Watery Depths: Ecofeminism and "Redemptive" Wetlands

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The cultural and intra-psychic maps of "pollution," communicated through the narratives of Judeo-Christian tradition, position us in destructive relationships with wetlands. Both the ecological terrrain known as wetlands as well as women's wombs have been at times derogatorily labeled as "rotting flesh." Our reactions of repulsion engendered by such labelling have led us to devalue economically what are some of the most fecund and generative of habitats, construing ecological wetlands as "wastelands" and the wet wombs of women as "lacking"—and thus women as "lack-landers." Exploring Judeo–Christian texts through anthropologist Mary Douglas's work and philosopher Julia Kristeva's insights on purity and pollution, I attempt in this article to open out how patriarchy's sacred endeavor of becoming "clean and proper" has contributed to destruction of life's generativity. Ecofeminism unveils the parallel ways in which women and the land are imaged and the resultant treatment to which they are then submitted. Through Douglas and Kristeva, I am attempting to disclose such images upon which our biblical narrative rides. These images generate our psychic maps as well as the geographic boundaries of self and other natural spaces. As Iris Marion Young opens out Kristeva's theory of abjection to suggest the psychic faultiness that

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underlie and belie our discursive commitment to end racial hatred, I am proposing that we borrow Young's insight to analyze the fear and disgust of natural "ecotones"—a practiced revulsion built up out of narrative memory, though we can nonetheless sing "For the Beauty of the Earth." (See Young 1990, especially chapter five entitled, "The Scaling of Bodies.") After noting now Luce Irigaray's gender analysis contributes to this concept of the "polluting," I invoke the spirit of Hildegard of Bingen—for whom moistness is essential to spiritual verdancy—toward a new sense of the sacred.

In suggesting that our Judeo-Christian tradition leads to disparaging "the moist side of the life process," a clarification may be helpful. The biblical tradition embraces images of pure and clean, freely flowing fresh water—waters, that is, that are proper to the "body" of water. I am attempting, rather, a psychoanalytic analysis of our experiences of those "ecotones" where the proper "body" of water is exceeded, where waters leak into or onto a body of land, mixing with and "muddying the water." Ecologically speaking, it is in these liminal areas or marginal lands that the Spirit of life and regeneration broods.

Fertility as Economic Waste: The Loathing of the Maternal

Recently I moved from Minnesota's rolling farmland to New Jersey's eternal suburbia. Prolonged "northern exposure" left me keenly aware of the serene strength of the hills, habited as they were by my spiritual mediators and advocates, the trees. Seeking to find such a sanctuary far from Jersey's asphalt jungle, I discovered myself in most intimate proximity to the sixty-eight-hundred-acre Great Swamp. Make a pilgrimage to a swamp? The very idea conjured up eerie feelings of totem-like old stumps, spooking me from their watery tomb. It roused memories of tempers and time lost as tractors were sucked into the slough on my homeplace. These foul damps—with their warm, sweaty, heavy breath heaving up haunting specters—still rattled with sinister intent for me.

Wetlands—in myriad incarnations as marshes, muskegs, mires and moors; potholes and peatlands; bogs, bayous and bottomland—rival the ecological productivity of rainforests (Mitchell 1992, 18). Yet saving wetlands, quite distinct from the exotic projection we practice toward rainforests, seems rather loathesome to our psyches. The United States, for example, "converts"—to employ the language of economics and federal policy—three hundred thousand acres of wetlands annually. Less than half of the 220 million wetland acres original to the United States 200 years ago remain in the lower 48 states (Mitchell 1992, 13–14). These fertile crescents function in economic theory as wastelands, an identification already explicit in the biblical reference to the nettle-infested salt pits

of Moab and Sodom: "A waste forever!," cursed the Lord of Hosts (Zeph. 2:9). An ecohistorian summarizes: "For most of recorded history, wetlands were regarded as bogs of treachery, mires of despair, homes of pests, and refuges for outlaw and rebel" (Mitsch and Gosselink 1986, 416).

To be productive, i.e., to be *redeemed* from this mixture of dubious social factors and to be converted into a system with a "pure and respectable" generative process, these lands must be brought to "higher and drier" purposes. Thus farm sloughs are drained and tiled "to make straight the way" for bigger combines and wider plows. In the midwestern states of the U.S.A., such as Iowa, nearly ninety per cent of the wetlands have been forced through this "conversion experience," primarily by intubating the land with subcutaneous sewers called tiles. Amidst urban squeeze, wetlands are either flooded or filled, making "rough places a plain" (Isaiah 40). Through the process of development, with its hardly covert religious injunctions, it is believed that wetlands can be "transformed" into thriving geo-social spaces.

