are grave as well. These chemicals are released into the air when applied
to a person’s hair and they leak into the ground, polluting the water supply.

While the history I have sketched here does not give grounds for optimism on first sight, I would still argue that increasingly, African American women are coming together in their communities to clear the path for a broader embrace of natural hair and beauty. Like my own circle of girlfriends, more and more black women today are arguing in favor of natural looks on the basis of a growing awareness of the long-term history and the ecological significance of the topic. Although there are still members of the black community who perceive going natural as negative and question why anyone would voluntarily choose “nappy” or “kinky” hair, the popularity of going natural is picking up momentum. By doing so, we are not only releasing fewer pollutants into the environment, we are also preserving resources to benefit our own communities and contributing to the necessary social and economic mobility of future generations.

PART III

VASHTI MA’AT

“LIVING AND LOVING IN A TIME OF SCARCITY”

As suggested by the previous two sections of this essay, individuals who have been subjected to marginal social and economic positions because of their race, ethnicity, politics, or their age, are also among the most vulnerable members of society when a new crisis, such as an environmental disaster or an economic recession, occurs. Yet what is also suggested by my two co-authors is that this very marginality can be a fountain from which individuals draw strategies and inspiration to create new forms of communities, centered on solidarity and mutual care. In this essay I will discuss two communities whose members were, and still are, relegated to a marginal social position on account of their sexual orientation and intimate relationship choices. The first of these is the nineteenth-century Oneida community created around the idea of “complex marriages.” The second example shall consist of the twenty-first century community of polyamorous living people. The goal of this
piece is to contrast polyamory, which is a non-monogamous, non-traditional family and intimate relationship, to monogamy, which is the traditional intimate and familial construct, and to discuss the former as a viable alternative to the latter at a time of limited natural resources. The plethora of social, legal, and financial benefits available exclusively to couples conforming to monogamous relationship structures suggests that cultural norms, the legal code, and the tax code serve as socio-cultural control mechanisms that marginalize a segment of the population. Many of these benefits have been ensconced in a singular ideology of monogamous marriage and family. The United States General Accounting Office stated that there are over 1000 “federal laws classified to the United States Code in which marital status is a factor” (Bedrick). These benefits are only available through traditional monogamous marriages and families. This reward and benefit structure, which reinforces traditional relationship models, must also be seen as part of a system that puts strains on our limited natural resources, and challenged ecosystem. A significant number of people desire to transcend the traditional monogamous family paradigm. It has been documented as early as the nineteenth century that the Oneida Community is a precursor to today’s polyamorous communities.

The Oneida Community complex marriage began with Humphrey Noyes, a nineteenth century religious and sexual radical. As documented in Lawrence Foster’s book, Religion and Sexuality: The Shakers, the Mormons, and the Oneida Community, Noyes might today be viewed as ahead of his time due to his keen understanding of human nature. His political and religious views were unlike other evangelical Protestants of his era, who tended to be pro-slavery (Noyes was not) and morally and secularly conservative. Noyes, by contrast, developed ideas and theories of “free love, including his concept that ‘God could not expect the impossible’ from humanity” (77). There is no data to suggest that he had any scientific basis to support his position that monogamy was “impossible” and contradicted “human nature”. However, he concluded that “there must be a harmonious relationship among people’s nature, their spirituality and social truths” (79), and intimate relationships
“between males and females must be greater than the traditional institution of marriage, which assigns the exclusive possession of one woman to one man” (91).

Noyes theorized that the “earthly” institution of monogamous marriage dishonored women and treated them as property. In essence, wives were the property of their husbands. He believed that the concept of monogamy breeds a selfish possessiveness and the psychological effect could be harmful for both the wife and husband. He believed the institution of marriage was illogical and it did not connect to human nature; for that matter, he felt the institution of marriage was the antithesis of human nature (91). Noyes went on to state in one of his writings that “all experience testifies...that sexual love is not naturally restricted to pairs...the secret history of the human heart will bear out the assertion that it is, capable of loving any number of times and any number of persons, and that the more it loves the more it can love” (91).

The Oneida community built around Noyes’ teachings embraced this theory that the normative binary configuration of marriage was in direct opposition to human nature and also to Biblical teachings. It undermined the essence of society’s social structure, and fragmented families into minute units - the nuclear family. It contributed to the economic and psychological disparity between a husband and wife. For instance, within the nuclear family, “mother[s] were held in an almost slave-like bondage at home, while the father toiled in a hectic and uncertain world outside” the home. The theory states that “[t]he father must be reintegrated into the spiritual and economic leadership of the home and home economy, and the sexes must work side by side in vital and rewarding labor” (92).

With everyone’s participation, the Oneida community became financially self-sufficient. This was highlighted in the business section of Constance Noyes Robertson’s autobiography, *Oneida Community: An Autobiography 1851-1876*. The community developed and maintained several businesses including the Oneida flatware. By 1861, they were well vested in different businesses. They made and sold several products including, traps, shoes, silk thread and materials, clothing and produce
from their farm and garden. Remnants from this family business can be found today in Oneida, Anchor Hocking Company (214).

Although the Oneida family model officially ended, this egalitarian model and theory of relationships has continued in the form of polyamory. Robyn Trask, the executive director of *Loving More*, a national not-for-profit organization for polyamory awareness, states that the organization is committed to educating and supporting polyamory as a valid relationship choice. Likewise, Alan M., from *Polyamory in the News Blog* reminds his readers that open, loving, intimate relationships are not a new idea, but built on and transcending preexisting models for relationship choices, as constituted by the nineteenth-century “free love” movement that was “led by such figures as John Humphrey Noyes and Victoria Woodhull.”

Some societal benefits of polyamory have been outlined in Elisabeth Sheff’s qualitative research described in *The Polyamorists Next Door: Inside Multiple-Partner Relationships and Families*. Participant family members who identify as polyamorous highlighted some benefits as, “honesty and emotional intimacy among family members..., [and] the increased resources that come with multiple-adult families” (191) such as financial stability, easy access to stable child care, elderly and disability networks within the community. Other common themes from the participants were increases in sharing resources, personal and family time. These options are the foundation “to build relationships outside the conventional [monogamous] framework” (206). Similar to monogamous families, polyamorous families’ time is spent sharing household chores, food shopping, carpooling, and caring for family members who need additional care. Sex is not the focus of these relationship structures and “without positive emotional relationships, a sexual relationship alone is often insufficient to sustain a complex, long-term relationship... The nonsexual emotional ties [are] far more important to the overall family connections than is any sexual connection between and among adults” (207).

Primatologist and biological anthropologist Agustín Fuentes’ body of research on human and non-human primate interactions has also
indicated that humans are non-monogamous by nature. However, society continues to reinforce morals that govern monogamous relationships even though it does work for many people. This may explain why non-traditional intimate relationships continue to be practiced covertly.

Cultural psychologist Steven J. Heine's research has shown that non-monogamy is not gender specific (191) however it has been genderized as a male-oriented behavior. This finding is similar to Noyes’ earlier assertion regarding the possible psychological effect to men and women in monogamous relationships. Likewise, Elizabeth Fee makes a cogent argument in her essay, “The Sexual Politics of Victorian Social Anthropology,” exposing the fallacy of moralizing monogamy as the only relationship choice. Her research looks at scholarly historical and anthropological theories on monogamy, and it reveals how these theories laid the foundation for many of our current culture’s mores regarding intimate relationship choice and the social construction of monogamy.

Additional data from Agustin Fuentes’ Race, Monogamy, and Other Lies They Told You: Busting Myths about Human Nature back up Fee’s research. His research looks at several biological arguments including the sex-gender system, hetero-normative constructions of monogamous bonding, and the United States’ (US) concept of a family unit. For instance, the US concept of family is structured around the exclusivity between male-female bonds with children. The assumption is that the heterosexual monogamous bond is part of human nature and the foundation on which the “basic unit of humanity” is formed (187). He also argues that a common myth about intimate relationships is that “humans are naturally monogamous and marriage is a reflection of evolutionary origins” (188). Based on my own research on polyamorous communities, I would posit that these claims show a normative bias and ignore scientific findings to the contrary. However, monogamy is still presented as a natural norm, and theories that ignore the existing body of research are constantly referenced to support established biases, which usually benefit the dominant group at the expense of gender or sexual non-conformists.
Relationships, familial structures, and community models such as the “Hamburg Hafenstrass Squat”, the “a la natural African hair” movement, the Oneida family, and twenty-first century polyamorous relationships, can be used as templates for other types of non-traditional communities that want to address the growing limits of natural resources and taxed ecosystems. There are many lessons that can be learned from these evolving communities and kinships, lessons of caring for each other in meaningful ways that can facilitate people’s well-being. When people’s basic well-being is secured, it is possible that the type of social capital gained can contribute and facilitate the growth of ecofriendly communities. These types of models can be balanced and may provide the space that encourages its members to be co-creators within an environment that can be sustainable for future generations, irrespective of longstanding traditions, mores and folkways.

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SISTERHOOD & FEMINISM:
ENGAGING GENDER AND WOMEN’S STUDIES STUDENTS IN THE COMMUNITY

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INTRODUCTION

In this article we attempt to share the theoretical framework and experiences of students and administrators in creating and maintaining a community engagement program, “Sisterhood & Feminism”. Through a review of the literature we offer our philosophy for including this program in our work, with particular focus on the role of Gender and Women’s Studies programs in engaging students in the community. We will discuss Gender and Women’s Studies' inherent mission as a site of feminist activism as well as look at the value of using feminist pedagogy in engaging students in activist work (Bricker-Jenkins and Hooyman). Finally, we will provide a description of the “Sisterhood & Feminism” curriculum, share student experiences, and discuss best practices for implementing similar programs. It is important to note that the authors of this article include both the student developers of this course and department staff. Each author brings a different lens to the analysis of mutually shared experience. It is also important to note that this article does not include the voices of our community partners. In sharing our experiences from collaborating on “Sisterhood & Feminism” we hope to provide a tool for administrators and students to create similar programming on their campus.
In 1970, Robin Morgan published the seminal feminist text *Sisterhood is Powerful*. This collection of essays and documents on the second wave of the feminist movement was named by The New York Public Library as one of the 100 most influential books of the century (Diefendorf). Morgan’s subsequent collection of essays, *Sisterhood is Forever*, illustrates not only the ongoing work of feminist scholars and teachers, but also the continued meaning and connection of women to sisterhood. Simultaneously, Gender and Women’s Studies programs began to appear in colleges and universities across the country (Ginsberg 10). Alice Ginsberg notes, “From its very inception, women’s studies had a very clear purpose and that was to transform the university so that knowledge about women was no longer invisible, marginalized, or made ‘other’” (10). Yet, bell hooks notes that oppressive practices are still often perpetuated by university systems. hooks states “that if we examine critically the traditional role of the university in the pursuit of truth and the sharing of knowledge and information, it is clear that biases that uphold and maintain white supremacy, imperialism, sexism, and racism have distorted education so that it is no longer about the practice of freedom” (29). Feminist theoretical perspectives that are based on the idea of transforming the academy and the world are therefore integral for Gender and Women’s Studies programs engaging students in the community. Contemporary feminist epistemologies demand we challenge not only sexism, but also the inequities of racism, colonialism, class, and all other forms of oppression (Naples and Bojar 13).

Through community work, Gender and Women’s Studies students “can begin to understand and use feminist theories as tools for improving women’s conditions rather than abstract sets of ideas” (Trigg and Balliet 60). Community work can not only benefit the community, but may also offer students the opportunity to learn about how to engage community members and develop an understanding of different meanings of community (Washington). Yet, community service can easily become oriented toward benefitting the institution. It is important to remember that effective community service holds many of the same goals as feminist teaching methods, and should be “collaborative,
nonhierarchical, nonjudgmental, respective, and transformative” (Trigg and Balliet 56). These principles inspired students to take the initiative in developing “Sisterhood & Feminism.” Their choice of sisterhood as a lens to teach feminism serves to demonstrate their commitment to collaborating with our community partners in ways that can allow for transformative learning for students, staff, and community members.

