

Hidden in Plain Sight: reconsidering the value of social reproduction, work and nature.

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Abstract

Taking as its starting point Marilyn Waring's painstaking research into the workings of the United Nations Systems of National Accounts (UNSNA),¹ this paper sets out to engage with critiques of the use of annual growth in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) as a measurement of national wellbeing. Attention then turns to the current COVID-19 pandemic, which is read for indications not only of the failure of neoliberalism's pursuit of economic growth to secure the wellbeing of citizens through the, but also for signs and ways that narratives and values have been disrupted since March 2020. Two strands of interlinking thought are then set out: the degrowth movement with its arguments for care-focused approaches to political economy, and the search for alternatives to the current 'growthism'. Feminist criticism of the degrowth movement's failure to engage with the work of Waring and ecofeminists more generally, as well as the limitations of the term 'care' open up further exploration of the devaluation of nature, women and social reproduction work. Val Plumwood's feminist critique of the master identity and the dualisms that are derived from it, particularly in relation to slavery, are followed through into Silvia Federici's assertion that the development of capitalism was facilitated by violence and devaluation, of women and of their work.

To the search for resources that inspire fresh imaginaries of a world in which difference is not linked to hierarchy and dominance is added the story of "the lowly Jesus" washing his disciples' feet. Jesus' disruption of dualisms associated with the household and hospitality, is situated in contrast with the role of the Church in upholding dominant power models. In conclusion, the paper returns to the issue of growth and its destructive impacts on the earth, making clear that progress within the capitalist system is not commensurate with freedom for women or the wellbeing of the earth. The urgent need for solidarity across gender, race and class difference that engages with the earth as a political subject is offered as a basis for the search for alternatives to growth.

Counting for Nothing

When former New Zealand Member of Parliament, Marilyn Waring told friends about her research into national income accounting in the 1980s, those who for years had been involved in environmental and

¹ Marilyn Waring, *If Women Counted: A New Feminist Economics* (San Francisco: Harper, 1990).
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political activism were “shocked to silence, having at first been disbelieving”² when she told them how little value was placed on the earth’s ecosystem that they loved and worked so hard to preserve.

Over 30 years on from the publication of Waring’s critique of the United Nations Systems of National Accounts (UNSNA), the accounting system developed to measure GDP, it remains the case that rivers, mountains, the oceans and the air we breathe count as nothing by its reckoning. The failure worldwide to ascribe value to the earth is mirrored by the fact that a vast swathe of life-making activity or social reproduction work, including having a baby and breastfeeding, growing and preparing food, nurturing and educating children are counted as ‘unproductive’ .

The standards by which nations measure and compare the economic activity of all goods and services entering the market evolved from a paper written by two British economists: John Maynard Keynes and Richard Stone in 1939. Their paper: *The National Income and Expenditure of the United Kingdom, and How to Pay for the War*³ makes clear their intentions. It formed the foundation of Stone’s later work, developing the accounting system of the United Nations and influenced Milton Gilbert’s 1941 paper *Measuring National Income as Affected by the War*, recognised as the first published statement of Gross National Product (GNP). Concern was expressed at that time regarding the inadequacy of using a system devised to win a war to measure a nation’s economic growth. Of specific concern was its failure to reflect the wellbeing of the population, particularly levels of poverty that might increase even as the economy is growing. Waring’s argument that, far from reflecting a country’s economic wellbeing, the accounting system is skewed in favour of war and “what men do”⁴ remains an important contribution to the debate around growth today.

Since the publication of Waring’s book, the fixation with ‘productive’ paid labour as enshrined in the UNSNA has not diminished, and nations remain tied to pursuing annual global growth of a minimum of two to three per cent and levels of production and consumption that far exceed both the needs of human well-being and planetary limits.⁵ Ecological breakdown, driven by excess growth in high income countries and, in particular, by excess accumulation among the very rich, primarily impacts the global South and those living in poverty around the world.⁶ In his book exploring possibilities for a post-capitalist society focused on human wellbeing and ecological stability,⁷ Jason Hickel writes that GDP measures such a narrow range of economic activity that it reflects only “the welfare of capitalism”.⁸ In an “extraordinary ideological coup” governments have become bound to a new rule, which is “not to achieve a level of

² Waring, 318.

³ Waring, 54.

⁴ Waring, 17.

⁵ Jason Hickel, *Less Is More: Economics for the Age of Climate Change*. (London: Penguin Random House, 2020), 102.

⁶ Hickel, 21.

⁷ Hickel, 289.

⁸ Hickel, 98.

output adequate to improve wages and build social services, but rather to pursue growth *for its own sake.*"

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For Waring, the analysis of growth and the disconnect with human flourishing is inseparable from her critique of the devaluation of women's and nature's contribution to wealth. Categorisation of these as unproductive is not, for Waring, a matter of mere oversight: the UNSNA's rules, far from being scientific, objective, or neutral, are the creations of "the male mind",¹⁰ expressions of patriarchal power that values militarism, environmental destruction, and tools of colonisation, but considers peace, environmental resources and social reproduction worthless. As a member of the Public Expenditure Select Committee, Waring was aware of the importance of accounting systems in determining policy, and that being excluded as a producer in the nation's economy rendered you invisible in the distribution of benefits, other than those attached to the labels of a welfare problem or burden. Although she argued for reform, she also called for the pursuit of "strategies that the system never dreamed of"¹¹ which remains an important provocation today, when the pursuit of growth, untethered from other measurements of national wellbeing or its impacts on the earth's ecosystem, continues to operate.