What irony that fertility should function as waste, wrote Wendell Berry in *The Unsettling of America* (1977, 136). But cannot our symptomatic loathing open these padlocked gates of irony? Lying psychologically below, and chronologically prior to, our practice of discursive reason are the psychic maps we have drawn of the pure and holy. The affect of loathing—termed "abjection" by Julia Kristeva—indicates that such a demarcation is psychically intact, attempting to turn us away from what is religiously polluting. Through a Foucauldian archaeology of our loathings, we will discover that wetlands (like their symbolic twin, women's wombs) can threaten the Western Judeo-Christian tradition, because these are the geo-social sites of our most intimate, habitual terror, the spaces of religion's abjected maternal function Kristeva (1982, 91). "[The abject]," Kristeva explains, "is the space of struggle against the mother. The abject insists on the subject's necessary relation to death, corporeality, animality, materiality—those relation's which [Western] consciousness and reason find intolerable" (Grosz 1989, 73 and 78).

In the psychic economy of the Judeo-Christian tradition, women and wetlands have shared similar tasks of clean-up, waste-disposal, and transformation of life forms. Against the horizon of the sacred and holy, both women and wetlands appear as sinister and forbidding, with little economic value granted to either. Noxious in the case of wetlands, obnoxious in the case of women, moistness—oozing fluids—supposedly defines each of them: milk, menses and mouthiness (e.g., juicy gossip) in the case of women; muck, mire and abysmal mud in the case of wetlands.

At variance with our conscious will-to-do-good, this loathing of natural fertility has been inscribed in our everyday habits and unconscious

fears as the obverse of the injunction to love God "whole-heartedly and with pure minds." The labyrinth of our loathings protect the God of Purity as well as that God's puritanical power over both women and wetness. In Mishnaic tradition, the womb and the swamp share symbolic identity; they are both *bet hatorfa*, places of rotting flesh (Drayson-Knigge). These maternal bellies, somatic and geographic, are the sites of greatest religious impurity, precipitating the salvific plan of severing the umbilical "ties that bind" us in a "bondage to decay" (Romans 8:19ff). Redemption of our bodies, the Apostle Paul explained, requires "adoption," a symbolic process predicated upon the forsaking of the mother's body.

Redemptive zealotry thus conceived wreaks ecological ruin, for our psychic patterns of purity and pollution sacralize ecological destruction. No recital of a theology of creation and an ethics of stewardship will uphold the "integrity of creation" as long as the recitals continue to construct a consciousness that wards off wetness. French feminists, like Kristeva and Irigaray, remind us that the blueprints of our religious ideality have been bounded by solids; the "Real" is cut and dry...hard, substantial, *form*-al.[1] Fluids transgress.

Saturating the Sacred Order

A wetland, by U.S. federal definition, is any ground that is saturated at least seven days per year.[2] Considerably more if you are a woman. This is the religious offense, the impurity which initiates the redemptive project, for "sinning flesh," according to Leviticus 15, sweats, dribbles, pours, flows, drips, leaks, cries, bleeds. To be out of control is to be "in tears" or wet under the armpits. To despair is to be ensnared in muck. "Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck. I sink in deep mire, where there is no foothold," cries the Psalmist. Only too soon does the Psalmist blurt out the feminine connection of this dread fear: "Do not let the deep swallow me up, or the Pit close her mouth over me" (Psalm 69:1–2, 15). Sacred order often demands that oozing secretions be secreted away. This irrational fear, this patriarchally founded taboo of polluting "issues" (incarnate in mouthy marshes and women's wombs) underlies the salvific crusade of human intervention precisely within those ecological systems which are the source of natural generativity.

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1. In addition to Kristeva's *Powers of Horror*, see Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985).

2. The U.S. Government definition, as proposed by the Clinton administration, reads: "A wetland is any ground that has mucky or peat-based soils, nourishes specified plant life and is saturated at least seven days a year."

