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Does Ecofeminism Need the Master Subject? A Response to Janis Birkeland

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Feminists can invoke numerous criteria to decide whether a scholarly work is feminist speech or whether it marginalizes or neutralizes gender. Does it value women's voices and enable their expression in diversity? Does it give due and generous attention to feminist speakers, including theorists and marginalized subjects? Does it enable a critical rejection of masculinist theory and practice, and of other forms of oppression? Does it fit the abstract perspective of the theorist to the activist perspective of the feminist political agent working for change? On these criteria, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London: Routledge 1993) seems to have a claim to count as feminist as well as ecofeminist speech: the standpoint of women's oppression supplies most the book's theory, experiential basis and examples, and feminist philosophy forms its primary theoretical base. I aim to bring ecofeminism closer to contemporary feminism, freeing it from assumptions incompatible with feminisms of class and colour in order to clear the way for a more integrated oppression perspective.

Janis Birkeland ("Disengendering Ecofeminism" *The Trumpeter* 12:4 Fall 1995, 178-180) consults none of these normal criteria to support her contention that *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* marginalizes gender. Janis Birkeland's claim that it presents a "gender blind analysis" is based on several major misconceptions about the concept of mastery and the place of gender in the web of oppression. The first of these misconceptions identifies mastery with the master/slave relationship, disregarding and distorting crucial sections of my text. The second misconception is that a properly gender-conscious ecofeminism implies ranking gender over all other forms of oppression as more basic and structurally crucial. The third, unstated assumption which is presupposed throughout Birkeland's argument is an overfamiliar scope confusion which leads her to the false dichotomy that declining to prioritise gender implies marginalizing gender. Once these connected confusions are unravelled, the real substance behind the accusation of "disengendering ecofeminism" emerges as my rejection of the doctrine that gender is the most fundamental form which always has priority over other forms of oppression. I would argue that this doctrine involves an unnecessary and damaging assumption for ecofeminism, and marks Birkeland's version of ecofeminism as isolated from contemporary developments in feminist and postcolonial theory.

The leading premise for Birkeland's argument that ecofeminism is neutered is that the term "mastery" refers in my work to master-slave dualism, which she claims is treated as the fundamental relationship of dominance (in place of the gender duality Birkeland thinks ought to occupy this privileged place.) But Birkeland's claim that I substitute the master-slave dualism for dominance relationship, as overarching concepts, involves careless reading and gross misrepresentation. In *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* I do discuss the master/slave relationship, along with other dualities, in connection with Plato's work, but ascribe to it neither historical nor methodological priority. The concept of mastery itself is definitionally tied, not to the master/slave relationship, but to the concept of "*the master subject*" in wide use among feminist and postcolonial

theorists.<sup>1</sup> Given the thesis my book defends, that the master subject's main project is the rational colonization of the lower order of nature represented as a void inviting occupation, the concept of the master subject is equivalent to the overarching (determinable) concept of the *coloniser identity* (as used for example by Mies and Shiva 1993), in the case where multiple specific sites of colonization are recognized. I explore the logic of this concept in Chapter Two (The Logic of Colonisation), defining this subject role in a quite precise sense as characterized by dualistic relations which produce a logical structure common to several different forms of colonization or oppression.

Thus the concept of the master subject is a placeholder or variable which defines a *determinable* subject place that can be occupied by a range of determinate forms; the concept of mastery stands to androcentrism, eurocentrism/racism, anthropocentrism etc., much as the concept of colour stands to red, blue, green, etc.<sup>2</sup> The master-slave relation is one, but only one, of the possible determinates of mastery, and occupies no privileged place. The concept of the master subject also brings together several well-established contemporary senses of mastery further to the master-slave sense Birkeland has seized upon. The first is that of the "*master or head of the household*" (OED)<sup>3</sup>, the occupant of the modern Lockean edifice of property, who appropriates the labour of denied and subordinated groups - women, servants, the colonized, the labouring and excluded classes, and of nature itself. The second sense denotes the figure who holds *the cultural master key* (OED), the (false) universal subject who claims to speak for all and who can remain unmarked because he is normalized in the master discourse (contrasting with subjugated knowledges and marginalized discourses) at the heart of hegemonic culture. The master subject of modernity is not the patriarch but his son and heir, he whose liberating fraternal enterprise it is to take for his brothers and himself the displaced father's domain of power over women and the lower order called "nature."<sup>4</sup>