The Narrative Interrupted

Privatisation and austerity cuts, the pursuit of policies that sideline social welfare systems and community, imposing individualised and financialised systems have dominated the political and economic landscape since the 1970s. Despite warnings about the threat of pandemics, many countries, including the wealthiest, were ill-equipped to deal with the Coronavirus outbreak that began in 2020. In the UK, all services, including hospitals, were struggling as a result of budget cuts, and the running of care services for profit by multi-national companies made both jobs and the capacity to care, precarious.

In addition to racial and gendered oppressions in health care provision, people working on the frontline with inadequate Personal Protective Equipment, and those most at threat from Covid-19, including care workers, the elderly, prisoners, immigrants and the precariously employed, were hardest hit. While governments did step in, offering unprecedented support to businesses and employees, the tension between protecting life and the health of the economy has been evident in decision making throughout. Disparities in relation to risks to health among vulnerable communities have raised questions around the world about whose lives are most valued.

⁹ Hickel, 98.

¹⁰ Waring, 225.

¹¹ Waring, 120.

The crisis also highlighted the complex web of dependencies that maintain food supply, keep the shelves stacked, deliver post and look after the sick. In the midst of the pandemic last year, the Degrowth Alliance (FaDA), Feminisms Collective wrote that the crisis revealed: “what many have long known: the foundations of the wealth and well-being of the world rest upon the sphere of social reproduction and the labor of care.”¹² Despite the weekly applause for the NHS and the eulogising of those who put their lives at risk to do their jobs, the work of care, as the FaDA noted, “is performed primarily by women and, more generally, by people whose work and lives are under-valued and marginalised by sexist, racist, classist, homophobic and ableist ideas and institutions.” The ongoing shortage of workers for ‘essential’ work has exposed the low pay, poor working conditions and a lack of social prestige workers have experienced, with employers only now being urged by governments to change their practices to attract staff.¹³

In contrast, around 11.6 million “non-essential” jobs were furloughed in the United Kingdom, as the government took the unprecedented step of paying employees not to work.¹⁴ As millions adjusted to working from home, a practice that many continued after the lockdowns ended, long-established divisions between work and home life were shaken or collapsed. With many meetings held online, spaces which had been rendered invisible came into focus. For many, including single parents managing childcare and a number of low-paid jobs, some of the issues lockdown highlighted were already a daily reality. For those who previously relied on a network of schools, after school clubs, child care and baby sitters, as well as cleaners and other services, for the functioning of their lives, the reality of the ‘double shift’ preparing food, caring for family was driven home.

Prior to COVID-19, women worldwide did the majority of social reproduction work and UN data from 38 countries shows that while the unpaid workloads of men and women increased, women took on more hours and tasks. Daughters were expected to help more than sons and more women than men globally left the workforce due to the burden of responsibilities of home.¹⁵ With the pandemic, new support networks sprung up: mutual aid and other forms of self-organising provided help for people who were isolating, doing shopping, providing meals and support locally. In some communities, domestic violence workers delivered soup and other food in order to maintain contact with women who used their

¹² Degrowth Alliance (FaDA), Feminisms, “Degrowth”, (20 Apr. 2020) <https://www.degrowth.info/blog/feminist-degrowth-collaborative-fada-reflections-on-the-covid-19-pandemic-and-the-politics-of-social-reproduction>.

¹³ Peter Walker, “Boris Johnson Vows to Unleash UK’s Spirit in Upbeat Conference Speech.” *The Guardian*, 6 Oct. 2021 <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2021/Oct/06/boris-johnson-vows-to-unleash-uks-spirit-in-upbeat-conference-speech>.

¹⁴ Andy Powell and Brigid Francis-Devine, “Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme: Statistics” Commonslibrary.parliament.uk, (8 Dec. 2021), <https://www.commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9152>.

¹⁵ “UN Women Data Hub Whose Time to Care: Unpaid Care and Domestic Work during COVID-19” *Data.unwomen.org*, (25 Nov. 2020), <https://www.data.unwomen.org/publications/whose-time-care-unpaid-care-and-domestic-work-during-covid-19>.

services. Such initiatives were vital amid what has been described as a “shadow pandemic”¹⁶ of domestic violence, with seven in 10 women claiming levels had risen, according to a UN survey.¹⁷ While many women encountered danger at home, sexual harassment increased during the times that access to public spaces was limited. Three in five claimed they experienced sexual harassment, while an “epidemic” of indecent exposure was also reported in the UK. Black Lives Matter protests took place across the United States of America and around the world, and in the UK, two incidents raised serious concerns about misogyny and violence in the police force: two police officers have been imprisoned after posting photos of the bodies of Bibaa Henry and her sister Nicole Smallman following their murder at a London park in 2020. Sarah Everard was raped and murdered by a policeman in March this year.