A review of biblical literature reveals the sacred tracings of these psychic maps. In creative as well as liberative acts, Yahweh takes charge of the waters—creating earth and sky by bounding and damming the waters into "one" place (Genesis 1:9); liberating humanity by heaping up walls of water in order to provide a dry path, a firm foothold, solid ground on which to stand. In the creation story of 2 Esdras (6:41ff), we read (and listen carefully to the proportions!): "On the third day, you commanded the waters to be gathered together in a seventh part of the earth; six parts you dried up so that some of them might be...cultivated and be of service before you." Or remember the voice from the whirlwind that chided Job: "[W]ho shut in the sea with doors when it burst out from the womb?... [Who] prescribed bounds for it and set bars and doors, and said, 'Thus far shall you come, and no farther....'" Thus contained, waters cannot comingle with dry land except by divine fiat and then as punishment. In the same "wise" manner the logic of that Proverb-ial wit wrote: "The mouth of a loose woman is a deep pit; he with whom the Lord is angry falls into it" (Proverbs 22:14).

Creation thus proceeds by a series of separations and divisions (and subdivisions) of solid properties, properly fenced and bounded, with no room for remainders. Anthropologist Mary Douglas drew this conclusion: "To be holy is to be whole; holiness is unity, integrity, perfection of the individual and of the kind" (Douglas 1966, 54). Holiness requires the intact boundaries of the "one" body, whatever its particular substance: sky, earth, or water. Wherever the singular unity of the body is breached, e.g., when dew forms at the threshold between sky and earth, when wetlands form between waters proper and the good earth, when bodies bleed over their boundaries, there transpires a religious offense. These places, essentially all fluid incursions, where the body exceeds its oneness, often fall away as waste, as religious impurity. To remain holy the categories of creation, the "kinds"—whether of seeds, cattle, cloth, or cosmic matter—were to be kept utterly distinct. Obviously offensive, the ecological casseroles we call wetlands mix kinds and fling seeds to all four winds. Matter merges, swamp sauces burble and brew throughout bottomlands and bayous.

Our revulsions, our repulsions, nausea, aversions and disgust protect this particular configuration of the sacred and holy. In this psychic economy, straying into a swamp could never be construed as divine encounter. According to the psalmists' incessant petitions, salvation implies getting out of the damp, dark deeps. It implies being extricated (i.e., redeemed) from the maternal menstruum. This salvific striving presupposes the belief that we can and should be purely separate from the sexual, nurturant discharges; from disintegrating, decompositional matters; from the

moist side of the life process, in general, which curiously includes smell, colour, sound and affect as well as emotion, imagination and sensuousness.

Multiplicity and Other Such Fluid Perversions

The speculum, in regard to women, and the gaze of the land speculator, in consideration of wetlands, reflect the same view: there's nothing there. Wetlands, with their imprecise perimeters, rouse the recurrent Freudian problematic: an anatomical defectiveness, the lack of a transcendental signifier. What lacks such definition cannot be accounted for within the symbolic system of solids. Protective federal legislation could not even be developed until twenty years ago when the term "wetlands" was conceived to lend the logic of identity to their myriad incarnations.

Luce Irigaray enlightens us with a seismic commentary on Freud's female reproductive geography: "Her sex organ represents the horror of having nothing to see?!" Irigaray retorts: "Woman has sex organs more or less everywhere" (Irigaray 1980, 101). Similarly, wetlands carry on multiple reproductive processes simultaneously, but out of sight of the single-minded significatory system. Irigaray continues: "[F]luid is always in a relation of excess or lack *vis-à-vis* unity. It eludes any definite identification" (Irigaray 1985, 117). The refusal of the bodies of women and wetlands to obey borders, to be principled enough to maintain proper, pure and precise boundaries, violates the holy "One" and the monotheistic law of Oneness.

Fluids—women's "issues" and wetlands, bilious brews—break down borders and breach identities. They make distinctions problematic, because these "ecotones," these folds of maternity, are unstable, transitional territories where objects are taking and losing shape. Wherever the maternal function is in process, dichotomies (e.g., self/other, death/life) lose their oppositional status. When and where these distinctions begin to disintegrate, acts of violence are perpetrated against the maternal functions by the social order. As the pregnant belly of the woman swells, potential for battering by intimate males—particularly battering that focuses on kicking or punching of the trespassing belly—increases. As for wetlands that ingress or offend the "truly terrestrial" with their seasonal swells, they are either leveed or leveled.