Educators and students use the knowledge they create in the classroom to inform their activism outside of it. Using the theoretical knowledge learned in a classroom to do work to transform the world is explained by Sonia Kruks as praxis—theory-informed action (Stanley; Agha-Jaffar). The effectiveness of including and validating relevant personal experiences in classroom discussions and sharing stories among all classroom participants is necessary in the formation of a “liberatory” feminist theory that has a great effect upon students’ experiential knowledge (hooks 15). Since feminist praxis is bound to activism, hooks explains that students must learn to offer the teachings of feminism in Gender and Women’s Studies programs in ways and spaces other than the traditional classroom in order to be accessible to all community members.

Anne Bubriski and Ingrid Semaan, in accordance with the ideas of hooks, discuss how activism is critical to feminist pedagogy. Bubriski and Semaan also make sure to warn teachers that we do not just create service-oriented students, but social justice oriented students. They offer five pedagogical guidelines to help teachers facilitate this process with their students. This includes: (1) having direct contact with the agencies the students will be working at before they begin, (2) teaching students the difference between service and social justice, (3) working with students to help them come out of their comfort zone, (4) meeting with students individually to guide them in the understanding of service versus social justice, and (5) using writing assignments to help students continue to reflect (Bubriski and Semaan 92). This framework is important to the work of “Sisterhood & Feminism”. It encourages students to be involved in certain administrative aspects of arranging
the course and also suggests that both the students and community members will act as teachers.

Melissa Peet and Beth Reed discuss praxis as an example of connected learning and its connection to feminist multicultural teaching. Their goal is to “illuminate why the action component of praxis can be ‘taught’” (Peet and Reed 107). We hope through gathering information about student and staff experiences building and implementing “Sisterhood & Feminism”, we will be able to teach and encourage other Gender and Women’s Studies Programs to implement similar initiatives. In the next section we will briefly describe the “Sisterhood & Feminism” course and share student experiences participating in the program. Finally, we will conclude by providing resources so that “Sisterhood & Feminism” can serve as a model that can be used to develop more opportunities for Gender and Women’s Studies students to engage with their communities, achieve praxis, and work to develop feminist identities.

ABOUT “SISTERHOOD & FEMINISM”

“Sisterhood & Feminism” is a course developed in 2007 by Gender and Women’s Studies students at The University of Rochester’s Susan B. Anthony Institute for Gender and Women’s Studies (SBAI). “Sisterhood & Feminism” was constructed to serve as a way to bring Gender and Women’s Studies topics into the community. It is offered as a community-based course to the women of Sojourner House, an organization that provides transitional housing for women, many with children, who are committed to overcoming the challenges of homelessness, addiction, and abuse and rebuilding their lives. The course is offered through the Henrietta Hammond Institute for Life Skills (HHILS). The HHILS principles of Sojourner House include: making it relevant to members, focusing on the positive, encouraging mutual aid, presenting class materials in multiple formats, offering appropriate choices without being overwhelming, bringing in and validating life experiences, and making connections with recovery principles. Based on these principles as well as Bubriski and Semaan’s
framework for creating social justice oriented students, “Sisterhood & Feminism” uses the powerful history of feminist sisterhood to teach feminism to the women of Sojourner House. Through the experience of teaching community members about feminism, the University students are able to experience feminist work firsthand. By evaluating their own lives and perceptions of the women of Sojourner House, both the students and the women in the community learn about sexism in modern American society, the ways sexism often goes unrecognized, as well as how sexism interacts with other forms of oppression.

**Student Experiences**

The women who participate in the course can offer valuable perspectives to the students that they may not have been aware of before teaching the course. The students found the consciousness-raising model (Bubriski and Seeman; Bricker-Jenkins and Hooyman; Naples and Bojar) to be successful because of the diversity of backgrounds in women participating in the course. The two experiences of the founding students of “Sisterhood & Feminism”, shared below, resonate in very different ways based on the reflections they offer to us. We start with Julianne’s reflection, which centers on the positive impact of the course on her understanding of community service and engagement, identity, and development of a professional career path dedicated to supporting individuals and making change.

**JULIANNE’S EXPERIENCE**

_My experience majoring in Gender and Women’s Studies at the University of Rochester was one of enlightenment, excitement, and inspiration. For the first time in my life, I felt connected to my coursework and actively engaged in my learning process. My academic training clearly translated to real life, and I began to see the world through a new lens._

_On a personal level, Gender and Women’s Studies gave voice to my life experiences as a woman, as well as my queer identity. On a larger scale, the discipline introduced me to the concepts of_
institutionalized violence, state violence, and privilege. I grew to feel fortunate and grateful for the opportunity to find empowerment through Gender and Women’s Studies, while also feeling enraged that this information is a privilege, accessible to very few. Unsure of what to do with that anger and incapable of shrugging it off, I found myself feeling increasingly frustrated.

Luckily for me, my colleague Susan Storey began fostering relationships with community organizations in Rochester and creating volunteer opportunities for the Gender and Women’s Studies Undergraduate Council. Her relationship and trust with the staff of Sojourner House led to the creation of Sisterhood & Feminism. Sisterhood & Feminism became a 4-session course at Sojourner House, a transitional housing facility for women. The goals were to learn collaboratively, recognizing that the women in the facility had their own unique experiences with gender and sexual violence, and that we, as college students, could learn a lot from the women in the program [at the Sojourner House].

Sisterhood & Feminism allowed me to engage with the Rochester community. Teaching the course felt different from volunteer work, it was a commitment and a relationship. We showed up every week to dialogue with the women and presented our course topics, as best we could. We then sat and listened, leaving room for discussion, opinions, feelings, healing, and growth. During college, I saw myself heading down a career path of activism and political engagement. However, upon graduating, I found myself applying for jobs in the social services and speaking about “Sisterhood & Feminism at all of my job interviews. This experience landed me my first job out of college, working as a counselor for female parolees in a residential rehabilitation center.

My experience with Sisterhood & Feminism inspired me to start a focus group around LGBT issues at the facility. In the group, I relied on the same consciousness-raising skills that I had fostered in Sisterhood & Feminism, and again, went into the group knowing that my students could also be my teachers. Today,
I am studying psychology, in the hopes of going to graduate school in the field of counseling psychology. I also volunteer at the GLBT National Hotline, responding to crisis calls. Inspiration for these decisions came from my work as a counselor, which came from my work at Sojourner House.

While Sisterhood & Feminism began solely as a desire to take feminism outside of the classroom, it led me to my current career path and continues to serve me as a source of inspiration today. For that, I will be forever grateful for the opportunity to help design and teach Sisterhood & Feminism, as well as the support of the Susan B. Anthony Institute for Gender and Women’s Studies, my co-teachers, the Sojourner House staff, and the brave clients of Sojourner House.

Julianne felt equipped to begin taking action on her own to organize to make change, and volunteering her time to work to support individuals in need. Susan, another founding student facilitator of “Sisterhood & Feminism”, offers a different reflection. Susan outlines how she came to understand feminism in a new light, as something all-encompassing rather than something to discuss solely in a classroom, and that consciousness-raising model (Bubriski and Seeman; Bricker-Jenkins and Hooyman; Naples and Bojar) again worked to develop a sense of connection, perhaps even community, among the students and instructors.

**Susan’s Experience**

During my undergraduate years studying Gender and Women’s Studies at the University of Rochester, I learned the history of feminism, the waves, and both the accomplishments and critiques of the movements. I learned how to pick apart arguments within a framework of feminism and make connections between feminism, race, and class. However, I often became discouraged by the constant theoretical conversations I had with my fellow Gender and Women’s Studies students regarding feminism because I felt as if after a while, it was little more than “preaching to the choir.”
What were we really accomplishing unless we left the boundaries of academia and made connections with women in the larger Rochester community?

While my academic studies taught me the foundations of feminism and philosophical frameworks, it was developing and teaching the Sisterhood & Feminism class that truly brought feminism out of a theoretical realm and into a reality. It was meeting with a group of women of different ages, diverse backgrounds, and bringing a variety of different stories to the table that completely changed the way I understood feminism, felt about my studies in the classroom, and incorporated feminism into my life. In the beginning, we tried to teach the class similarly to our own Gender and Women’s Studies classes; it was very structured and discussed key figures and movements in feminism. It was not long before we realized that the women were learning little more than facts and that a consciousness-raising model was significantly more influential. Not only did a model of consciousness-raising allow each woman in the Sisterhood & Feminism class to come forward and talk openly about her own experiences, but it also allowed the rest of us to not only be there as supporters, but to realize that there are many common and shared experiences.

I hope that the Sisterhood & Feminism class will continue to raise feminist consciousness for women in the Rochester community, as well as continue to also raise the consciousness of the university students who lead the class, as it did for me. Without my time working with the many women who signed up for our Sisterhood & Feminism class, I do not believe I would feel as fully immersed in feminism as I do today. I would know the theories, I would be able to pick apart the arguments, and I would still protest for Women’s Rights any day of the week, but I would be stuck within a bubble of feminist academia. Rather, today I am working towards a career centered in women’s health care because I feel, like with teaching the Sisterhood & Feminism class, that
rather that studying feminism, I will be able to essentially live feminism by affording a safe and holistic place for a variety of women to share not only their health concerns, but also their stories and experiences.

These reflections demonstrate the unique and affirmative ways that a community engagement opportunity like “Sisterhood & Feminism” can affect students, and based on these accounts, the community-based women in the course. These students’ responses, along with an understanding of how consciousness-raising teaching methods work, allow us to infer that the course was successful in helping both students and communities’ members explore feminist identities, see how feminist theories can be applied in practice, and learn useful communication skills to discuss difficult topics with individuals from varying backgrounds.

**Teaching the Course**

Here we offer what are in essence guidelines for students and administrators who are interested in creating a similar program and partnership between their Gender and Women’s Studies program, students, and the community. This information can help programs identify undergraduate student participants, build relationships with community organizations, and design an appropriate community-based curriculum. We offer examples of the content in the “Sisterhood & Feminism” “lessons” to give readers an understanding of the nature of discussions in the course. Following this, we will offer best practices in teaching the course for students, and discuss some best practices for community engagement in Gender and Women’s Studies learned through our experience with “Sisterhood & Feminism”.

**Course Model**

“Sisterhood & Feminism” is taught using the consciousness-raising model, which operates under the assumption that students and community members can learn together from each other’s experiences and opinions. By focusing on the lives of the women in the course and
their understanding of gender relations, both students and the women at Sojourner House were able to develop a deeper understanding of feminism. Susan Faludi notes it is important “that women not be forced to 'choose' between public justice and private happiness” and emphasizes that women must be “free to define themselves--instead of having their identity defined for them” (xxiii).

**Finding Student Instructors**

Ideally, three or four students should teach the “Sisterhood & Feminism” course but the course has run with as few as two students as instructors. The students are able to split up the topics for that week so that no one person is responsible for facilitating the whole hour. If one student is unsure how to respond to a question or situation in the community, the other students often provide additional insight and assistance. Since Sojourner House quickly fills the time slots for its elective HHILS courses, as many community-based agencies do, it is a good practice to start the process of finding students and a time slot with a local agency as early as possible. A great place to begin looking for students is through talking to members of university clubs involved in feminism or activism. At the University of Rochester we were in touch with the Undergraduate Women’s Caucus (now called College Feminists), the Gender and Women’s Studies Department’s club, as well as other aligned academic programs.

When talking or emailing with potential student volunteers, we have found it most effective to emphasize that potential students need not be experts, but rather that they care about the issues and have some coursework in Gender and Women’s Studies. Once students commit, they contact the community organization to find out the available time slots for elective courses that semester and decide the time slot that works best with the schedules of students and the community organization. Two weeks before the first class, students begin to prepare to facilitate the four, one-hour meetings that make up the course.