The importance of collaboration, cooperation and solidarity in all spheres has been underscored during the pandemic, including in the unprecedented work carried out by scientists searching for vaccines.¹⁸ The role of the UK and Germany and the large pharmaceutical companies on the issue of patents, however, has reinforced inequalities in impoverished countries and risks prolonging the pandemic. In the wake of the 2020-2021 lockdown we are faced with fresh evidence daily that the systems built on individualism, nationalism and the expectation of limitless resources are showing signs of stress: empty shelves, sharp rises in fuel prices, energy companies going bust, disrupted global supply chains, and a fragility in relation to the adverse weather conditions that seem ever-more frequent.

Nothing to See Here: Backgrounding and Care

As the Care Collective observed, despite increased talk about care in the “unsettling days” of the pandemic, “carelessness continues to reign”.¹⁹ Asking the question “what would happen if we were to put care at the very centre of life?” they set out to mobilise “our individual and common ability to provide the political, social, material, and emotional conditions that allow the majority of people and living creatures on this planet to thrive - along with the planet itself.”²⁰ Care, understood as being “active and necessary across every distinct scale of life” is a practice that can be applied to “the global dimensions that have produced

¹⁶ <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/in-focus-gender-equality-in-covid-19-response/violence-against-women-during-covid-19>

¹⁷ UN Women Data Hub, “Measuring the Shadow Pandemic: Violence against Women during COVID-19,” 24 Nov. 2021. https://www.data.unwomen.org/publications/vaw-rga?gclid=Cj0KCQiA-qGNBhD3ARIsAO_o7yIF_1IH--6YSLWgHRS4WpvXRE_ariAnJft7ZujTxL0KmVU_iZBwS1AaAiftEALw_wcB. Accessed 8 Dec. 2021.

¹⁸ Matt Apuzzo and David D. Kirkpatrick, “Covid-19 Changed How the World Does Science, Together.” *The New York Times*, 1 Apr. 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/01/world/europe/coronavirus-science-research-cooperation.html>.

¹⁹ Andreas Chatzidakis et al, *The Care Manifesto: The Politics of Interdependence* (London & New York: Verso, 2020), 3.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

the climate crisis and economies that put profit over people, through careless states and communities, to how the banality of carelessness ultimately affects our interpersonal intimacies.”²¹

Noting the problematics of conditioning and stereotyping, Ariel Salleh criticises ‘Green’ perspectives that, while they acknowledge that care and nurture are typically ‘feminine,’ fail to take the important next step of asking “who in society already acts on these values?”²² If they did, she suggests, they would realise that the majority of women world-wide are already educated into such behaviours. Acknowledging the marginality of the majority of women in relation to work that is “highly rewarded by income or public status”²³ Salleh suggests that women - who carry out “65% of the world’s work for 5% of its pay” - represent “a global majority whose interests as an economic underclass lay in bringing about the social changes requisite for ecological revolution.”²⁴

Gregoratti and Raphael pick up on concerns expressed by Waring in her more recent writing about the use of care and the care economy as descriptors for all paid and unpaid work - a trend they acknowledge is present in degrowth literature. The term care is not only associated with work women are socialised to perform, but it also fails to capture all activity which the commodified economy relies upon.²⁵ Waring gives the example of work carried out by indigenous peoples of the Pacific in the *fale*, a building used as a meeting house and space for ceremonial gatherings, to illustrate how not all activity can be subsumed under care or be considered as exclusively ‘women’s work’.²⁶ Waring, Gregoratti and Raphael write, “Pushes us to consider the devaluation and invisibility of care, but also to look beyond it”. They suggest that engagement with Waring’s analysis that situates growth “at the nexus between patriarchy, capitalism, and ecological degradation, from the global to the local level”²⁷ would thus strengthen and expand degrowth’s perspective as would the “distinct theoretical contribution, strategies and proposals for change” that emanate from her work.²⁸

Degrowth literature has often acknowledged Waring’s analysis of the disconnect between GDP growth and human wellbeing, but less attention has been paid to her critique of economic accounting and the devaluation of both women’s and nature’s contribution to wealth. One explanation for this lingering reluctance drawn from Salleh, is the fact that “environmental and economic analyses are still marred by masculine ontologies and epistemologies that displace and erase the materiality of gendered embodiment

²¹ Ibid., 6.

²² Ariel Salleh, *Ecofeminism as Politics* (London: Zed Books Ltd, 2017), 24.

²³ Salleh, 82.

²⁴ Salleh, 25.

²⁵ Catia Gregoratti and Riya Raphael, “The Historical Roots of Feminist Degrowth”. In Stefania Barca et al. *Towards a Political Economy of Degrowth* (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2019), 92.

²⁶ Gregoratti and Raphael, 92.

²⁷ Gregoratti and Raphael, 84.