Birkeland's assertion that I identify the overarching dualism with the master/slave relation runs totally counter to my text. I take reason, in its dominant Western conception in rationalism, to be the chief characteristic associated with the master subject of Western culture and with his project of colonization. But it is a major and clearly stated thesis of my work that *the overarching dualism of Western culture opposes the sphere of reason (mind, spirit) to that of nature as a sphere of multiple exclusions of reason* encompassing women..., slaves, indigenous peoples, nonwhite races, and animals, (and of course much more, including non-human biological life, necessity, and the body.) Hence the relevant dualistic contrast to mastery is not *slavery*, but *nature* as a determinable lower sphere of exclusion and colonization. The master subject is unmarked One to marked Other; not only master to the other's slave, but also man/masculine to the Other's woman/feminine, civilized to the Other's primitive, rational to the Other's irrational (emotion), objective to the Other's subjective, mind to the Other's body, and so on. To prioritise the master-slave relationship characteristic of antiquity as the fundamental model for domination would be limiting and

anachronistic in the context of modernity. And since slavery is a premodern form of the class relationship, this reading is inconsistent with my explicit and prominent rejection of Marxist class reduction.

These misconceptions about mastery are supplemented by the false choice Birkeland presents between prioritizing gender and neglecting it. I am accused of failing "to use gender as a metaphorical icon of value", instead "relegating the concept to just another means by which people are categorized, much in the way that race and class have been used to marginalise people." The intense debates in feminism in the last twenty years over the use of gender concepts as surrogates for all other types of domination seem to have passed Birkeland by entirely. The outcome of these debates has been a clear recognition by most feminists that there are multiple dimensions of oppression, a rejection of assumptions of hierarchy among them, and a rejection of the surrogacy and prioritization of gender assumed by Birkeland. Birkeland assumes that there must be such a hierarchy, that since I replace patriarchy by mastery I must have replaced the dominance of gender dualism by the dominance of the master/slave dualism. But to reject a hierarchy of oppressions is not to marginalize gender any more than it is to marginalize class or race, . *gender-conscious analysis is not the same as a gender-prioritizing analysis*. By the same logic, much contemporary feminist theory itself would have to count as "degendered" or as marginalizing gender, a *reductio ad absurdum* of Birkeland's argument. Birkeland misses entirely the point that it is not a question of replacing one kind of hierarchy privileging women's oppression, by another which privileges slavery (or class or race) but rather of abandoning the ranking compulsion along with the whole idea that we can establish any general methodological priority among oppressions.

Although some older forms of ecofeminism may have embraced it, ecofeminism does not require the doctrine of methodological priority for gender, or the associated reduction of power to male power and its transformation to a matter of remaking male psychology.<sup>5</sup> It can demonstrate powerful links between feminism and ecology and between androcentrism and anthropocentrism without the reductionist assumptions which appear persistently throughout Birkeland's article.<sup>6</sup> The doctrine that gender is a unitary and more fundamental form of oppression is a hindrance both to developing the cooperative forms of struggle we need and to developing critical insight into feminism itself. Methodological priority for gender assumes that women's oppression must *always* be ranked as more fundamental, strategically prior to other forms of oppression in all contexts. To reject this universalizing approach however is not to assume that forms of oppression can *never* be ranked, or to suggest that we can never make distinctions of relevance or explanatory priority. Gender *is* pre-eminent in structuring certain contexts, particularly the private sphere of intimate and personal relations, as bell hooks notes.<sup>7</sup> Rather to deny methodological priority to gender is to avoid making any *general* theoretical ranking of oppressions, whose priority can then be treated as contextually-variable rather than open to some sort of universal and abstract determination.