**Weekly Meetings**
Students should try to meet a few times before the first class and at least once a week during the class. During the first meeting, students decide on the topics for that week and devise a basic agenda. These topics can often be tricky to present effectively, and meeting again in a few days gives the student instructors time to brainstorm different techniques. Additional meetings are important as they allow the students to finalize the agenda, decide who will take which topics, and come up with a basic time schedule for how long each of the topics should take. Two meetings are effective because the students address and iron out any problems before teaching the class. For example, if the students decide during the first meeting to incorporate a movie clip but the co-instructor is unable to find the movie, the second meeting allows them to revise the plan. The students should have a conversation about the following issues as they update their agenda: How can this course be the most beneficial to the students? How do we incorporate consciousness-raising into the course? What are our goals for the semester? We also suggest including a list of local resources that instructors can refer to for help and assistance, as well as to refer their students to in answering questions about local places of interest.

**Suggested Topics to Cover in the Course**

Instructors are encouraged to make changes to best suit their situation, but we offer the following suggestions of topics to cover in the course, and suggestions about ways to include these topics in a class agenda. Based on these principles, topics in the class could include: introductions to feminism, reproductive rights, women in the workplace, and voting rights. Students may want to specifically discuss stereotypes of feminism, why they identify as feminists, what feminism advocates for, and explanations of feminism connection to combating all forms of oppression. In many ways the building of community through sharing personal experiences is the most important part of this course. Student instructors can begin by explaining their personal experiences with feminism and sisterhood. Make sure to include that it’s okay not to identify as a feminist and why or why not the instructors do. Recognize
that “feminism” is a political ideology. One can support feminist goals without identifying as a feminist. You may want to show pictures of famous feminists. Ask the women about their personal thoughts, experiences, and understandings of feminism. Do not tell them that they are wrong. Instead, encourage further conversation and open-minds.

**Best Practices and Lessons Learned for Student Instructors**

What follows are notes that have been developed for students before they begin the course. These guidelines were created after starting the first “Sisterhood & Feminism” course and have continued to be built upon as a way to help students prepare for the challenging discussions that will happen. It is important to remind students that difficult conversations, if handled appropriately, can result in the most meaningful sharing of knowledge and learning experience for the students and the women at their community partner organization. We believe that providing these materials to the students make them feel more comfortable assuming the role as a facilitator, as most Gender and Women’s Studies students are versed in these topics and can feel capable of discussing them with these types of examples.

**Diversity**

Before beginning the course, it is important to recognize that the women you will teach are coming from very different backgrounds. Issues of race, class, religion, sex, sexual orientation, and gender identity come up often in class discussions. As a facilitator, it is important not to ignore these experiences, but instead acknowledge them and use them to begin meaningful and respectful conversations. This includes recognizing one’s own biases. Evaluate language choices and make sure you are using correct and inclusive terminology. Try to become informed about the histories and cultures of the social groups you may be working with. If you don’t know something, ask someone who does. Recognize that someone’s upbringing affects the way that they understand concepts like sisterhood and community. Most importantly, do not assume that everyone shares the same experiences.
**Things Will Not Always Go As Planned**

You are dealing with sensitive material that may bring up unexpected emotions or memories for your students. Once again, it is important to recognize these experiences if they arise. Your response often provides an important example of sisterhood for the women. Remain confident and in control, but listen and learn from the women’s experiences. Even if the experience is something that you are unfamiliar with, you can listen and respond, but sometimes it is important for someone who understands the situation to respond. Luckily, the room is filled with women who may have had similar experiences. Without assuming or expecting anything, you can encourage class members to jump in. Either way, you should listen and acknowledge the experience of each woman if they struggle with the discussions. Do not ignore situations as they present themselves. You may also wish to speak with a woman after class to make sure she felt heard and that any questions or concerns were answered. Checking in with them before the next class is another option as well.

**Not Everyone Will Be Receptive and Some May Know More Than You Do**

Some topics that arise in this course can cause controversy and debate in the classroom. Embrace these conversations as a learning experience. Refer to ground rules when conversations begin to get out of control. Many students have told us that they learn a lot from the course. Even when topics become difficult, it is important to stick with the class.

It is important to also remember that some of your students may be highly educated in this topic. Acknowledge the students’ knowledge and encourage them to share it as well as to continue learning. Almost all students come with experiences of gender oppression. These experiences may not be exactly what you learned in your Gender and Women’s Studies course, but in many cases they are as or more important. Try to incorporate space for these experiences into your lesson plan.
CONCLUSION

“Sisterhood & Feminism” is an opportunity for academic theory around feminism to move toward praxis. If Gender and Women’s Studies is inherently about community engagement, then engaging students in community is integral to an undergraduate education in Gender and Women’s Studies. Student reflections demonstrate that putting theories into practice outside of the classroom does work toward the mission of Gender and Women’s Studies in engaging students in activism and community building so they can begin to understand how to be agents of social change. We suggest that community-based programs should be commonplace for all Gender and Women’s Studies programs that are working to teach feminist praxis. “Sisterhood & Feminism” is offered here as one example to serve that mission. We have included additional course materials with suggested discussion topics and sample weekly agenda for that purpose. We encourage you to use this model and information in any way that could help to expand your Gender and Women’s Studies program on a path towards community engagement and feminist praxis.

WORKS CITED


APPENDIX A

Suggested Topics to Cover in the Course

1) **Explanation of Feminism and Sisterhood**
   a) Feminism: A movement to end sexism and oppression (Sexism is discrimination based on a person’s sex)
   b) Sisterhood: Encourages women to support each other in order to end sexism. Sisterhood recognizes that women (not just men) can perpetuate sexist practices. Sisterhood encourages women to reach out to each other and end their own sexist behaviors

2) **Explanation of Sex, Gender, Sexuality, and Transgender**
   a) Sex: Whether someone is male, female, intersex. This is biological and often determined at birth.
   b) Gender: “The range of social and relational characteristics that mark our bodies as belonging to one of several social categories. The most common categories are boy/man and girl/woman, but they are not the only possible ones. There are also individuals who identify as transgender, two-spirit, and genderqueer... Gender is a complex set of situated relationships that describe how we identify ourselves and how others choose to interact with us in the world. It is informed by the sex that we are assigned at birth, and although many females develop a gender identity as a girl or woman, and many males identify as boys and men, many individuals also develop gender identities that vary from this familiar pattern”
   c) Sexuality: “A term that is used to refer to an individual’s tendencies, preferences, and desires with respect to romantic partners and intimate relationships. Sometimes sexual orientation is used interchangeably with the term sexuality; however, sexuality can be used more broadly to refer to a wide

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variety of identities and behaviors as well”\(^2\).

d) Sexual Orientation: “Describes who we are sexually attracted to and is generally determined at a very young age.” The four main categories of sexual orientation include asexuals, bi-/omni-/pansexuals, heterossexuals, homosexuals”\(^3\).

e) Transgender: This term “describes individuals who are not cisgender, or whose gender identity is different from the sex that they were assigned at birth. There is as much variety of gender expression within the transgender community as there is within groups of men and women. Some transgender people choose to challenge and disrupt the categories of masculinity and femininity and embrace varying degrees of each”\(^4\).

3) Waves of Feminism

a) First wave: Primarily dealt with suffrage, this perhaps can be linked to voter rights today.

b) Second wave: Focused on inclusion of women into male dominated fields; white, middle-class woman was “universal” woman; sought equality with men. (Womanism or Chicana Feminism may broaden this perspective.)

c) Third wave: Addresses issues of intersectionality, more inclusive towards all individuals across race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ability, nationality, and other axes of difference.

4) Personal Experiences

a) Feminism in our personal lives: Relate to feminism on a personal scale by explaining how you are a feminist and its importance in your life.

b) Feminism in their lives: Ask the women to share their experiences/impressions of feminism, the work of feminists.

\(^3\) ---. 48.
\(^4\) ---. 37.
Sisterhood and Feminism Agendas

Week 1 Agenda Example

1) **Introductions** (15 minutes)
   a) Group Introduction – Students will give a brief welcome and introduce the group
      i) Thanks for signing up for Sisterhood and Feminism
      ii) We’re undergraduate students studying gender and women’s studies
   b) Student Introductions
      i) Who we are (names, pronouns, etc.)
      ii) Why we wanted to teach this course
      iii) Whether we’ve ever taught the course before
      iv) Why we identify as feminists / why we think it’s important / what it means to us
   c) Introductions of community members at Sojourner House
      i) Names
      ii) Why they signed up for the course
      iii) What they’d like to learn from it

2) **Ground Rules** (15 minutes)
   a) Ask the women to help create a list of ground rules that we will use throughout the course. We will add to the discussion if the women are stuck or we think there’s an important one that has not been said. (Think about using a white pad so you can bring these each week)
   b) We came up with the following rules (backups):
      i) Always use “I” statements and speak for yourself, not the group
      ii) Respect others
      iii) What’s said in the room stays in the room (confidential)
      iv) One person talks at a time
v) You can disagree something that is said, but make sure to disagree with what is being said, not who is saying it
vi) This is a safe space - Verbal attacks and bullying are not allowed

3) Sex, Gender, and Sexual Orientation (15 minutes)
a) Definitions (Consider using an activity as opposed to just reading a list)
b) Discussion about differences between sex, gender, and sexual orientation
   i) Create list of gendered activities
   ii) Discuss how gender is socially constructed
   iii) Discuss how sexual orientation is determined by sex or gender

4) What is Planned for the Course (5 minutes)
a) In the next couple of weeks we will.... (Some examples include)
   i) Look at the representation of sisterhood in the media by watching a clip from a movie
   ii) Share personal experiences/opinions about sisterhood through positive and supportive discussion
   iii) Discuss how the themes of the course affect society today
   iv) Learn to understand and identify gendered issues
b) Community Member Goals for the Course (5 minutes)
   i) If there is anything the students would like to learn about that wasn’t mentioned

5) Highlights of Everyone’s Day (5 minutes)
a) We will go in a circle and talk about the best part of our day
b) Thank everyone for their time

Week 2 Agenda Example

1) Introductions (10 minutes)
a) Group Leader Brief Reintroductions – Names
   i) Remind everybody of ground rules
b) Names of community participants again (Possible pair with the highlight of their day so far)

2) **Introduction to Today’s Topic** (10 minutes)
   a) Begin discussing concept of “sisterhood” and its representation in the media
   b) Ice-breaker: name a famous woman that you admire (living or dead)

3) **Personal Experiences w/ Sisterhood @ Sojourner** (10 minutes)
   a) Introduce how Sojourner can be an opportunity to connect with other women
   b) Ask women to write down one goal for a way they can better support the women in their lives
   c) Ask if they would share if comfortable

4) **Small Groups** (15 minutes)
   a) Introduction to scenario activity
      i) Hand out scenarios and ask the women to decide as a group why each of the women in the scenarios acted the way they did and how you would have felt as each one of the characters
      ii) Assign scenarios (1 per group)
      iii) Everyone will briefly join a group (read scenario, leave, come back and check in with them)

5) **Movie Clip** (15 minute)
   a) Intro to Activity
      i) We’ll watch a brief clip from a movie and then in the small groups discuss the medias role in creating stereotypes of women, sisterhood, and feminism

6) **Wrap-up**
   a) Thank everyone for their time

**Week 3 Agenda Example**

1) **Introductions** (5 minutes)
   a) Welcome
i) Highlights of everyone’s day so far
ii) Connect this week to last week

2) **Icebreaker:** (5 minutes)
a) What do you think of when you hear the word feminist or feminists?