²⁸ Gregoratti and Raphael, 84.

in nature".²⁹ Gregoratti and Raphael also wonder if the 'founding fathers' of degrowth, which has its philosophical beginnings in the 1970s, also played a part in failing to consider how economic growth is predicated on intersecting forms of oppression. This line of inquiry can now be taken up - and expanded upon - by means of Val Plumwood's critical ecological feminism, and in particular the process she describes as 'backgrounding'.

Backgrounding, or denial, is a feature of dualism which she defines as "a relation of separation and domination inscribed and naturalised in culture and characterised by radical exclusion, distancing and opposition between orders constructed as systematically higher and lower, as inferior and superior, as ruler and ruled".³⁰ Underlying these is a denial of dependency on the subordinated other by the multiple, complex "master identity"³¹ that Plumwood suggests has framed the dominant concepts of western thought. This denial operates as the master makes use of the other, organising, relying on and benefiting from their services. Making the other inessential and denying the importance of another's contribution are common means, another is to create a strong hierarchy of activities so that the denied activities are deemed not worth noticing. Throughout history, the work of the other has been made to seem inessential, their contribution, and the extent to which their services are relied upon diminished. "It is essential to the maintenance of the foreground reality that nothing within it refer in any way to anything in the background, and yet it depends absolutely upon the existence of the background," Plumwood argues.³² The real role of and contribution of the other is thereby obscured and the economic relation is "denied, mystified, or presented in paternalistic terms."³³

Alongside incorporation and homogenisation or stereotyping, instrumentalisation is another important feature of dualism. Those on the lower side are conceived of as the master's instruments, part of a network of purposes harnessed to the master's needs. In the context of the relationship of a superior to an inferior order, it is also seen as fitting and natural that the latter serves the master as a means to his ends.

Dualisms and the Master Identity

The identity of the master, as opposed to a solely masculine identity, and a series of exclusions and denials that include the feminine, nature "and all those orders treated as nature and subject"³⁴ lies at the

²⁹ Gregoratti and Raphael, 86.

³⁰ Plumwood, 47.

³¹ Plumwood, 5.

³² Plumwood, 48.

³³ Plumwood, 49.

³⁴ Plumwood, 42.

heart of western culture, Plumwood argues. From slavery, through to the early history of capitalism and colonisation, it is possible to detect values of a “white, male, elite” that have given shape to world in which difference is construed as belonging to radically different orders of higher and lower, inferior or superior, ruler and ruled.

Expressed most strongly in the dominant concept of reason, these dualisms have generated a series of qualities appropriated to men, while qualities traditionally excluded from the male ideal are attributed to women and others.³⁵ Tracing the development of Western thought from Plato onwards, Plumwood cites the main dualisms that underpin our current system as: male/female, mental/manual (mind/body), civilised/primitive, and human/nature. These correspond directly to and naturalise gender, class, race and nature oppressions.³⁶ A private/public dualism also plays an important role in the positioning of a “dominant, white, male, Eurocentric, ruling class”.³⁷ While the public sphere is linked to reason via the qualities of freedom, universality, and rationality, the private sphere is connected to nature through dailiness, necessity, particularity and emotionality, supposedly exemplified in and constitutive of femininity.³⁸ The understanding that what it means to be human has been “constructed in the framework of exclusion, denial, and denigration of the feminine sphere, the natural sphere and the sphere associated with all human subsistence”³⁹ is vital as we turn to the development of early capitalism.

Slavery, Capitalism and the Denigration of ‘Women’s Work’

Aristotle used the metaphor of the martial relationship, taking for granted that his audience would consider the woman’s inferiority ‘natural’ or uncontroversial, to argue the case for the master’s domination of the slave. Aristotle’s “grand and daring explanatory system” incorporated concepts of the inferiority of women “in such a way as to make it indisputable and, in fact, invisible”.⁴⁰ Slavery, a practice that originated as a substitute for death during war, initially for women and children, was reliant on the “new” concept that difference of any kind can be elevated into a criterion for dominance.⁴¹ In every slave society, men were primarily exploited for their labour, while women were exploited as workers, providers of sexual services and reproducers. The twin roots of the exploitation of some men by others and men’s sexual dominance over women can be traced throughout European history. During feudalism, the lord could claim

³⁵ Plumwood, 44.

³⁶ Plumwood, 43.

³⁷ Plumwood, 44.

³⁸ Plumwood, 45.

³⁹ Plumwood, 22.

⁴⁰ Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness: From the Middle Ages to Eighteen-Seventy*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 210.

⁴¹ Lerner, 77.

possession of the serf's person and property, exerting control over every aspect of life. In the case of women, a lord could decide if a widow could remarry, and whom, and could also claim *ius primae noctis* - the right to sleep with a woman on her wedding night.

