

# REVALUING HOME: Feminism And Bioregionalism

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Several years ago, at a conference about regional development, in a workshop with native women, I asked Marie Smallface for some guidance: "What is the best thing for white people to do in the midst of the cultural and environmental havoc *created* by white people?"

She spoke directly and said, "Find a place and stay there." She went on to talk about how she thought it made more sense to be "of" the land you're struggling to save. Ultimately, she meant, staying home.

Bioregionalists express the same idea. Yet, at the same time home has been a very isolated place for women. To be different from this traditional situation, home, as such, needs understanding, valuing, and redefining. Here a partnership between bioregionalism and feminism can provide fertile ground for deep societal changes. For both perspectives value "all our relations"—with nature and with humankind,—and both value home.

Without feminism, it seems that the bioregional view is not going to bring about the shift in attitude that is required to live an ecologically harmonious life. We have to put our own house in order. Our relations with the earth reflect our relationships with each other.

## Redefining and Revaluing Home

Bioregional action is based on local control and decentralization; nonviolence; sustainable lifestyles; and on a revaluing and redefining of home.

In considering the notion of home, bioregionalists turn towards ecology. The word itself comes from the Greek *oikos*, for home—an indication that home is much broader than simply the nuclear family. As it is in the natural world, where all life is connected and inter-related, teeming with diversity and complexities, so it is with human domestic life. Here is the scene of *human* ecology, or what Murray Bookchin refers to as "social ecology." Home becomes the locus of

liberation from a culture of violence, because it is here where people really have a measure of control over the creation of nonviolent values. It is where the consequences of political decisions are felt.

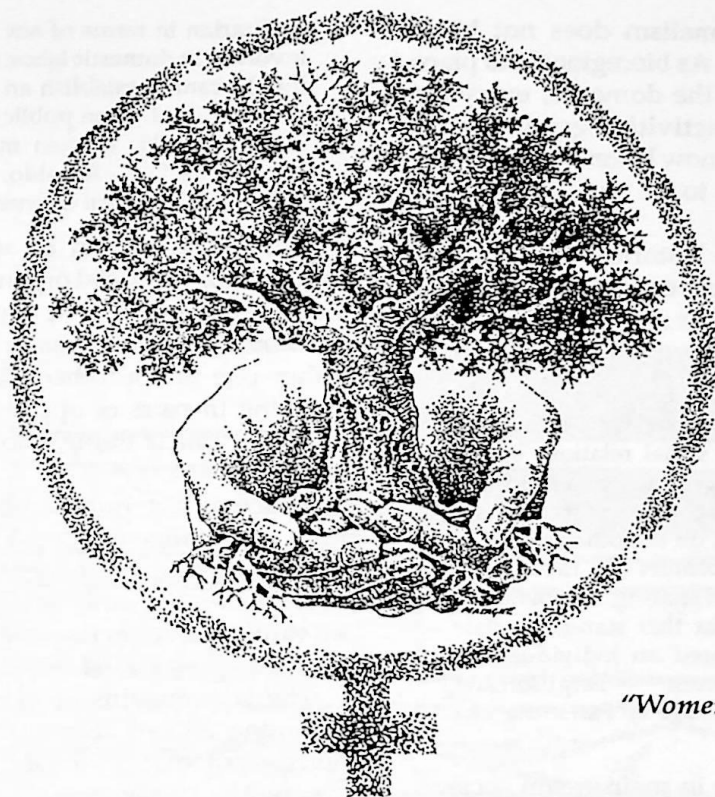
Feminism has everything to do with social relations and human ecology. The schism between the personal and the political has kept this valuable information from informing and directing political decisions. Feminists have given this a lot of thought; and not just abstractly, but thought based on experience. Since time-out-of-mind, women have had a history—or herstory—with home. Feminism has helped people understand how women have been isolated at home and, in turn, has articulated the value of women's work at home. This work has been done in the context of a society which has traditionally undervalued both home *and* women.

## The Personal As Political

"All the issues are related. Now nobody can deal with all the issues—there isn't energy and time. But we can deal with *our* issues—the ones that affect us immediately—in a way that relates them to all the others.

And I think that we had better because otherwise we're bound to fail." — Joanna Russ, from *Reweaving the Web of Life*.

Dealing with *our* issues is the bioregional method. When bioregionalists talk about Forestry's cut-and-run mentality, they are speaking from their hearts, from their own experience. Clear-cutting the watershed which is the vital artery that supports the environment in which one lives stirs the emotions and the intellect together in



*"Women of Europe," anonymous.*

a powerful expression. To be an environmentalist takes on a deep, personal meaning.

It is because of this personal connection with political decisions and actions that the bioregional process helps people to see that what is valued personally is the same as what is valued politically. Seems common sense enough but, as many have experienced in political activism (in the alternative politics of the Left in the 60s, for instance), there has been a blind spot in seeing this relationship. So

exploitative behavior in the market was viewed as unrelated to exploitative behavior interpersonally. The connection between personal values and political ones was missed. It was because of this blind spot, or inability to make this connection, that many women broke away from Left politics.

#### **Is The Revaluing of Home a Double Bind for Women?**

To avoid alienating women again, we have to

**T**his is a whole new kind of home-grown politics. The bioregional movement is in some very profound way political. It is not largely concerned with the political institutions that now exist but with replacing those with new, organic and regionally-based ones. This is the sort of politics, I think, that is very much like what Students for a Deomocratic Society (SDS) was looking for. You look at the Port Huron statement in 1962—it has no ecological sense, really, because it wasn't until the late '60s and *Silent Spring's* effects that this began to dawn on people. But nonetheless, the vision of a future America that the Port Huron statement embodies is not all that different in terms of participatory democracy, community empowerment, workplace deomocracy, etc., from what the bioregional movement is pointing toward. It's probably a kind of organic outgrowth of what happened in the '60s. We've grown up!