3) **“This is what a Feminist Looks Like:”** (10 minutes)
a) Pass around diverse pictures of women/men wearing the “This is what a Feminist Looks Like” shirts and/or show this is what a feminist looks like media clip
b) Talk about how feminists can be anyone/very diverse (include gender, race, sexual orientation, class, ability, nationality, and other axes of difference)

4) **Definitions:** (10 minutes)
a) Go over definitions of feminism, sisterhood, sexism
   i) What it means to be a “feminist”
   ii) What it means to have “sisterhood” in your life
   iii) Connection between “feminism” and “sisterhood”

5) **Group Activity:** (20 minutes)
a) Have women split into groups
b) Ask them to think of at least three problems that women (in general) face that men usually don’t worry about
c) Make the distinction that these should be gendered problems, not biological
d) Ask if anyone remembers what “gender” is? Does anyone know what a “gendered problem” means? Gendered roles?
i) One student can help with each group
e) Discussion
   i) Go over the problems they came up with
   ii) Take one “problem” from each group
   iii) Discuss the roots of that problem
   iv) Relate it to feminism (a feminist lens allows you to see why it’s a problem)
   v) Relate it to sisterhood
6) **Movie Clips**: (15 minutes)  
   a) Cinderella, clip without sisterhood  
   b) Sister Act, clip with sisterhood  
   c) Discuss the clips and their reactions

7) **Wrap-up**  
   a) Thank everyone for their time

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**Week 4 Agenda Example**

1) **Introductions** (5 minutes)  
   a) Welcome  
      i) Highlights of everyone’s day so far  
      ii) Connect this week to last week

2) **Sisterhood Discussion** (10 minutes)  
   a) Focus on concepts instead of definition  
      i) Use examples of engaging in sisterhood in classroom like clapping during highlights, helping sign everyone in, trying to remember names, taking care of each other’s babies, not judging each other, etc.  
      ii) Tie in common goals of being better people/better mothers  
      iii) Reminder how you do not have to give up on self, do not have to be best friends, and no one is perfect in sisterhood  
      iv) By being the best you can be, you are in a better position to help others

3) **Definitions of sexism, feminism, and feminist** (10 minutes)  
   a) How these definitions relate and importance of both sisterhood and feminism  
      i) Flip sheet to reveal pre-written definitions  
      ii) Difference between feminism/feminist (feminism as movement against sexism)

4) **Expression of their own stories** (20 minutes)  
   a) Where do they want to be after leaving the house? How can they use sisterhood and feminism to help them get there?
i) 10 minutes to write/10 minutes to share with group

5) **Final Wrap-Up** (15 minutes)
   a) Class Evaluations
   b) Give out resource sheets for them to learn more
   c) Thank everyone again for their time

**APPENDIX C**

**Example of Resources Provided to Community Partners at Sojourner House**

**Websites of Interest**


“Ask Amy,” part of the [www.feminist.com](http://www.feminist.com) website, serves as a resource for people to ask questions about anything from “How do you define feminism?” to “What’s a good feminist movie?”

**Feminist Majority Foundation**- [http://www.feminist.org/](http://www.feminist.org/)

Another very active non-profit women’s rights organization, “www.feminist.org” also allows you to get involved with feminist campaigns by sending pre-written emails.


Feministing is a website that blogs about current and recent events relating to feminism.
Autostraddle specifically deals with the intersection of queer identities and The Feminist Crunk Collective with race and ethnicity.

**National Organization for Women**- [http://now.org/](http://now.org/)

One of the largest non-profit women’s rights organizations in the world, [http://www.now.org](http://www.now.org) allows you to get involved with feminist campaigns by sending pre-written emails.
Planned Parenthood - http://www.plannedparenthood.org/
Offers detailed information about birth control and other aspects of sexual and reproductive health.

**Suggested Reading**

*Colonize This!: Young Women of Color on Today’s Feminism* – Daisy Hernandez and Bushra Rehman (2002)

*Feminism is for Everyone* – bell hooks (2000)


*The Vagina Monologues* – Eve Ensler (2001)

“One Unpacking the Invisible Backpack” – Peggy McIntosh (1988)

*Sisterhood is Forever: The Women’s Anthology for a New Millenium* – Robin Morgan (2003)
APPENDIX D

Examples of Ways to Break Down an Agenda

This agenda is based on the Suggested Topics (Appendix A) and a course with four instructors.

Instructor 1: Explanation of Feminism and Sisterhood

1) Introduce the terms: Before jumping right into defining feminism, sisterhood, sexism, give a bit of a context first. For example, you could say something like, “Feminism is a term that is often misunderstood and defined incorrectly. Although there is no universal definition, the one we like best and find is the most reflective of a universal definition (if there could be) is.... ‘a movement to end sexism and oppression.’”

2) Then, since you just mentioned “sexism,” it would be easy to then explain that term (just so all the women are on the same page).

3) Lastly, “sisterhood” is a term that the community members at Sojourner House will probably have an easier time relating to. Not all the women may be ready to declare themselves feminists (perhaps because they are unfamiliar with it, they may have had a bad experience with it, maybe because the often negative connotations that follow the word, or other reasons), but “sisterhood” has a friendly connotation and is a good step toward embracing feminism. Taking the time to really explain sisterhood and giving examples of sexism (including how women can be sexist toward one another) and how sisterhood works against these negativities is a crucial part to introducing this course.

Instructor 2: Explanation of Sex, Gender, Sexuality, and Transgender

1) Expect questions, concerns, frustrations, misunderstandings, etc. with this section. Just make sure to slowly and clearly go over each term. These terms are important to understand for this class and future classes.
a) Some classes have no trouble accepting these terms, while other classes may have initial hesitations. However, in most classes there are many questions, so make sure to clearly explain the terms and listen to questions carefully.
b) It may be beneficial to include these terms in the handout, but leave room for women to write in definitions.
c) One co-instructor could write the terms on the flip-chart as another co-instructor explains them.
d) Make sure the person writing has finished before moving on to the next term (this also ensures that the women had enough time to write down the term in their notes).
e) Ask for any questions after each term, and again – pay close attention to them so your answer is helpful.

2) “Transgender” can be a difficult term to explain. Some may think you either mean drag queens or transsexuals. The easiest way to make sure everyone understands is to explain early on that it is not the same thing as changing your sex or wanting to change your sex (transsexual). Refer to the root word “gender” vs. “sex.”

Instructor 3: Waves of Feminism

1) Discuss the time period (political goals, political climate, etc.)
2) Make sure that the women understand that knowing the dates and the names of the laws/policies that changed are not as important as realizing that feminism is a fight that began a long time ago and is still going on today.
3) Lead a conversation on the ways that things have and have not changed.

Instructor 4: Personal Experiences

1) Begin with the instructors explaining their personal experiences with feminism/sisterhood. Make sure to include that it’s okay not to identify as a feminist and why/why not the instructors do. Recognize
that “feminism” is a political ideology. One can support feminist goals without identifying as a feminist.

2) Show pictures of famous feminists. Make sure to include diversity in this lesson. In the past, these pictures have included Barack Obama, Ashley Judd, Whoopi Goldberg, Geena Davis, and Margaret Cho in their “This is What a Feminist Looks Like” t-shirts.

3) Ask the women about their personal thoughts, experiences, and understandings of feminism. Do not tell them that they are wrong. Instead, encourage further conversation and open minds.
CHANGING AN INSTITUTIONAL ENVIRONMENT THROUGH APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY: ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY’S COLLEGE OF LIBERAL ARTS

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INTRODUCTION

Changing our institutional environment to make it more beneficial to the success of women (and colleagues of all genders), while not changing ourselves to better fit into the existing environment – this is the goal of the Appreciative Inquiry process underway at Rochester Institute’s College of Liberal Arts (COLA). Appreciative Inquiry is a strength-based approach that builds on positive psychology as well as social construction of language (Cockell and McArthur-Blair). Based on interviews that reveal existing strengths of an organization, it leads practitioners to envision and realize a future organization that builds on and reinforces these strengths by developing concrete steps to implement their vision. We are using this approach to enhance professional and leadership development among women in the college,

1This paper is based upon work supported by the National Science Foundation under Grant No. 1209115 as well as by RIT’s College of Liberal Arts.
expand representation of diverse faculty in leadership positions, and improve overall faculty satisfaction in the college. At the 2014 Seneca Falls Dialogues, we introduced participants to Appreciative Inquiry and reflected on the process in our college. This article provides an overview on Appreciative Inquiry, analyzes the results of our session at the Seneca Falls Dialogues, and discusses the Appreciative Inquiry process in our college. It aims to introduce readers to Appreciative Inquiry as a form of feminist engagement in higher education and other institutional environments.

Our Appreciative Inquiry process at Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) is part of a larger Advance grant funded by the National Science Foundation (NSF) under Grant No. 1209115. AdvanceRIT aims at increasing the recruitment of women faculty candidates in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) including Social and Behavioral Sciences (SBS), strategically increasing the representation of women on RIT's faculty, reducing women faculty attrition rates, and promoting women faculty career advancement. In 2012, RIT received a 3.5 million dollar NSF grant to work towards these goals over a 5-year period. Based on a previous self-study of gender disparities in faculty attrition rates, salary, climate, and satisfaction, AdvanceRIT includes a dual-career hire initiative and work-life integration efforts, pursues policy development such as automatic extension of the probationary period for parental leave for tenure-track faculty, and addresses unconscious bias in faculty hiring and various evaluation processes. In addition, AdvanceRIT organizes a Connectivity workshop series to promote recruitment, retention, and advancement of women faculty in STEM fields by offering resources and strategies related to career satisfaction, career navigation, work-life balance, leadership, recognition of work, and scholarship to RIT faculty, and Connect grants to support leadership and career development for all tenured and pre-tenured faculty at RIT. Our Appreciative Inquiry process is funded through one of these Connect grants. Many gender equity programs aim at making women better fit in the existing institutional environment, for example, by improving their negotiation
and career navigation skills. Program approaches such as these put the onus on women to fit better into the existing institutional environment. By contrast, Appreciative Inquiry aims at changing our college’s institutional and organizational environment to create a culture that better accommodates its faculty.

**APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY: AN OVERVIEW**

Appreciative Inquiry is a narrative-based organizational change approach developed in the 1980s by scholars at Case Western University and has spread widely in the field of organizational development. It is the foundation for positive organizational studies and strength-based organizational management. When the positive core of an organization is revealed, it nourishes personal and organizational change and, potentially, transformation (Cockell and McArthur-Blair). According to Whitney and Trosten-Boom, Appreciative Inquiry is a form of personal and organizational change “based on questions and dialogues about strengths, successes, values, hopes and dreams” (1).

Grounded in social constructionist theories, Appreciative Inquiry assumes that we live in worlds of meaning that emerge from our personal history and shared culture and that we create in our conversations (Gergen; Watkins, Mohr and Kelly 38-9). In higher education, people come from various social backgrounds and cultures with different beliefs and norms. Dominant cultures are the “established ways of doing things, beliefs and norms that are often based on gender, race, ethnicity, age, ability, religion, class, and so on” (Cockel and McArthur-Blair 53). While institutions of higher education nowadays often seek to attract faculty, students, and staff from diverse cultures, members of the dominant culture often unknowingly exclude others from fully participating in the institution such as from conversations about the preferred future of the institution or in the dominant daily dialogue about institutional priorities. Appreciative Inquiry provides a framework for people to construct stories that have common themes and future images and that recognize the social inequities of those participating in the process.
Appreciative Inquiry involves an iterative process consisting of four phases (see fig. 1):

1. Discovery: At the heart of this stage are *appreciative dialogues*. A semi-structured interview guide is used for one-on-one conversations. Participants are encouraged to discover personal and organizational high points and what they value. These interviews explore the success factors and personal experiences that contribute to the participants' personal success and the success of the organization. From these conversations, themes that describe the positive core of the organization are identified.

2. Dream: The purpose of this stage is to move beyond the status quo and to discuss what the organization would look like if the

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*Most Appreciative Inquiry practitioners refer to these exercises as “interviews.” We call them “dialogues” because the notion of interviews carries methodological implications, particularly in the social sciences, which the conversations and narratives in an Appreciative Inquiry process do not necessarily meet.*
personal and organizational strengths and aspirations were realized.

3. Design: At this stage, participants are asked to plan the ideal organization, the social architecture or actual design of systems that give rise to the articulated vision of the possibilities. (Cooperrider and Whitney call this the design of the *appreciative organization*.)

4. Deliver: Participants identify their intended actions and ask for support. Self-organized groups plan and carry out the next steps.