As land was generally given to the family unit, women were not as dependent on male kin in their community, less differentiated from men physically, socially and psychologically, and less subservient to their needs than they would later be, according to Silvia Federici.⁴² As all work contributed to the family's sustenance, no distinction was made between the production of goods and the work women did in the fields, raising children, cooking and washing clothes, or spinning and keeping a herb garden. Such activities were not devalued and did not then involve different social relations from those of men.⁴³

The transition from feudalism to a money-economy was not a smooth one, as is often suggested. The new visions of life and gender relations that emerged as feudalism was crumbling are key to understanding how women's history intersects with the development of the capitalist economy.⁴⁴ Widespread resistance to the feudal system that broke out in the 1300s was violently crushed by well-armed militias, but the outbreak of Black Death across Europe in 1347 transformed the fortunes of the commoners. The scarcity of labour and abundance of land that followed, gave men and women unprecedented bargaining power so that by the end of the 14th century, bondage had almost ended and free farmers became the norm. Commoners began to glimpse new possibilities of "egalitarian, co-operative society rooted in the principles of local self-sufficiency". This way of organising and working not only benefited human life, but also set in motion a period soil regeneration with potential to reverse the ravages of over-extraction during the feudal era. The first grassroots women's movement evidenced in European history, opposed to the existing order and contributing to the construction of alternative visions of communal life, emerged at this time.⁴⁵

In the counter-revolution that took place towards the end of the 15th century through an alliance between the bourgeoisie, the nobility and the Church was evidence of a "vicious" sexual politics being unleashed.⁴⁶ Class antagonism was thereby turned into an antagonism against proletarian women: in French cities, the rape of proletarian women by gangs of young men became common-place. Carried out with impunity, it "created an intense misogyny that degraded all women".⁴⁷ The capitalist counter-revolution "destroyed the possibilities that emerged from the anti-feudal struggle".⁴⁸ It was achieved in through violent evictions and enclosure that began in England in the 16th century and secured for the elites

⁴² Federici, 25.

⁴³ Federici, 25.

⁴⁴ Federici, 22.

⁴⁵ Federici, 44

⁴⁶ Federici, 47.

⁴⁷ Federici, 48.

⁴⁸ Federici, 21.

vast amounts of land - and a labour force that was dependent on whatever wages it could get.⁴⁹ Women's social and collective power, which was closely linked to the commons, was particularly impacted by enclosure. With the demise of the subsistence economy, the unity of production and reproduction work came to an end. Production for market became the only value-creating activity, making it more difficult for women to support themselves. As they were excluded from guilds and from traditional roles such as brewing, plant medicine making and midwifery, women were forced into lower paid work. The only reproductive work that was paid - at the lowest rates - was for the master class or outside the home.

In this new order, class for men was based on their relationship to the means of production: Those who owned it could dominate those who did not.⁵⁰ For women, economic oppression and exploitation was also based on the commodification of female sexuality and the appropriation by men of women's labour and her reproductive power.⁵¹ Seen in the context of enclosure and the process of capital accumulation, the witch trials that took place during the sixteenth century, were part of a disciplinary process that destroyed "a world of social/cultural practices and beliefs that had been typical of pre-capitalist rural Europe, but which had now come to be viewed as unproductive and potentially dangerous for the new economic order".⁵² In a new sexual contract, men gained free access to women's bodies and their labour as substitute for the land lost to the enclosures. The scold's bridle and the ducking stool were also used to instill obedience, and were the instruments by which the quiet, submissive and dutiful wife was created. The most basic means of reproduction came to be defined as non-work, a natural resource, available to all, no less than the air we breathe, or the water we drink."⁵³

The control that was exerted over women's lives and bodies reached its fullest expression in colonisation and the slave trade. Colonisation, which began during the same period, enabled primitive accumulation on a "staggering" scale⁵⁴ as across the global south "nature and human bodies were enclosed to an extent that dwarfed what happened within Europe itself".⁵⁵ Force was the main lever that drove a strategy of land appropriation that saw one third of communal indigenous lands expropriated by Spaniards by the turn of the 17th century.⁵⁶ There is, Federici argues, "a continuity between the subjugation of the population of the New World and that of people in Europe, women in particular, in the transition to capitalism."⁵⁷ Today, areas "marked up for commercial ventures, and where the anti-colonial struggle has

⁴⁹ Federici, 52.

⁵⁰ Lerner, 215

⁵¹ Lerner, 216

⁵² Silvia Federici, *Witches, Witch-Hunting, and Women*, (Oakland, Ca: Pm Press, 2018), 21.

⁵³ Federici, 54

⁵⁴ Federici, 51

⁵⁵ Hickel, 51.

⁵⁶ Federici, 68.

⁵⁷ Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*, 219.

been the strongest”⁵⁸ are experiencing high levels of violence against women - underscoring the argument that attacks on women are central to capital’s search for control over the world’s natural wealth and human labour.

Land grabs and privatisation that have devastated areas rich in natural resources, such as sub Saharan Africa, Latin America, South East Asia, have been disastrous for the planet, and for women whose reproduction work sustains their communities and upholds “noncommercial conceptions of security and wealth”.⁵⁹ Communal land tenure and subsistence farming have both come under “institutional attack”⁶⁰ so that leaders in both Africa and India, influenced by the World Bank have forced women to give up subsistence farming - the only means by which many have been able to survive austerity programmes - to work with their husbands in commodity production.