Of course it is in one sense "our job" as feminists to stress the importance of gender and gender analyses and make sure they are not overlooked, but that does not imply constructing a hierarchy of oppressions with gender at the top, or elevating the importance of gender by depreciating and trivializing the Other's form of oppression in a misguided competition for "most basic" place. This assumes a separation we cannot make, for on closer examination, the depreciated form of oppression often turns out to be that of marginalized aspects of ourselves or of our own group, and not quite so other as we thought. When contempt for nature or animality turns out to entail contempt for what is represented as nature or animality in our group, and for whatever is marginalized under this guise, it is our problem, not the Other's. So attention to Women's oppression requires attention to many other forms; there is no such thing as a pure "women's oppression." Birkeland's own work<sup>8</sup> shows what happens when such a prioritizing approach for gender in relation to other oppressions is assumed: constant, vague and highly generalized claims are advanced, presupposing the historical and explanatory priority of gender ("far deeper", "far harder to change", "the oldest war", "more central", "at the core", "more crucial", "the key", "underlying", "pivotal", "the glue" etc.) Birkeland's prioritization of gender is clearly accompanied by a depreciation of the importance of the Other's oppression. Thus anthropocentrism is said to be merely a "cerebral concept",<sup>9</sup> and to be easy to change, unlike androcentrism.<sup>10</sup> It is puzzling that anyone could describe practices which daily destroy the non-human and human life of the Earth as only a "cerebral concept", but the intent here is clearly to suggest lower explanatory and strategic priority.

Feminist arguments that some forms of the critique of anthropocentrism (deep ecology) involve masculinist approaches and assumptions, have mainly been based on bringing out neglected connections with gender, rather than on prioritizing gender.<sup>11</sup> Birkeland's argument<sup>12</sup> that androcentrism is more basic than anthropocentrism and much harder to dislodge, and that deep ecology is masculinist where it does not concede the priority of gender, stands in contrast. The argument that anthropocentrism is less central and easy to change compared to androcentrism neglects their close connection and parallel structure. Anthropocentrism is embedded just as strongly as androcentrism is in the Western conceptual and perceptual framework and its most basic practices, and is the last area to be subject to sustained critique. Insight into the colonizer role always required the development of other-attentive and self-critical capacities, but in the case of anthropocentrism this is required to an even greater degree than usual because non-humans do not usually articulate or confront us with their oppression directly, and we have to arrive at knowledge of our species colonizer identity more indirectly. There is a problem not only about the point of claiming that androcentrism is more conceptually and historically basic than anthropocentrism, but about what this claim means and how it could be established.<sup>13</sup> One method might be to argue that justifications for non-gender forms of oppression always refer back to women or the feminine as the source of inferiority, and that such references are not symmetrical, so that gender oppression

is the common basic justificatory reference point. But such asymmetry does not seem to hold, and in any case Birkeland herself destroys this possible source of support by asserting that it is the association of various oppressed group, including women, *with nature* (not with women or the feminine) which justifies their exploitation.<sup>14</sup>

Birkeland offers no support for the gender priority doctrine, other than the conviction that all "social pathologies" are ultimately traceable to a monolithic "Patriarchy," and that a program of remaking "the male psyche" and replacing male values will undo all power and oppression.<sup>15</sup> These assumptions give rise to a cluster of further misconceptions about my work and analysis of power. Birkeland takes it as an objection to my account that power does not begin in ancient Greece, where my analysis starts, and that power is never defined. However, I certainly do not attempt to provide in my historical work any universal account of the origins of power or domination, nor do I think this is possible in a non-trivial way: what I aim to provide, as I clearly state, is an account of the marriage of reason and domination, and of reason nature/dualism in the historical context of the West and in the rationalist tradition of philosophy. My leading project is to show how a particular kind of power, the dualistic conceptual structures which naturalize certain oppressions, can be remade in ways which denaturalize them. I would certainly reject the view that power is inevitable or is "just somehow pervading human relationships," although in contrast to Birkeland's own view of power as a simple function of male domination, I would certainly want to understand power as more complex, multiple and diffused through a variety of practices and conceptual networks.