Five basic principles arise from Appreciative Inquiry’s theoretical foundation and practical approach. First, following from the constructionist foundation, practitioners believe that the way one describes things guides one’s perception of the world, and they pay attention to where conflict arises from the assumption that others see the world in the same way. The second principle, simultaneity, poses that the process of Appreciative Inquiry itself creates change, by leading participants to reflect on the questions and issues that arise. Third, the poetic principle states that practitioners choose what to focus on in their inquiry. Without ignoring problems that need to be changed, practitioners focus on reframing problems creatively and collaboratively in view of a desired state. Fourth, the approach is anticipatory in that the image that participants create of their shared future inspires their actions. And fifth, the underlying positive principle reinforces the notion that questions lead to positive change (Cockell and McArthur-Blair 16-9; Cockell 2014).

Appreciative Inquiry thus moves away from focusing on deficits to searching for, and finding, the positive core of a team or organization. Cooperrider and Whitney, among the co-originators of the process, describe it as “the cooperative, co-evolutionary search for the best in people, their organization, and the world around them. It involves systematic discovery of what gives life to an organization when it is most effective and most capable” (8). By recognizing participants for their
strengths, successes, and effective work, Appreciative Inquiry energizes them to do more of that rather than discourage them through a focus on their weaknesses and failures. As Cockell and McArthur-Blair emphasize, “[b]y beginning with what is wanted and finding out where it already exists, however small, people get grounded in their successes and therefore become more confident that they can do more and build their ideal futures” (15).

While organizations are often seen as problems to be solved, Appreciative Inquiry sees organizations as a solution or as a mystery to be embraced (see table 1). In other words, Appreciative Inquiry encourages a style of leadership that focuses on what in an organization is working well, fosters inquiry and dialogue, acknowledges strengths in others and oneself, and reframes problems to desired outcomes (Cockell 2014).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Problem Solving</th>
<th>Appreciative Inquiry</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identify Problem</td>
<td>Appreciate “What is” (What gives life?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conduct Root Cause Analysis</td>
<td>Imagine “What might be”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brainstorm Solutions and Analyze</td>
<td>Determine “What should be”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop Action Plans</td>
<td>Create “What will be”</td>
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Table 1 adapted from Cooperrider and Whitney; see also Cooperrider.

Appreciative Inquiry has been implemented in a number of higher education settings and circumstances, including those focused on student retention, curricular change, adult education, program evaluation, and faculty development (Alston-Mills; Davis; Goen and Kawalilak; and Nemiro, Hacker, Lucero-Ferrel and Guthrie). At least one institution, California State Polytechnic University of Pomona, has used Appreciative Inquiry in its ADVANCE project. The Appreciative Inquiry team at Cal Poly recognized that Appreciative Inquiry encourages building on what an organization is already doing well,
rather than trying to pinpoint problem areas and fix what is not working... [Simultaneously, Appreciative Inquiry] enhances an organization’s capacity for collaboration and change. Appreciative Inquiry is a particular way of asking questions and envisioning the future that fosters positive relationships and builds on the basic goodness in organizations and the practices within them (Nemiro, Hacker, Lucero-Ferrel and Guthrie 11).

The Appreciative Inquiry process at Cal Poly included eight focus groups among faculty in science, engineering, and math. The focus areas were recruitment of women in STEM disciplines and career development for women. The goal of these focus groups was to determine department strength in these areas for new women faculty. Each focus group meeting lasted about an hour and followed the process outlined above, incorporating all Appreciative Inquiry process stages. The Appreciative Inquiry process resulted in a series of strategies and best practices in recruitment and career development for women in STEM, and by 2009, implemented several of these initiatives.

**Appreciative Inquiry at the 2014 Seneca Falls Dialogues**

During our 2014 Seneca Falls Dialogue session, we asked participants to engage in Appreciative Inquiry Dialogues before we introduced them to the approach. We thus provided conference participants with an inductive experience, exposing them to Appreciative Inquiry on an experiential basis before familiarizing them with the approach’s theoretical background. We had successfully used the same inductive sequence (and a similar set of questions) for an informational session for women faculty in our college. In both cases, we thought that a direct engagement with this set of questions that emphasizes the positive would convey the different kind of methodology adopted by Appreciative Inquiry more effectively than a mere description of the method. Furthermore, this process-based and interactive approach challenged the more traditional critical analysis methodology to which we have grown accustomed in academic circles. Since our less common approach challenged participants to think about their expectations for the session,
it brought to the foreground that the academic approach often shapes the organization of meaning and experience, something usually hidden underneath the content conveyed.

For the Seneca Falls Dialogues, we adapted a set of questions commonly used in Appreciative Inquiry Dialogues. Usually, partners who work in the same organization or institutional environment, and who are interested in improving their shared environment, participate in Appreciative Inquiry Dialogues. At the Seneca Falls Dialogues, however, our session participants came from different institutions and professional backgrounds. Therefore, we added an introductory question in which the participants introduced themselves and explained the organizational environments in which they worked. We asked the Seneca Falls Dialogues session attendees to address the following four questions:

1. Where do you work, and what is your role at your workplace?
2. Describe your best experience at your workplace – when you felt the most alive and vibrant, and most excited about your work.
3. Without being modest, describe what it is that you value most about yourself and your work.
4. Imagine your workplace ten years from now, when everything is just as you always wished it could be. What is different? How have you contributed to making the dream possible?

It was a testimony to the open and interactive nature of the Seneca Falls Dialogues that, after the dialogue questions were distributed, session attendees very quickly formed groups of two or three and the room instantaneously hummed with conversation. The attendees knew that we were hoping to collect their dialogue notes after the session for the purpose of our own data analysis for this article. Fourteen participants – that is about half of the session attendees – did return their dialogue notes, and their responses provided helpful insights into their institutional backgrounds and their self-images and visions as well as revealed a hidden bias present in the Appreciative Inquiry questions.

First, the dialogue notes revealed information about the institutional affiliations of the session attendees. The majority of the attendees – six
out of fourteen respondents – were undergraduate students from different majors, including three students from computing disciplines, two students from humanities backgrounds, and one student with a science background. Four session attendees worked as university faculty or staff, and two worked in the service sector as sales associates or lifeguards. To preserve the anonymity of the respondents, we had made the response to the first question optional, and two participants chose not to respond to the first question.

Second, the best workplace experiences seemed to depend on the institutional backgrounds of the session attendees. The students tended to identify a particular content area as their best experience, for example, building math foundations, literature and writing, or coding to design games. One student identified as his or her best experience classes that convey a new perspective. All three faculty identified teaching as the best experience in their workplace, and they specifically mentioned the opportunity to connect with students, to see students learn, and to observe them see something in a new way. One faculty member also mentioned research as a best experience, particularly the ability to take a project from its inception to completion and to create new knowledge. A staff member described doing a perfect job as the most satisfying experience, even if that person was not individually credited for the work done. Of the four attendees who did not identify themselves as being part of higher education, three identified helping – both customers and co-workers – as their most satisfying experience, while one was most satisfied when she or he receives comments and appreciative remarks from clients and supervisors. The responses also suggest that those inside academia see their best experiences as related to a certain subject matter – the major in the case of students, and teaching in the case of faculty – while those outside of higher education identified helping as the most satisfying experience. If further data supported this finding, it would suggest that one possibly essential way to improve institutions of higher education is to support people’s ability to relate to their subject matter.
Third, it appears that what session attendees valued in themselves and in their work also depended on their institutional affiliation. Notably, the students and those working outside of academia reflected on what they valued in themselves and not so much in their work. For example, they valued their own directness, what they are doing, being a responsible person, being a good writer, learning things, drawing connections between texts and creating syntheses, their passion and impetus to pursue it, their brain working like a computer, self-respect and mutual respect, honesty, being helpful and feeling needed, and being personable and knowing their clients/customers and their needs well. By contrast, faculty and staff mostly valued being able to reach out to others. For example, faculty mentioned valuing inspiring others and sharing experiences, creating space for others and building communities, and being able to teach different subject matters to diverse student populations. Some students also valued their ability to reach out to others, such as encouraging learning in other people, wanting people to be happy, promoting good character, and keeping people safe. These responses suggest that reaching out to others and being able to collaborate is an essential positive value for persons in higher education, and this could be strengthened in an Appreciative Inquiry process.

Finally, responses to the fourth question revealed a hidden bias in the Appreciative Inquiry questions: Appreciative Inquiry assumes that participants will remain in their current organizations or institutional environments for a significant amount of time, and may therefore be interested in improving these environments. Of course, this applies to employees in corporations – the area in which Appreciative Inquiry was developed – and it applies to faculty and staff in higher education. However, it applies less to transient students who expect to move on to new environments after graduating. Either students need to be altruistically motivated to improve their environment for future generations, or the Appreciative Inquiry process will have little to offer them for their current environments. Consequently, the majority of students – and one staff member – answered the fourth question by giving the place where they expect to be in 10 years from now, such as
opening a business in computer networking, having or running a computer game store, coding for space robots, completing a graduate degree, and acquiring an academic job. By contrast, faculty and staff as well as those working in non-academic environments imagine improvements of their current environments such as fewer divisions between faculty, staff, and the administration, better pay for teaching and professional development, and more encouragement for part time faculty. Given our current focus on improving the situation of women faculty, this hidden bias has not had any direct bearing on our own Appreciative Inquiry process; yet, it suggests that the methodology will have limited use or at least require adaptation for those seeking to improve the situation of women students or other more transitory groups.

In addition, a notable number of session participants wished that their workplaces had a more diverse staff in the future. Expressed by participants working in higher education, in the legal system, at a computer game store, and among service associates, this may be a vision emerging from the shared values of those participating in the Seneca Falls Dialogues. There also were a few visions that included improved values rather than environments. Thus, one student hoped to better understand perseverance, a faculty member hoped for a vibrant intellectual culture around a specific subject area, and two persons from outside academia hoped for more respect for elders. Most people focused on the first part of the fourth question (“Imagine your workplace ten years from now, when everything is just as you always wished it could be”) and did not specifically address the last part (“How have you contributed to making the dream possible?”). The key, and the most challenging part of Appreciative Inquiry, is to identify how to transform the workplace into an ideal organization. To focus on the transformation piece, perhaps the last question should have been split into two questions. The Appreciative Inquiry Dialogue we conducted at the 2014 Seneca Falls Dialogue session was likely not long enough to tackle the transformation step.
In 2013, RIT conducted a survey administered by the Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education (COACHE) at Harvard University. Serving as part of the data collection for the AdvanceRIT grant, the survey revealed strengths and weaknesses in the situation for women faculty. For the College of Liberal Arts (COLA), the COACHE Survey results indicated several strengths, including mentoring, promotion and tenure, college leadership and department collegiality, and departmental quality. They also identified four areas of concern and four areas of mixed results, three of which Appreciative Inquiry addresses through fostering leadership among women faculty: collaboration opportunities, interdisciplinarity, and appreciation/recognition.

Appreciative Inquiry involves a whole college process rather than one that is department-based because the majority of COLA departments, nine out of thirteen, are small, with twelve or fewer faculty. Some of these departments have only three or fewer women faculty. Furthermore, among the thirteen COLA departments, only five are chaired by women. The majority of associate and full professors in the college are men, and the majority of assistant professors are women (currently less than 10% of the full professors are women). Nine departments have only one or two tenured women, and one department has no tenured or tenure-track woman.

In January 2014, a core group of five women faculty from different ranks and departments applied for funding for an Appreciative Inquiry process in COLA through an AdvanceRIT Connect Grant, which was awarded and officially launched in February 2014. Like at other institutions, our core group defined the Appreciative Inquiry process and guided it through the initial stages. By now, four additional women faculty have become involved in planning and guiding the Appreciative Inquiry process, and the core group has met five times – in February, May, August, September and October 2014 – for planning purposes. So far, the core group has organized three events, all of which were open to all women faculty in COLA: (1) An introductory lunch meeting in March 2014, (2) a one-day Appreciative Inquiry training workshop in April
2014, and (3) a follow-up Appreciative Inquiry Workshop in October 2014.

The lunch meeting in March 2014 aimed at introducing women faculty in COLA to the Appreciative Inquiry approach, and inviting those interested to join the process. About twenty-five women attended the meeting, which the core group organized in a similar fashion to the way we organized the session at the Seneca Falls Dialogues. After a very brief overview on Appreciative Inquiry and introductions by the core group, participants engaged in Appreciative Inquiry Dialogues that included the last three questions. The Dialogues invited women to share their best experience in COLA, when they felt most alive; what they valued about themselves and their work; and how they imagined a better COLA in 10 years.