Encountering the lowly Jesus

New visions of life and gender relations, even if short-lived, glimpsed as they were before violent counter-revolution and new forms of bondage within capitalism, are nonetheless crucial if the possibility of projecting beyond the current mental constructs of western thought is to be realised. Such stories include the remarkable writer Hildegard of Bingen, a nun living in the 12th century, whose work encompassed medicine, natural sciences, cosmology, mystical revelations and poetry. Her visions and pictorial representations included a predominance of female figures that Lerner describes as “startling” and visions that fused male and female elements - the physical and the spiritual, the rational-practical and the mystical aspects of existence - an expression of her theology which breaks sharply with traditional dichotomised categories and patriarchal hierarchies.⁶¹

The possibility of dialogue with a theopolitical analysis that considers the “lowly Jesus”⁶² offers further imaginary impetus that may surprise some. As was the case with the woman who met Jesus at the well⁶³, such an encounter has the potential to upend traditional assumptions about God and religion, and may offer up unexpected surprises and potential for transformation. For these purposes, the story of Jesus washing the disciples feet, can be read not only as a challenge, but as an intentional setting aside of the master model, and associated dominance in relation to slavery, race, class and gender. Drawing on Roger Haydon Mitchell’s analysis of Jesus’ actions as a countercultural politics and situating them in the context of

⁵⁸ Federici, 50.

⁵⁹ Federici, 51.

⁶⁰ Federici, *Witches, Witch-Hunting, and Women*, 51.

⁶¹ Lerner, 46-64.

⁶² Mitchell, 218-231.

⁶³ John 4: 4-42.

the household and every day hospitality opens up possibilities that can speak to the search for tools and spaces where socio-ecological transformation can occur. This reading of the story draws on Mitchell's assertion that Jesus' actions can be interpreted as a counterpolitical response, the culmination of a sequence of events that began when he went into the temple to drive out those buying and selling there, overturning the tables of the money changers and the seats of those selling doves, and then obstructing those who were carrying merchandise. While the "amazement" his words and actions provoked among the multitude, is acknowledged in the text, so too is the "frightened and murderous reaction" from vested interests. To these, as Mitchell points out, the "lowly stance" of Jesus would have been anathema.

Three incidents explored by Mitchell that take place following the altercation in the temple "affirm the interpretation of the incident as a demonstration against the whole religio-political system" of the time. During each, questions are posed to Jesus that "clearly present contending political agendas". In the first, the religious authorities seek to challenge Jesus' authority, asserting their perception of power based on "imperial sovereignty". Here, Jesus responds by making clear that his authority was of a different order; that is, divine kenotic love; the second contention, intended as a trap, was a question about the poll tax. Read in the context of the "puppet status" of the religious leaders in relation to Caesar, Jesus' response reiterates his distinctiveness from those power structures, even if strategically he is subject to them; the third contention, in which Jesus responds to questions posed by the Sadducees, "underlines that a theology of immanence without the possibility of a present transcendence endorsed by resurrection can provide no alternative to apathy, suppression, or collusion with the imperial powers of the current age."⁶⁴ Upholding the possibility of "a larger counterpolitical revelation of God", Jesus also challenged "the gender hierarchy of the law's attitude to women and his expectation that it must come to an end in the resurrection."

Seen as an attempt to embody an alternative to the hierarchies of "imperial sovereignty", Jesus' subsequent actions can be interpreted as an embodied response, an act of kenarchy, thus defined as "the emptying out of power motivated by love for the other".⁶⁵ His actions, crucially, are positioned at the centre of an important sequence of the story: knowing that he had come from God and was returning to God, he attempts to show his love for the disciples by washing their feet. By removing his outer garments and wrapping himself in a cloth, he divests the apparel of power and embraces vulnerability by doing work that expressed love and care, but was also menial - 'women's work' of the lowest degree. This hands-on challenge to the 'backgrounding' and invisibility of work that would usually be done by a female slave,⁶⁶ would have been shocking to all around him. Read in this way, the "second inner story" at work in the account highlights Peter's shocked reaction as he recoils and insists that Jesus stop. Seeing him from a

⁶⁴ Mitchell, 226.

⁶⁵ Mitchell, 10.

⁶⁶ Matson, M.A. "To Serve as Slave: Footwashing as Paradigmatic Status Reversal" in *One in Christ Jesus: festschrift for Scott Bartchy*. [online] Available at <https://www.academia.edu/9509354>

“human imperial level” Peter regards Jesus as being “too great” to perform the task. Jesus here embodies Paul’s later assertion that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female,⁶⁷ and positions himself in a potential community where power positions that have been naturalised and made invisible are brought to the fore and disrupted.