— Kirkpatrick Sale, *from an interview in The New Catalyst, Spring 1987.*



make sure that bioregionalism does not leave women in a double bind. As bioregionalists place new value on home, on the domestic, everyday life, those values and activities generally associated with women are now believed to be healthy activities that need to be maintained and developed.

At the same time, the historical and, indeed, present reality is that these life activities have been undervalued and have been a source of oppression for women.

"Women are nurturers: we keep the systems we work in together (the family, service jobs in wage labor) by nurturing. The social relations of our nurturance work account on the one hand for our oppression (sacrificing our own interests for those of men and children) and, on the other hand, for our potential strength as bearers of a radical culture: we support an ethic of sharing, co-operation, and collective involvement that stands in clear opposition to an ethic based on individualism, competition, and private profit." — Ferguson and Folbre, *The Unhappy Marriage of Patriarchy and Capitalism*.

What remains valuable in mainstream society, and deep within our beings, has a dollar sign attached to it, and generally has nothing to do with home. In fact, home is more and more being sacrificed for economic ends. What is important goes on in the public sphere—politics and economics—and a person's worth is gauged in monetary terms. Within this ideology, domestic life has meant that some are subservient to others. Traditionally this has been women, as slaves, servants and wives. Children quickly learn that what goes on at home is unimportant compared to the values "out there."

### Out of the Bind

Based on the strong, educated hunches of feminists, the only way out of this bind is to take the view that, culturally, society is in a transformational, transitional phase. We are attempting to move out of culturally-defined sex roles which value one over the other, toward a culture that places positive value on the active involvement of all people in domestic life. For it is here where culture is shaped.

"Societies that do not elaborate the opposition of male and female and place positive value on the conjugal relationships and the involvement of both men and women in the home seem to be most

egalitarian in terms of sex roles. When a man is involved in domestic labor, in child care and cooking, he cannot establish an aura of authority and distance. And when public decisions are made in the household, women may have a legitimate public role." — Rosaldo, *Women, Culture, and Society: A Theoretical Overview*.

The polarization of women and men, as either/or, is the social organization from which we have emerged. There has been little, if any, tolerance for gradations or complexities. You are either one or the other. Part of this problem is thinking in pairs of opposites and, as with most dualities, one is thought to be preferred over the other.

In actual fact, human beings have the capacity for a wide range of behaviors. People now know that men are capable of gentleness and women can be assertive. Yet, still, mainstream society persists in valuing tendencies associated with maleness over those associated with femaleness.

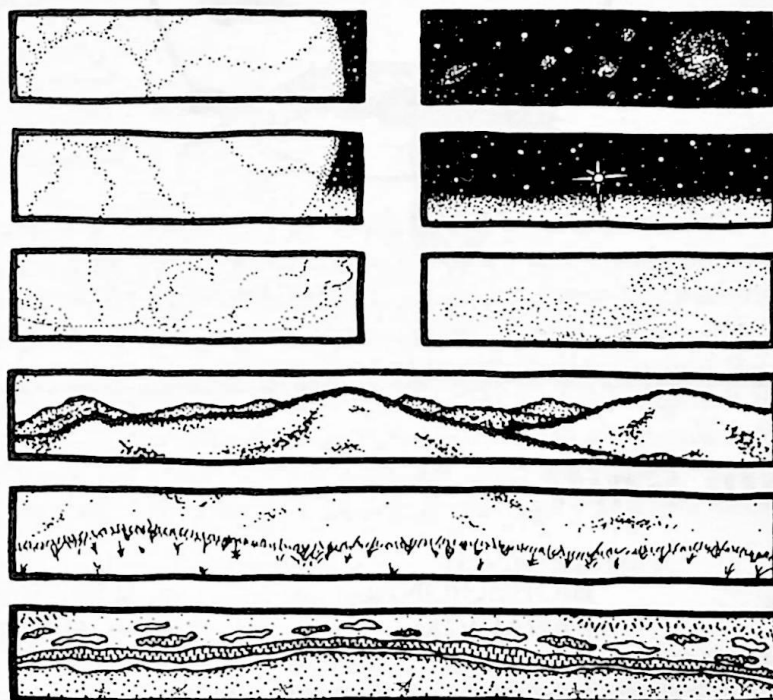
The task remains to outsmart ourselves. Harmonizing all our relations, making the connections, is potentially the footing for a quantum leap in evolution. It's not simply a question of rights but of actually saving the species from itself.

It is no easy transition to a valuing of the domestic. For men, it is very difficult to find a place in a sphere of life they have been socialized to avoid and consider unimportant. Similarly for women who are so tempted to prove themselves according to patriarchal society's measuring stick.

Paying consistent attention to how we do things, to process, seems vital to the reconstruction of healthy relationships with the earth and with each other. Bioregionalism and ecology can guide us in our relations with nature, just as feminism can aid in an understanding of our human relationships. These two theories, coupled with inspiration from the natural world, could bring women and men together, with integrity and dignity, in bioregional community.

"To put feminist values of equality, mutual aid, and respect for life in their place requires a society where people are engaged in face-to-face relations and where nature inspires us with the sanctity of life and the need to give back to others that which we receive from them." — Alexandra Devon, *Kick It Over*.

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## T'AI : PEACE

*Drawing by Rob Messick.*