Two workshops with Jeanie Cockell, an Appreciative Inquiry consultant and co-author of the leading publication on Appreciative Inquiry in Higher Education, have been an essential part of our Appreciative Inquiry process (Cockell and McArthur-Blair). In April 2014, Dr. Cockell conducted a one-day Appreciative Inquiry training with nine women from the core group and other interested COLA women faculty. This training led the group through the four-phase process of Appreciative Inquiry. The group began by identifying what everyone valued in themselves and in their work so as to discover what gave life to their work. Values such as “people valued and respected,” “real connections,” and “authenticity” achieved the highest support among the group, leading the group to appreciate existing strengths in the college. The group then engaged in a dreaming exercise to envision what could be, and to envision results. To do so, they reframed current issues as positive values on which the group can build to change the college. For example, issues such as “fraternity,” “two-facedness,” “dismissiveness,” and “under-evaluation of women’s research, service and teaching” were reframed as “community,” “honesty,” “consideration,” and “support, lifting people up.” The group agreed that they wanted a “healthy life, positive environment, unconditional support for careers,” and a “collegial and inclusive environment.” In the next step, the group designed its
ideal: “COLA – thriving & inclusive” would be the goal to work towards. In the final step, destiny, the group discussed how to realize a thriving and inclusive COLA and how to sustain the positive dynamic. Ideas ranged from forming a research group to foster dialogue and connections among women to founding a women faculty club to create an intimate atmosphere in which women can connect and support each other.

In October 2014, finally, the extended core group met with Jeanie Cockell for a three-hour workshop to review and reorient the Appreciative Inquiry process. The core group created the idea of bracelets with the inscription “COLA - thriving and inclusive” for raising awareness of the group’s goals among all COLA faculty, the idea of writing an AdvanceRIT Partnership grant to conduct an Appreciative Inquiry survey for additional data on the situation of women in COLA and their aspirations and dreams, and the idea of conducting drop-in sessions to encourage participation in the survey. One of the major challenges of the Appreciative Inquiry process has been that the process is emotionally demanding of its participants. Because Appreciative Inquiry requires participants to reframe problems to strengths, in effect, it called upon participants to think and feel differently. The reframing exercises challenged participants to change their own workplace identities and strategic competencies, and that challenge, was in and of itself, revolutionary. Members of the core group responded in different ways to this challenge. For those of us in junior positions, the Appreciative Inquiry process carries the insecurity of how what we do may affect our tenure cases. And for those of us in leadership positions, the Appreciative Inquiry process requires laying open the planned calculus and luck that it takes to arrive and survive in these positions, and to play and subvert the game at the same time. The emotional intensity of these challenges has occasionally pervaded the core group discussions, and during these discussions, the personal and professional support within the group has been critical. While we feel that it is important to be transparent about the emotional dimension of the methodology, it may preclude participation of those who choose not to be open emotionally in their professional environments. It will thus
function as a potential exclusionary factor. Creating a “safe” environment for Appreciative Inquiry dialogues may help overcome this exclusionary factor. Since the concept of “safe” may be specific to a given environment, those organizing Appreciative Inquiry activities may want to take this into consideration.

The COLA group has also faced more practical challenges such as the timing of the Connect grant cycle and the high demands of teaching, research, and service commitments on faculty time. The timing of the Connect grants led the core group to organize the full-day workshop with Jeanie Cockell in April, towards the end of the academic year, when additional meetings and other activities increase the already high demands on faculty time. This may have impeded the already difficult recruitment of faculty for the Appreciative Inquiry process. Although many faculty had to leave and rejoin the workshop throughout the day because of teaching and other commitments, those participating developed supportive group dynamics and created constructive ideas for change. Unfortunately, the group dispersed over the summer, and other scholarship and teaching commitments diverted any individual activities for the Appreciative Inquiry process. Being able to work together again with Dr. Cockell in the fall allowed the group to regain momentum and to set new directions.

Another challenge is to what extent to include non-women COLA faculty in the Appreciative Inquiry process. The core group has had many discussions about this question, recognizing that transforming the organizational culture will require participation across the college. Indeed, the core group is aware of women – including women in leadership positions – who act in masculine ways that exclude other women, as well as of men who are not part of the masculine in-group, and who would likely benefit from participation in the Appreciative Inquiry process in similar ways as many women faculty. So far, the core group has limited Appreciative Inquiry activities to women faculty for the main reason that this allows the group to create a “safe space” where women can feel free to address problems openly. Yet, the core group continues to reassess when and how to expand their activities.
Overall, the Appreciative Inquiry process started at a very opportune
time, and this may be a factor that will help us change COLA’s
institutional environment. The results of the COACHE survey revealed
information on the RIT overall climate for women and other minority
groups that the College and Institute leadership has been compelled to
act upon. For example, the current COLA Dean has pursued new policies
aimed at supporting a better work-life balance. Thus, in Fall 2014,
COLA instituted a parental teaching leave and reduction of
responsibilities policy after the birth or adoption of a child, and is now
considering a childcare emergency fund, with the understanding that the
focus on the needs of young families should, in a second phase, be
complemented by a focus on the needs of families in later phases that
may have, for example, the need to care for an aging parent or partner.
The Appreciative Inquiry process thus was initiated in a changing
environment, rather than in a stable environment, and it may contribute
to changes in the right direction.

There are other institute-wide changes underway to improve the
success of women faculty at RIT. For example, the AdvanceRIT team has
successfully worked towards changes in policies and procedures such as
an automatic extension of the tenure probationary period for the birth or
adoption of a child, allowing for better work-life balance. The
Appreciative Inquiry process is part of a recent shift to more strongly
highlighting the cultural aspects that obstruct women’s success such as
stereotype threat and hidden bias in recommendation letters and
student evaluations. Together with colloquia and town hall meetings on
these topics, Appreciative Inquiry reveals the ways in which our acting,
speaking and thinking create environments that support or hinder
women. It also leads us to develop a vision and measures for
institutional change. We must ensure that the changes that the college
and the institute are undergoing are not only seen as a mere pipeline
problem – increasing the number of women faculty – but as a climate
problem, that is, as the need to change the environment to make it more
beneficial to the success of all faculty.

**Conclusion**
At the completion of this article, we are almost a year into the Appreciative Inquiry process, which is still a work in progress. This process has certainly helped those involved build new networks and develop support and trust. We know more about what each of us is doing to improve the situation of women and other groups with diverse backgrounds in the college (for example, starting women’s mentoring groups or vocally supporting our women peers in committees), and we can better provide each other with personal and professional support. In other words, in keeping with the simultaneity principle, Appreciative Inquiry is already effecting change in our college.

Our session at the 2014 Seneca Falls Dialogues revealed some specificities of the higher education sector. Both students and faculty are tied to the subject matter of their interest, and faculty, given their role as educators, value being able to collaborate and to reach out to others. We discovered similar values in our own Appreciative Inquiry process, and we designed a future that involves a journal club or writing groups that would allow us to share our research subjects, and a women faculty club of some form that enables us to interact and collaborate more closely. One session participant asked about the place of students in Appreciative Inquiry. While individual students may have limited benefit from Appreciative Inquiry, given their transient time in institutions of higher educations, students will certainly benefit from interacting with diverse, inclusive and thriving faculty.

We expect the results of our Appreciative Inquiry process to be qualitative not quantitative. We do not anticipate claiming that more women faculty are hired, or promoted, or serve as department chairs as a consequence of the process, although, if such demographic changes happened, we could certainly welcome them. But if women’s voices and their issues are heard in committee meetings and given fair attention; if women no longer feel the need to cringe at some of their colleagues’ supposedly funny remarks; and if women feel free to embrace leadership positions because they no longer require them to either act in masculine ways or exclude them from the real locus of power, our college’s
institutional and cultural environment will have undergone a change for the better that embraces women (and many more).

Our goal in using an Appreciative Inquiry process with all interested women in COLA is to achieve the “ripple effect” desired in the Cal Poly ADVANCE project; that is, through the Appreciative Inquiry process, participants will become change agents who can support and encourage other faculty and create a momentum for change that will benefit all faculty in the college and across the institute. Already, based on the experience at our April 2014 Appreciative Inquiry workshop, the leadership of RIT’s Wallace Center – which includes RIT’s library as well as a number of service centers from web development and faculty career development to video production and RIT Press – used Appreciative Inquiry for their own strategic planning process in Fall 2014. Likewise, at least one participant at our Seneca Falls Dialogues session indicated that she wanted to start an Appreciative Inquiry process in her own institution. Appreciative Inquiry thus has and will continue to contribute to changing institutional environments in higher education at RIT and elsewhere, as a form of feminist activism to improve the institutional environment for women and colleagues of all genders.

WORKS CITED


THE DISPROPORTIONATE IMPACT OF TOXINS IN CONSUMER PRODUCTS

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MERCYHURST UNIVERSITY

INTRODUCTION

The following essay will discuss the overuse and under-regulation of toxins in daily consumer products from a gender perspective. Part I of this essay explores the ways in which women are disproportionately affected by toxins in consumer products while at the same time underrepresented in the patriarchal power structures that control and produce these toxins. Part II discusses the advocacy work currently being done to eliminate and reduce toxins in consumer products, and draws comparison between the nature of those efforts and the efforts of first-wave feminists in the suffrage movement. Part III describes a University-level campaign aimed at informing college-aged students about toxins in products. Part IV provides an overview of the dialogue that ensued after the presentation of this information at the 4th Biennial Seneca Falls Dialogues. Part V provides a brief conclusion.

PART I: TOXINS, WOMEN, AND POWER

The twenty-first century has witnessed an extraordinary increase in the number of toxic chemicals used in everyday products (“TSCA Chemical Substance Inventory”). Many of the chemicals that are routinely used in common household or consumer products have undergone little to no regulation or testing for safety to human health (Gray 84). Throughout the course of a “normal” day, it is nearly impossible to avoid exposure to these chemicals. They are found in cosmetics, cleaning products, and a
variety of other daily use items, (e.g., shampoo, soap, couches, plastics, electronics, and receipt paper). They truly are ubiquitous. These toxins are linked to a growing number of poor human health outcomes including infertility, cancer, behavioral disorders, and asthma (Bergman et al. 7). The imprudent overuse of chemicals in consumer products without an appropriate regulatory schema stands as one of the biggest national consumer protection failures in history.

Women are disproportionately suffering as a result of this failure. Women are acutely affected by the rampant and under-regulated use of toxins in consumer products for a number of reasons. Exposure to toxins through consumer products is greater for women in part because they use more products than men (“Exposure Adds Up”). Women also carry more of the caretaking burden for family members who are affected by the negative health outcomes listed above (“Women and Caregiving”). The average caregiver, according to the Family Caregiver Alliance, National Center on Caregiving, is a 46 year-old married female, making roughly $35,000 a year. Women spend approximately 50% more time caregiving than men do, and make up between 59-75% of the caregivers nationally (“Women and Caregiving”). Women’s bodies are particularly sensitive to the endocrine system disruption caused by toxins in consumer products, as evidenced through infertility and strikingly high incidence rates of non-hereditary breast cancer in the United States (Gray 24). The bodies of American women also have been shown to carry higher levels of “foreign chemicals” than their American male counterparts (Reuben 26).

While women disproportionately carry the burden of toxins in consumer products, they are at the same time underrepresented in the decision-making processes related to the manufacture, sale, and regulation of those toxins. Women currently make up about 20% of the United States Congress, which is currently the most important source for effective and meaningful domestic regulation of toxic chemicals. Legislation was introduced in 2013 and again in 2015 to update the ancient and ineffective 1976 Toxic Substances Control Act. These proposed updates have not been supported by key chemical reform
advocacy groups like the Safer Chemicals Healthy Families organization, which states that the current proposed reforms are “too weak” to address the problem (“We Need Stronger Reform”).