Reimagining the household

As it dawns on Peter that the work of foot washing is being reinstated “from uncleanness and meniality to holiness and transcendence”,⁶⁸ he rushes to embrace it in an expansive way asking Jesus to wash his hands and head as well. The response that follows might be read as resisting appropriation or instrumentalisation in an intentional holding of the tension between transcendence and immanence. The physical act of care is thus established as being central to the demonstration of God’s nature in an earthed, embodied way. Such physicality is an important counter-move to dominant conceptions of humanity that exclude nature and thus those aspects associated with the body, sexuality, reproduction, affectivity, emotionality, and the senses as well as dependence on the natural world.⁶⁹ A Jesus who is altogether different from the one created in the interests of a narrow elite may begin to be glimpsed, one who spat copiously in the dust to make healing balm for a blind man,⁷⁰ cooked breakfast for his friends, and took care of those around him.

Jesus goes on to open up “the imperative of Peter and the others following his example into the future”⁷¹ - an invitation to the male disciples to continue this work of divestment and participation in hands-on, life-enhancing work. Jesus’ actions therefore both reach back toward the imposition and naturalisation of women’s inferiority and of slavery, and forward to the network of assumptions about who does social reproduction work and who is on the receiving end. The refusal of the master identity and the positioning of mutual, life-enhancing care at the centre of the household and his God-nature opens up new contexts for kenotic power “as a practice that does not belong to the ‘binary pair’ of the dominant and the submissive, but also does not require pure distinction or separation from these positions”.⁷²

Reclaiming Lowly Roots

⁶⁷ Galatians 3: 28.

⁶⁸ Mitchell, 228.

⁶⁹ Plumwood, 71.

⁷⁰ Mark I. Wallace, *When God Was a Bird: Christianity, Animism, and the Re-Enchantment of the World*. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019).

⁷¹ Mitchell, 227.

⁷² Anna Mercedes, *Power For: Feminism and Christ’s Self-Giving*. (London & New York: T & T Clark, 2011), 131.

The suggestion that a story about Jesus could be a potential resource for imagining worlds not shaped by the master identity and challenging the oppression of human others and the earth, can perhaps only be taken seriously if the Church's role in upholding and strengthening that identity is exposed. Since the fourth century, as Mitchell has shown, the church colluded with the "trajectory of empire" as it "subverted into support for the higher power".⁷³ The Roman Empire when it adopted Christianity was troubled by a god-figure who became like a servant, and so developed an emperor-like Christ, who was able to call people into obedience. The kenosis - or self-emptying - of Jesus was gradually exchanged for an imperial model of Christ⁷⁴ - a mascot for a different power dynamics entirely. The radical potential of Jesus' actions were largely unrealised, although traces that affirm hope in his lowliness are woven into history. Within the traditional Church structures, however, doctrines of self-emptying were used to justify its authority and to perpetuate hierarchies of gender, race and class. Religious authority and power came to be "no longer understood as enabling power but as controlling power, as patriarchal super-ordination and subordination."⁷⁵

Christianity, despite its "primordial beginnings" and "originary vision of the world as sacred place, as holy ground, as the body of God"⁷⁶ participated in the process by which human life was extracted from an interwoven relationship with the earth's ecosystem and came to be understood in terms of alienated concepts of domination and extraction. "As a vassal to Plato and Aristotle, it has operated within a graded hierarchy of Being, in which plants and animals, rocks and rivers are denigrated as soulless matter," argues Wallace, who explores Jesus' actions in the light of Martin Heidegger's work exploring '*techne*' which is hand, or human-mediated change.⁷⁷ Heidegger distinguished between the attitudinal dispositions that are brought to such work, as either *poiesis* - bringing forth, or setting upon. In the account of Jesus healing a blind man with a poultice he makes out of the soil and his own spittle, Wallace sees his "skill and sensitivity in *techne* - to bring forth nature's potential" and "harness the curative powers of the earth to do something radical and unexpected in the community."⁷⁸

The Dualistic Bind: Women and Humanity

The understanding of Jesus as participating in the work of foot washing at meal time, not only demystifies his authority, but also opens up space for undoing the ways that his actions have been used as a

⁷³ Mitchell, 23.

⁷⁴ Mitchell, 21.

⁷⁵ Schüssler Fiorenza, 73.

⁷⁶ Wallace, Mark I. *When God Was a Bird: Christianity, Animism, and the Re-Enchantment of the World*. New York, Fordham University Press, 2019, 4.

⁷⁷ Wallace, 56.

⁷⁸ Wallace, 62.

tool for domination and ecclesial control. For over a thousand years, women have “reinterpreted the biblical texts in a massive feminist critique, yet their marginalisation in the formation of religious and political thought prevented this critique ever engaging the minds of men who had appointed themselves as the definers of divine truth and revelation.”⁷⁹

Later, they would grapple with an “unacceptable dilemma”, based on the fact that what it means to be human has been constructed by the master identity shaped feminist responses in the West. From the 17th century onwards, feminists in both religious and secular traditions focused on education, working to achieve equality through education. One such advocate of equal access to education was Mary Wollstonecraft whose *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects* was published in 1792, argued that “a revolution in female manners” was necessary for women to stand equally with men. Liberation therefore came through access to education and to reason, which Wollstonecraft accepted as a superior realm.⁸⁰ Her view of women’s labour remained class-bound: she believed that a servant class was necessary, and so differentiated between rank as to the kind of teaching required. For “young people of superior qualities, or fortune”⁸¹ the “sober pleasures” of equality could be achieved through an education that enabled them to perform their God-given duty as productive people. Poor girls should be taught skills necessary for their future work.