Closely associated with the drive to prioritize gender is the drive to present all oppressions as reducible to a single all-encompassing form, which Birkeland labels "Patriarchy." The work of Black feminists and women of colour has been at the centre of a major debate on gender and race in the last two decades of feminist theory which has highlighted the severe problems in these assumptions. As Elizabeth Spelman has cogently argued, the doctrine that gender is more fundamental articulates a privileged perspective, since those who are able to focus exclusively on gender must be those whose experiences allow them to see other forms of oppression as secondary or inconsequential, that is, *women privileged by race and class*.<sup>16</sup> Such a position is unable to represent the experience of marginalized women whose lives are strongly marked by class, race, ethnic or other forms of oppression.<sup>17</sup> It renders invisible the crucial areas of intersection which, rather than the abstract concept of gender appealed to in Birkeland's account, operate together with the common logic of the master subject to hold the interlocking structure of oppressions together.

Perhaps the worst feature of the doctrine of gender priority is the obstacle the associated conception of Patriarchy as the regime of unitary male oppressors versus unitary female oppressed presents to the recognition of fractured identities and to a self-critical feminist practice which confronts women's participation in

oppressive structures.<sup>18</sup> It is unable to come to grips with the colonizer within, "that piece of the oppressor which is planted deep within each of us," in Audre Lord's phrase. Along with many contemporary feminists, I reject the reductionist concept of Patriarchy Birkeland advocates, not because it is too radical and confronting, as Birkeland implies, but because it is not radical enough and does not confront its own silencing or marginalized women who do not always suffer primarily from or personally prioritize gender oppression.<sup>19</sup> In contrast, the theory of the master subject provides a way to drop rank reductionism privileging a unitary oppression model and substitute a concept of multiple, intersecting and interlocking oppressions and fractured identities.

Birkeland's strategy of stretching the concept of patriarchy (or Patriarchy) to act as a surrogate for all forms of dualism, power relations and oppression, while retaining the usual connotation of patriarchy as gender oppression, smuggles in via definition the assumption that gender oppression encompasses, explains or reduces all other forms.<sup>20</sup> Many feminists now opt for a more inclusive strategy and terminology, in search of a non-reductive integration which does not mask the multiplicity of oppressions. Birkeland's comments are remarkably insensitive to important differences here, for among those who adopt an alternative inclusive approach which contrasts sharply with Birkeland's reductionist stance are the very theorists whose work she commends, Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva in *Ecofeminism*. Thus Mies does not allow the concept of Patriarchy to engulf all other forms of oppression in Birkeland's fashion, but is careful to speak of *capitalist patriarchy*, and to call for a theoretical integration of these critiques.<sup>21</sup> But the recognition of multiplicity Mies' concept of capitalist patriarchy provides, although necessarily better than Birkeland's, is much too limited: *capitalist patriarchy* is patently too thin to give an account of "White Man," the master subject they associate with colonisation, so that this key concept, which is used throughout *Ecofeminism*, appears in an unclearly theorised way.<sup>22</sup> Nor is it obvious how Mies' *capitalist patriarchy* can give due weight to the concept of anthropocentrism or naturism needed for a fully-fledged ecological feminism, which makes only fleeting appearances in the book.

If we are exceptionally brave and don't mind the looks on our listener's faces, we can of course try to speak of *white supremacist, naturist, capitalist patriarchy*. But a simple enumeration of oppressions has more problems than just awkwardness: enumeration suggests an additive account<sup>23</sup> rather than an interlocking one in terms of mutual modification, and generates continuing problems about completeness no matter how long we make the list because it selects not an open but a closed set and provides no way to extend it. It is good methodology to give preference to accounts which are open to including further forms of oppression not yet recognized or articulated. A concept such as mastery which defines a determinable subject place in terms of structural characteristics can be useful here, making it possible to recognize both commonality and difference, both the openness and multiplicity of determinate oppressions, and to validate and integrate multiple critiques without hierarchy or reduction.