Several states, including California, have begun to tackle this problem by passing state-level regulations to curb exposure to toxic chemicals. This state-by-state approach falls far short of the broad national regulation that is needed to effectively regulate the manufacture and use of toxic chemicals. Adequate regulation of toxins in consumer products is critical to the health and well-being of the populace. It would appear to be in the best interest of legislators to act on this issue because of the bipartisan and vast support proper regulation has in the electorate. Across the political spectrum, voters agree overwhelmingly that tighter controls on chemicals are “important” or “very important” (Mellman 11). It is also worth noting that women made up 53% of the electorate in the last presidential election and according to commentators played a significant role in determining the outcome of the election (Omero and McGuinness).

While strict federal regulations remain the best path to meaningful national reductions in exposures, there are other powerful actors who could effect change. The other locus of power, when it comes to curbing the use of toxic chemicals, lies within the leadership ranks of major consumer products manufacturing companies and retail outlets for these products. Women also hold significantly fewer seats of power in these realms, making up only about 20% of the seats on the boards of Fortune 500 companies (McGregor). Women chair the boards at less than 8% of Fortune 500 companies, and serve as CEO at less than 5% of those companies (McGregor). Very few women have a seat at the table when decisions regarding the use of toxic chemicals are made. This has not served anyone well from a public health perspective.

One is reminded of Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s *Destructive Male* speech delivered at the Women’s Suffrage Convention in Washington, DC in 1868. In the speech, Stanton describes a society plagued by “social disorganization” and “destructive forces”. Stanton suggests that including women’s voices in decision-making would temper the
“destructive forces” experienced under a society controlled entirely by men. She closes her speech with the following:

...for woman knows the cost of life better than man does, and not with her consent would one drop of blood ever be shed, one life sacrificed in vain. With violence and disturbance in the natural world, we see a constant effort to maintain an equilibrium of forces. Nature, like a loving mother, is ever trying to keep land and sea, mountain and valley, each in its place, to hush the angry winds and waves, balance the extremes of heat and cold, of rain and drought, that peace, harmony, and beauty may reign supreme. There is a striking analogy between matter and mind, and the present disorganization of society warns us that in the dethronement of woman we have let loose the elements of violence and ruin that she only has the power to curb. If the civilization of the age calls for an extension of the suffrage, surely a government of the most virtuous educated men and women would better represent the whole and protect the interests of all than could the representation of either sex alone. (Stanton)

One can make the argument that America has come close to universal suffrage; however there has not been a true equalizing of power vis-a-vis gender, as illustrated in the low percentage of women who hold seats of power in key legislative and corporate bodies, and any other number of other troubling statistics including the perpetual wage gap. Perhaps a legislature or board of directors with true gender parity would do things no differently than their male-run counterparts have to regulate toxins. Even with gender-parity, profit maximization may still be the axis upon which all decisions turn, and “destruction” and “disorganization” would abound, and toxic chemicals would continue to pervade daily life. However, in light of the current public health issues surrounding the use of toxins, and the growth in the type and severity of health problems, and the high cost to women, one has to wonder if Stanton’s “equilibrium of forces” proposed in this first-wave feminism may hold some answers, or provide some path forward that is not so bent on profit at any cost. Perhaps women, having suffered more and carried
more of the burden under the current state of “disorganization,” do truly understand the “cost” better, as Stanton suggests, and would work more diligently towards reducing the harm caused by toxic substances.

**PART II: ADVOCACY WORK**

While women may lack an equal voice in the formal seats of power in the legislature and corporate America, their voices are increasingly being heard by those around the table as a result of the current advocacy work aimed at eliminating toxins from consumer products. The work being done follows the model of grassroots advocacy exemplified by Stanton in the fight for women’s suffrage. Each of the examples in table 1 represent the efforts of a small group of people refusing to simply accept the decisions of those who hold the power. Just as Stanton refused to remain quiet and passive about disenfranchisement, advocates for better regulation of toxins too refuse to be silenced. It is their voices and their commitment to providing information to the public about the dangers of these toxins that act as the requisite catalyst for change.

This advocacy work is having an impact. In 2012, Johnson & Johnson made a “global commitment” to remove a number of chemicals of concern from its products. This move was precipitated by the efforts of an advocacy campaign called the Campaign for Safe Cosmetics. The Campaign applied steady public pressure on Johnson & Johnson to reformulate its baby products after reports revealed that the products sold in the United States contained chemicals of concern, while the same product sold outside of the United States did not contain the chemicals. Johnson & Johnson imposed voluntary deadlines for their commitments ranging from 2013 to 2015. Johnson & Johnson’s announced change was met with approval of consumers and advocacy groups. In February of 2013, it was reported that executives from the company were handed a scroll signed by 30,000 consumers thanking them for their commitment to improve their products. In January 2013, Gatorade agreed to remove Brominated Vegetable Oil (BVO), an ingredient shown to cause negative health outcomes, from its sports drinks. The move appears to be related to a petition, signed by over 200,000 consumers, posted on change.org by
a 15 year-old consumer, Sarah Kavanuagh. Walmart announced in September of 2013 that it will require suppliers to disclose certain chemicals and eventually will phase out other problematic ingredients. About 30 days after Walmart’s announcement in September, Target made its own announcement, adopting a new program called the Target Sustainable Product Standard. This program will assess the environmental impact and sustainability of products and will then use those assessments to make “merchandising and product placement” decisions (“Introducing the Target Sustainable Product Standard”).

None of these changes was mandated by domestic federal regulations, but rather the result of the pressure placed on these companies from advocacy groups and consumers. It would appear that corporate America is a bit concerned that women (who are understood by marketers to be in many cases the most powerful and important shoppers) are becoming more aware of the dangers lurking in all of those personal care products and cleaning supplies purchased each week.

Table 1
Advocacy work for eliminating toxins from consumer products.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author Filmmaker</th>
<th>Summary</th>
<th>Year</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Little Changes: Tales of a Reluctant Home Eco-Momics Pioneer Book</td>
<td>Kristi Marsh</td>
<td>Little Changes follows the story of Kristi Marsh as she attempts to change her life in the wake of being diagnosed with breast cancer. Reluctant to make changes in her own life for fear that they would be costly and imposing, Marsh chronicles her re-education on the products, foods, and environments she had introduced to herself and her family. Marsh hopes Little Changes will enlighten readers to the potentially harmful reality of many everyday products and show that every change makes a difference, no matter how small.</td>
<td>2012</td>
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<td>Slow Death by Rubber Duck: The Secret Danger of Everyday Things Book</td>
<td>Rick Smith and Bruce Lourie</td>
<td>Rick Smith and Bruce Lourie hope to bring pollution from distant danger to household threat by demonstrating the potential harm of many of our everyday items. Purposefully subjecting themselves to extended contact with many of these items, Smith and Lourie experimentally depict the very real danger of these products. Simultaneously, the two authors shed light on many of the corporate and governmental policies that allow these toxic miscreants into our homes.</td>
<td>2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Secret History of the War on Cancer Book</td>
<td>Devra Davis</td>
<td>Devra Davis hopes to bring attention to the ongoing misdirection of the medical industry. She believes that past and present medical positions surrounding cancer have focused solely on finding and treating cancer rather than taking preventative measures. She skillfully outlines how harmful environmental exposures to toxins are to health, specifically their ability to cause cancer.</td>
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<td>2007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Non-Toxic Avenger Book</td>
<td>Deanna Duke</td>
<td>Deanna Duke illuminates the state of government regulation concerning daily-use products. Using her own family’s struggles with cancer and autism as a back-drop for her fight to remove dangerous chemicals from her life, Duke advocates personal change in light of lacking governmental responsibility. The Non-Toxic Avenger follows Duke’s own quest to rid her life and the lives of her family of toxic chemicals, while discussing what every American can do about it in their own life.</td>
<td>2011</td>
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<tr>
<td>Not Just a Pretty Face: The Ugly Side of the Beauty Industry Book</td>
<td>Stacy Malkan</td>
<td>A group of upset environmentalists are wondering why there are toxic chemicals in so many cosmetic industry products. Not Just a Pretty Face follows these environmentalists as they try to uncover just how exactly this industry has gotten away with so much, for so long.</td>
<td>2007</td>
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<td>Pink Skies Documentary</td>
<td>Gulcin Gilber</td>
<td>This documentary showcases the story of Jump For A Cause, an event focused on raising publicity for breast cancer awareness as well as the empowerment of women. The event brought together 181 women from 31 countries in order to set the world record for the largest all-women sky dive. Pink Skies highlights the necessary shift towards funding for prevention research.</td>
<td>2011</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Body Toxic Book</td>
<td>Nena Baker</td>
<td>Taking a closer look at the chemicals that have been introduced to our body through everyday items, Nena Baker addresses the growing health concerns surrounding household products. Examining the lax government policies surrounding the prohibition of these chemicals, and the lengths to which companies will go to defend them, Baker hopes to bring about serious changes that will make the world a safer place to live.</td>
<td>2009</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Hundred - Year Lie: How to Protect Yourself from the Chemicals that Are Destroying Your Health Book</td>
<td>Randall Fitzgerald</td>
<td>A hundred years ago congress passed the Pure Food and Drug Act. Since then, thousands of chemicals have been added to our food, our water, and our medicines, and many of them are taking a toll on everyday citizens. Randall Fitzgerald seeks to overturn the myth that our food is safer, and create a growing realization of the need for change, as well as provide simple solutions that will produce real results.</td>
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<td>The Human Experiment Documentary</td>
<td>Sean Penn</td>
<td>Sean Penn’s documentary takes a look at the world of chemical misuse in everyday products. The Human Experiment outlines the lives of people who have had their lives changed for the worse after exposure to harmful chemicals. The documentary also follows the fight for change as activists take on the chemical industry.</td>
<td>2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pink Ribbons, Inc. Documentary</td>
<td>Lea Pool</td>
<td>This documentary seeks to expose the world of cause marketing through a critique of the Susan G. Komen Foundation, as well as many others with corporate interest in breast cancer awareness. Stories of pain and suffering from women who have been diagnosed with breast cancer detail just how far this misguided marketing has gone. Pink Ribbons Inc. hopes to bring about the realization that breast cancer and other very serious illnesses are not grounds for corporate profiteering.</td>
<td>2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unacceptable Levels Documentary</td>
<td>Ed Brown</td>
<td>Unacceptable Levels illustrates the story of the constant exposure to potentially harmful chemicals that surround us every hour of every day. Hoping to create greater awareness about the dangers of chemicals, this documentary shows the many dangers that these chemicals pose. Unacceptable Levels calls for people to raise their voices and make a call for change, and to make a decision not to put up with harmful chemical usage anymore.</td>
<td>2013</td>
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**PART III: MERCYHURST UNIVERSITY CAMPAIGN**

Following the example of many of these grassroots advocacy groups and initiatives, the Fresh Face Forward campaign was established at Mercyhurst University in 2013 to raise awareness about the toxic
chemicals in personal care products and their damaging effect on human health and the environment. The goals of the campaign include increasing knowledge about these chemicals and motivating students, faculty, and staff to swap their more harmful products for safer alternatives. Moreover, Fresh Face Forward was designed to empower individuals through targeted educational initiatives, encouraging consumers (women in particular), to become informed advocates for change.

The Fresh Face Forward campaign was created in an environmental communication class and began as a group project. Following a presentation from Pennsylvania Sea Grant, an organization that works to protect Pennsylvania’s precious freshwater resources, the five graduate and undergraduate women in the course decided that something needed to be done to alert others about the dangers these toxins pose to human health and the environment. Saddened by the lack of legislation regulating these toxins and disappointed in industry and corporate professionals for not stepping up, the team found hope that a college-wide grassroots initiative would help begin the necessary process of bringing these issues to light.

The Mission Statement of the Fresh Face Forward campaign reads as follows:

Founded by a group of concerned women at Mercyhurst University and funded by Pennsylvania Sea Grant, Fresh Face Forward was created to raise awareness about the toxic chemicals in personal care products and their damaging effect on our bodies and our environment. Our mission is to empower individuals, encouraging them to become educated consumers and grassroots advocates for change. We believe that we deserve products that are not harmful to us, to our wildlife, or to our water. We hope to inspire others to raise their voices as stewards of the environment and advocates for future generations.