While Wollstonecraft and other feminists from the 1790s onwards, contributed a great deal to the understanding of the divisions between the public and the domestic spheres, the exclusions and contradictions within this emergent tradition remained to the present day.⁸² The class blindness embodied in Wollstonecraft’s invocation of a maidservant to relieve the housewife of domestic toil, remains present in equality feminism, which has also failed to recognise that women’s household work is rooted not only in an unequal and oppressive gender division of labour, but in racist, colonial enterprises as well.

Christian feminists have struggled with concepts of service within the context of a Church that is structured according to a hierarchy of power-dualisms that include ordained/non-ordained, clergy/laity. “Dependence, obedience, second-class citizenship and powerlessness remain intrinsic to the notion of “service/servanthood” as long as society and church structurally reproduce a “servant” class of people,” according to Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, who argues for the categories of service and servanthood to be rejected because they disempower women.⁸³

⁷⁹ Lerner, 275.

⁸⁰ Susan J. Ferguson, *Women and Work: Feminism, Labour, and Social Reproduction*. (London: Pluto Press, 2020), 31-39.

⁸¹ Ferguson, 34.

⁸² Ferguson, 39.

⁸³ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 72-73.

Fiorenza rejects feminist strategies for retrieving the concept of service by redefining it as freely chosen “power for” rather than “power over” in line with the early church’s understanding of ministry as service. In her view, such strategies, continue to valorise the patriarchal concept of service/servanthood. These developed as a result of theologians failing to understand the radical potential of a discipleship of equals and instead adapting the Christian community as “the household of God” to its patriarchal societal structures. Distinctions that were gradually introduced between diakonia - or service - of the word and that of the table can therefore be connected to the restriction of women’s ministry.⁸⁴ Since the discipleship of equals has been overshadowed by the reality of the patriarchal church, women’s ministry should no longer be construed as “service” or “waiting on someone” but as “equality from below,” as a democratic practice of solidarity with all those who struggle for survival, self-love and justice. Fearing that the cultural patterns of self-sacrificing service for women and other subordinate people will be reduplicated, Fiorenza insists there is a need to re-envision women’s ministry as a practice of solidarity and justice.⁸⁵

While the argument for an *ekklesia* of women struggling for solidarity resonates with the need for broad-based alliances against multiple oppressions, there is a risk that the hands-on, menial work, that the majority of women worldwide are engaged in, is over-looked and devalued. The radical potential of a discipleship of equals, it can be argued, lies in Jesus’ intention of drawing the male disciples into embodied expressions of life-giving work, and also in the space for solidarity and justice across divisions of race and class his example opens up.

The Dualistic Bind: Women and Nature

Lerner’s charge that many women, depending on their class, race and ethnic affiliations, also participated in discriminating against, disadvantaging and exploiting men and women different from themselves by race and class and religion⁸⁶ applies both in respect to human others and to nature. Many feminists have been wary of discussing a connection to nature on the basis that doing so could “play into men’s hands”, given that “it is this loaded truism that men have used over the centuries to keep women in their place as ‘closer to nature’”⁸⁷. The suggestion that women’s association with nature should be set aside is often based on the assumption, as was the case with Wollstonecraft, that this paves the way for both men and women to become fully human. Without reframing these assumptions, however, there is a risk

⁸⁴ Fiorenza, 73.

⁸⁵ Fiorenza, 73.

⁸⁶ Lerner, 280.

⁸⁷ Federici, 35.

that the dominant model of human distance from and transcendence and control of nature will prevail - with disastrous consequences.⁸⁸

The denial and backgrounding of the more-than-human, the reproductive and the bodily sphere, and the labour of those colonised in nature are all, as we have seen, treated as invisible inputs in the economy. Understanding pertaining to instrumentalisation of the earth, Plumwood suggests, can be drawn from feminist understanding of structures of human identity involved in sexual domination. By this means, the process by which the other is used as a means to another's ends, as one whose being creates no limits on use and which can be entirely shaped to ends not its own, can be challenged. Nature, Plumwood argues, must be seen as a "political" rather than a descriptive entity, integrated as a fourth and "missing" category alongside race, class and gender in a resistance to the dominant system that prioritises solidarity, and the work of undoing of divisive dualisms.⁸⁹

By such means, the potential of "power for" which, as Anna Mercedes writes, defines Jesus' self-emptying, can be set free from patriarchal domination and employed in an "ethics of care" which "reveals a kenotic energy insistent on working against the currents of abuse"⁹⁰ wherever they are found. Forms of resistance that have "temporarily and partially reorganised the relations of social reproduction labour" are the means by which we can discover new ways of life-making and defy the alienating, individualising experiences of everyday life under capitalism.⁹¹

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⁸⁸ Plumwood, 23.

⁸⁹ Plumwood, 3.

⁹⁰ Mercedes, 117.

⁹¹ Ferguson, 138.

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