For over a century, wetland removal (somehow not unlike treating women with hysterectomies) was considered the good and "proper thing to do" (Mitsch 22). The Swamp Land Acts of the mid-nineteenth century made it official policy to drain and fill wetlands in order that "wastelands might soon bear the fruits of sustained agriculture" (Mitchell 13; Mitsch 416). Out of the geographic body of land, we have attempted to create the

same holy and respectable body which we find physiologically acceptable—one free of the fluids and smells that religiously pollute it— *but which ecologically redeem it!* In a purificatory ritual no less obsessive than that which we perform on our own bodies daily, the economic practice of transformation of ecological "waste" (religious impurities) into wealth has been attempting to create the "clean and proper" body of the earth by damming up its fluids, by drying up its sweaty pits, by stopping up the tear glands of the gods.[3] Within such a perspective wetlands and women are both horrors threatening to suck life back into the steaming, sweaty primeval backwaters of civilization. Or is it that they somehow, in our peculiar logic of the holy, threaten us with awareness of the psychic primal scene? Does not wetland destruction as well as the domination of women have everything to do with our desire to believe in an "immaculate conception?"[4]

The Spirit Pores/Pours Herself upon All Flesh

Women's wetness and the ecological casseroles called wetlands haunt the Holy One, placing the "Subject(of God)-on-trial," to pervert Julia Kristeva's sense of postmodern subjectivity. If, metaphorically speaking, the universe is God's body (Hartshorne, McFague), then God's body sweats, bleeds, flows, cries. No longer a clean and proper body, but rather loathsome. The waters of regeneration pouring forth from its orifices are never as pure as the rubrics of liturgical ritual demand.

Because she has from the beginning insisted on brooding on the waters, it is perhaps no surprise that the Holy Spirit has been silenced in Western Christianity. Living within the wetlands of the Rhine River valley, Hildegard of Bingen recognized the moist, rapturous potency of the Spirit as *viriditas*—"greening power." The generativity of the Earth, she knew, was necessarily connected to the "dew of grace" (Hildegard 1987,

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3. It is told that the Prairie Pothole Region (a thirty-thousand square mile area covering much of the midwest from Iowa to Canada and through the Dakotas) was formed one day when the gods decided to have a good cry and happened to forget their handkerchiefs (Mitchell 29).

4. In Christian theology, maternity occurs either virginally or kenotically. Virginally, "the Virgin is impregnated by the Word and not by a product of a body" (Kelly Oliver, *Reading Kristeva*). Remember, the wetland becomes economically productive and prosperous when penetrated by the plow. Kenotically, God supposedly makes room in God's self for the other by self-emptying; as Moltmann sees it this is a maternal experience, and though critical of Moltmann, feminist Elizabeth Johnson does not escape the same valorization of the empty container theory of maternity (cf. Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is*). Pregnant women do not create space by emptying. Rather, maternity creates new space, energy—expansively, pushing, exceeding, flowing over boundaries—not by retreating anorexically.

231 and 244).[5] Moisture and mist, she wrote, are the forces of the Spirit inspiring the Earth, leaving it perspiring, sweaty and glistening green (Hildegard 281). In opposition to this history of the sacred separating itself from the waters and salvation being a delivery out of the depths, Hildegard regarded the returning of moistness, like the spring sap run, as salvific: "The Earth is always muddy..." she wrote, "and it is this mud that causes the Earth to become fruitful. In this way, the body should be subject to the soul" (Hildegard 112). Wetlands and women's wetness are two aspects of the Spirit's natural, salvific grace. Wetlands act as huge breathing organisms, purify water, attenuate stormwaters, and regulate climate. They are nature's nurseries. Seventy-five per cent of North American bird species depend on roosting in wetlands; ninety per cent of oceanic life begins in estuaries.

Though culturally encouraged to stay "soft and dry," to keep our moistness a "secret," women's wetness is the fertile hope for on-going generations of humanity. And as for women's tears, weeping keeps life verdant, for within a world that refuses to weep at its horrors, tears redeem the possibility of humane human life.

Escaping into the watery depths—those raw spaces of nature where death and renewal refuse the confines of an oppositional dyad—provides us with rare moments of cultural flexibility. Exploring these liminal lands where sky, soil and water dare their fecund interface brings our own imaginal abilities to the maternal thresholds where we can reconceive our present imprisoning boundaries of male/female, fertility/waste, natural/supernatural. Such an exercise can begin to displace the power of purity, which has debased women and destroyed wetlands. Knee-deep in the mire where wild rice grows on green spindles like heron's legs, we might now practice prayer with poet Mary Oliver's ritual rhythms:

> I don't want you to sit down at the table./I don't want you just to eat, and be content./I want you to walk out into the fields/where the water is shining and the rice has risen./I want you to stand there, far from the white tablecloth./I want you to fill your hands with the mud, like a blessing (Oliver 1992, 38).

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5. The Mishnah identified dew as one of the offending fluids. At the threshold between sky and earth, dew is the juice of their intermingling. Think, if you will, how loathe some are to get their bare feet wet in grass dampened with the morning's dewfall.

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