The campaign team decided that college aged students, women in particular, would be the most effective target for this message. Studies have shown that women use twice as many products as men, with the
average woman using 12 personal care products daily and the average man using only 6 ("Exposure Adds Up"). A preliminary study conducted at Mercyhurst University in 2013 surveyed 346 respondents, 237 women and 109 men. Respondents included 157 undergraduates, 29 graduates, 73 faculty, 87 staff, and 4 with other affiliations. The modal age of respondents was 15-20. Individuals were asked about their daily personal care product use, including the number and type of products used, importance of cost in purchasing products, and where they received messages about products (television, magazines, doctors, etc.). Additional questions assessed participants’ knowledge of the terms “natural” and “organic”, awareness of chemical toxins in products, and the ability to read and understand product labels. A combination of multiple choice and open-ended questions were used.

The study confirmed with high statistical significance ($p = 0.001$) that women in this population use more products than men, further justifying the campaign's focus on women. The study also revealed some strikingly high usage of personal care products, with four female students regularly using more than 25 different personal care products daily. The survey also substantiated the need for a targeted informational campaign. Across the board, both women and men were vastly unaware of the toxins in daily use items, with 70% admitting they were uneducated about the ingredients listed on the labels of their favorite products ("Fresh Face Forward Campaign 2013 Survey").

The team reasoned that a specific focus on the college demographic would provide a significant opportunity to interject in students’ lives when it would be most impactful. At this time, most young women and men have been making purchasing decisions for a while. They have some familiarity with particular brands and the process of searching for and purchasing consumer goods. They are also likely on their own for the first time and making more decisions independently with their own money. This is the prime time for messages, like those espoused by Fresh Face Forward, to be heard. The impact on students is potentially more meaningful now than at any other time in life - before habits are set in stone and before they begin to make purchasing decisions for their future.
families. College is a formative time in many young lives and provides a leverage point for infusing the country’s future leaders, workforce, and consumers with important knowledge.

Also, during the college years, females are particularly vulnerable to negative impacts from toxins (“Exposure to Toxic” 1-3). These young women are entering their prime childbearing years. High exposure to potentially harmful chemicals in consumer products, as evidenced through much of the research on consumer product use, puts females in a compromised position. This is the time when, statistically, they are most likely to be using a high volume of products, thereby placing a large chemical load on themselves. The Mercyhurst University study confirmed this assertion, with younger individuals using significantly more products than older individuals (p = 0.001) and women using more products than men (“Fresh Face Forward Campaign 2013 Survey”).

Women are negatively impacted during these reproductive years, when endocrine-disrupting chemicals (EDCs) can significantly influence the formation and functioning of the developing baby, and negatively affect fertility (“Exposure to Toxic” 1-3). Thus, the timing of these health-related messages is critical for college females.

Once the survey results were tabulated, the Fresh Face Forward team began a campaign aimed at educating the college community about these toxins with the hope of creating behavior change. The campaign team selected a handful of chemicals to educate students about during the 2014-2015 academic year. Highlighting one chemical of concern per month, the team aspired to influence students to swap one product per month for a safer alternative. Many of the featured chemicals are known endocrine disruptors, while others are noted for links to cancer, allergies, and environmental harm.

Of particular focus were hormone disrupting compounds like triclosan and phthalates. Triclosan is an antibacterial pesticide found in many antibacterial hand soaps and other household items. While its purpose is to kill bacteria on the hands, studies have shown that it cleans the skin no better than regular soap and water, and it may actually lead to the creation of antibacterial-resistant bacteria through
continued use (“Triclosan: What Consumers Should Know”). Animal studies have revealed its endocrine-disrupting properties, meaning it may change the way that hormones function in the body (“FDA”). What is concerning is that triclosan runs rampant in the environment and in human bodies. A study conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found triclosan in the urine of 75% of people tested (“Triclosan”). The chemical has also been detected in “finished drinking water, surface water, wastewater, and environmental sediments, as well as in the bile of wild fish, indicating extensive contamination of aquatic ecosystems” (Fang et al. 150).

Phthalates are a class of chemicals that plasticize and fix colors and scents in cosmetics and personal care products. They are also known to disrupt the endocrine system, interfering with the body’s hormones. Like triclosan, evidence shows they are accumulating in human bodies. Several studies have found phthalates in human urine, blood, and breast milk (Gray 43). Women and children carry a higher body burden of phthalates, as, according to a national CDC survey, phthalate levels are highest in the bodies of children ages 6 to 11 and women (Gray 43). Phthalates can also cross the placenta, putting children in the womb at particular risk (Gray 43). In fact, some studies have suggested that prenatal exposure to this class of chemicals can compromise infant development, and one study of Danish children revealed a link to thyroid disruption (Boas et al.). In young girls, phthalate exposure has been associated with early breast development, which can be a predictor of the development of breast cancer later in life (Gray 44). Thus, phthalates are an important group of chemicals about which college-aged women should be both aware and concerned.

Sharing this important information through the campaign has been a constructive step towards informing consumers about these toxins and changing their behavior. Even in its inaugural year, Fresh Face Forward has celebrated much success in its efforts. The initiative has realized both the educational and behavior change goals it had hoped to achieve. According to a post-campaign survey administered to the campus community, 32% of individuals reduced their personal care product use
and 54% began using products with fewer toxins due to the campaign team’s efforts (“Fresh Face Forward Campaign 2014 Evaluation Survey”). Also, 69% of respondents now read their product labels, as compared to only 36% before Fresh Face Forward initiated its strategies and tactics (“Fresh Face Forward Campaign 2014 Evaluation Survey”). These early achievements give hope for the campaign’s future successes and highlight the potential of other “ground-up” movements to realize similar victories.

Though unintentional, the campaign team, after two years, is still entirely made up of women. These women are stepping up to the challenge of changing common practices and illustrating a primary concern for environmental and health issues. The movement, while designed to empower members of the university community, has also been empowering for the student members of the campaign, allowing them to add their voices to the discussion on this important topic. At the outset the team did not fully appreciate the feminist nature of the project. However, it has become clear throughout that it is indeed addressing in a targeted way an issue that disproportionately affects women, and working towards improving the health and lives of women through education and information sharing. Through its work, the Mercyhurst team has contributed to the national conversation and raised awareness about toxins and their impact, and made positive contributions to improving the lives and health of women and children.

**PART IV: SENECA FALLS DIALOGUES PRESENTATION**

The authors along with a colleague presented this information at the 4th Biennial Seneca Falls Dialogues in October, 2014. The audience was engaged and receptive to the information presented. During the post-presentation discussion, several audience members shared personal stories of experiences with toxins in products that affect them or a family member. The authors’ perception, which was confirmed by a post-presentation survey, was that the audience was generally aware of the “toxin” problem, but lacked information on the specifics such as names of chemicals, where they are found, and what harm they are known to do.
The authors were asked about reliable resources that could be accessed for further information to assist in making informed and healthy shopping decisions. Materials from the Fresh Face Forward campaign were distributed and information on reducing toxins was shared. The audience felt this was an important topic and one that they wish they knew more about so that they could make better choices for themselves and their families. It became clear throughout the dialogue that each woman in the audience shared concerns about how toxins adversely affect their lives and the lives of their loved ones. It also became clear that these women would make changes and advocate for change if they were given more information on how to do each of those things more effectively. This realization informed the direction of the Fresh Face Forward campaign at Mercyhurst University. In the future the campaign will focus on providing more concrete guidance on what toxins and products to avoid, and also provide more information on how to join in and become a contributing member to the grassroots advocacy efforts.

**Part V: Conclusion**

The toxin crisis in this country has grown out of a patriarchal regulatory and industrial system. Like many of the failures that mark the patriarchal system (perpetual war, extreme wealth disparity, destruction of the environment) women suffer a high cost, yet lack a voice in the decision-making process on the very things that affect them the most. And like many of the problems created by the patriarchal system, the solution to the toxin crisis appears to lie in collective and sustained advocacy efforts, like those seen in the suffrage movement. Informing consumers of the dangers of these toxins, pressuring elected officials and corporate leaders to act, and making informed shopping decisions are currently the primary drivers of change in reducing the toxins used in everyday products. The “equilibrium of forces” that Stanton called for over a century ago has certainly not been realized, but undoubtedly it is closer now than it was then. And with that recognition of progress, albeit small and slow, it becomes clear that sustained effort and work by a
relatively small group of dedicated people can lead to progress and change.

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The history of mankind is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of man toward woman, having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over her. To prove this, let facts be submitted to a candid world. –Declaration of Sentiments

In 2010, my colleague Christine Chin and I made video recordings of participants at the Seneca Falls Dialogues conference reciting the above selection from the 1848 Declaration of Sentiments. In the edited work, the phrases are repeated over and over until they begin to sound like an incantation. The participants range from small children to college students to adults and include men and women of a variety of races and sizes. The video is meant to celebrate the radical power of diverse voices speaking as a community and to highlight the stirring language of the 1848 Declaration of Sentiments. Like the Declaration itself, the editing style of the documentary makes an argument for collaborative action.

The 1848 Declaration of Sentiments is particularly powerful as a call to action. The lines repeated in this video act as a conceptual and rhetorical hinge in the Declaration; they link the introductory section, which lays out the case for equality, to the list of abuses for which the document seeks recompense. In these lines, the framers of the 1848 Declaration reveal to us the careful labor that went into constructing the document by lucidly illustrating that their claims of abuse would be backed up with the submission of facts. The language is carefully controlled and powerfully evocative; by linking their cause to historical
fact, the framers of the document are able to make an unimpeachably persuasive case. Though women have gained the elective franchise, the language in the 1848 Declaration speaks to the twenty-first century audience with undiminished urgency.

The construction and conceptualization of the project are driven by the techniques and style of feminist avant-garde filmmaking, which emphasizes non-hierarchical and collaborative production processes. This style also embraces rough edges, non-narrative structures, and decentering techniques. These production choices resist conventional cinematic style in order to enhance and promote a feminist commitment to offering the world alternatives to the status quo. In this video, the repetition of the document’s conceptual hinge is meant to reinforce the document’s historical claims by emphasizing the power of repetition to create meaning. The mashup of different voices and recitation participants demonstrates that the message of the 1848 Declaration speaks of a great variety of people to a great variety of people. The mashup style also embraces gaps and fissures in sound and image: these gaps are meant to open space for viewers to imagine themselves speaking the language of the 1848 Declaration and to emphasize the do-it-yourself (DIY) production process of the video. The video is also a celebration of these particular speakers – people who attended the Seneca Falls Dialogues Conference in 2010 – and an invitation to viewers to imagine themselves as part of a similar community.

Sentiments and Usurpations is the first of a series of videos that engage the Seneca Falls Dialogues Conference and the 1848 Declaration of Sentiments. At the 2014 Conference, a group of William Smith students and I recorded people reciting the entire 1848 Declaration of Sentiments in the Wesleyan Chapel, where it was first presented to the public. In this second iteration of the project, Declaration of Sentiments 2014, still images of those reading the Declaration accompany an audio track featuring the voices of the participants. The students and I felt that the still imagery would foreground the language of the Declaration and allow viewers to meditate on the range of speakers participating. This project was screened at the National Women’s Rights Historical
Park during Women’s History Month in 2015. A third iteration of the project, Declaration of Sentiments Wesleyan Chapel, uses the audio track from the 2014 project as the background for an avant-garde exploration of the interior of the Wesleyan Chapel. The collage of images is meant to reflect the diversity of voices in the recording and to offer a meditation on the textures of the historically significant location. This iteration of the project was recently accepted as an entry in the Finger Lakes Environmental Film Festival’s “Iterations as Habitats” exhibition. My current plan is to continue producing iterations of the video at each Biennial Seneca Falls Dialogues Conference.

1. “Sentiments and Usurpations.” (Click on image to view video.) <https://vimeo.com/122440382>.

The Biennial SFD and *The Seneca Falls Dialogues Journal* are sponsored by Women and Gender Studies affiliates at:

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