## Notes

1. To give just a few examples, the concept of the master subject is used by Donna Haraway ("Situated Knowledges" in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women* London: Free Association Books 1991), Nancy Hartsock ("Foucault on Power: a Theory for Women" in Linda J. Nicholson ed. *Feminism/Postmodernism* New York: Routledge 1990), William Connolly "Voices from the Whirlwind" in Jane Bennett and William Chaloupka eds. *In the Nature of Things* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), and in several essays in Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson eds. *De/Colonising the Subject* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992.)
2. Birkeland presents no case at all for her claim that the concept of the master subject involves mind/body dualism.
3. OED: Oxford English Dictionary. Birkeland neglects a whole range of relevant connotations of mastery, including the idea of mastery as the production of a transparent and controllable world. See for example Valerie Walkerdine 1988 *The Mastery of Reason* London: Routledge.
4. This master subject is already himself a fractured identity combining oppressed and oppressor aspects, since his discourse of freedom and gesture of emancipation from the power of the father is deeply ambiguous in its emancipatory content. This fracture spills over into the ambiguity of the fraternal democracy, fraternal socialism etc. in which the master subject is strongly entrenched. See Carole Pateman *The Disorder of Women* Polity Cambridge 1989.
5. It is the absence of these reductionist elements from my analysis which seems to have inspired Birkeland's inaccurate and totally unsupported assertion that the concept of the master subject neglects the body and "splits off the biological dimension of human psychology and behaviour" from the cerebral. In fact my account makes a good deal of use of the concept of "nature within" she claims I neglect.
6. Thus Birkeland quotes (giving the wrong page reference) a statement of mine on page 116 that the exclusions of Cartesian "pure thought" include much more than the feminine "not only animality and the body itself, but also material reality, practical activity, change, the emotions, sympathy, and subjectivity." Birkeland objects that these are associated with the feminine. But of course my sentence does not deny this, and my point, that "it is *not only* the feminine which is excluded" - the body, for example, has class and race as well as gender association - is not refuted by Birkeland's claim, but that claim does indicate her obsession with establishing gender as at the bottom of everything and her assumption that those who deny the priority of gender ignore gender.
7. bell hooks "Feminism: a Transformational Politic" in *Talking Back* 1989 Boston: South End Press, p. 21.



8. Janis Birkeland "Ecofeminism" in Greta Gaard ed. *Ecofeminism: Women, Animals and Nature* 1993 Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
9. Janis Birkeland 1993, p. 43.
10. For a feminist discussion of the concept of anthropocentrism see Val Plumwood 1996 "Androcentrism and Anthropocentrism: Parallels and Politics" in *Ethics and the Environment* (2) Fall 1996.
11. See for example Val Plumwood 1991 "Nature, Self and Gender" *Hypatia* (6) 1 pp 4-32.
12. Birkeland, 1993. p. 43.
13. On the unclarity of this kind of claim see Elizabeth Spelman *The Inessential Woman* 1988 Boston: Beacon Press, p. 117.
14. Janis Birkeland, *Environmental Ethics* (17) 443-444. In Birkeland 1993 (p. 24), however, it is stated that it is the association with the feminine which justifies exploitation. Of course, in my framework both can be true, but not in Birkeland's.
15. Janis Birkeland 1993.
16. Elizabeth Spelman 1988, p. 117.
17. See Elizabeth Spelman 1988 p ix, bell hooks *Ain't I a Woman* 1981 Boston: South End Press.
18. See Patricia Hill Collins *Black Feminist Thought* 1990 London: Routledge, p. 229.
19. Elizabeth Spelman 1988, p. 117.
20. Janis Birkeland 1993, p. 17. Although Birkeland claims that no such reductionist forms of ecofeminism exist, her own work, as well as the passage from Charlene Spretnak she quotes, seems to provide a clear example of just such a position, whose implications have clearly not been faced. The quote from Spretnak is extracted not from "a newsletter for lay readers" as Birkeland claims, but from a definitive ecofeminist collection (Irene Diamond and Gloria Orenstein eds. *Reweaving the World*, San Francisco Sierra Club Books 1990, 3-14), which provides a number of other examples.
21. Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva *Ecofeminism* 1993 Melbourne: Spinifex, p. 160.
22. For capitalist patriarchy to suffice, we would have to make the very problematic assumption that anti-racist and post-colonial theory could be absorbed into either the critique of capitalism or that of patriarchy.

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23. See Elizabeth Spelman 1988, p. 122-125.

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