

Tracing the absence of a feminist agenda in gendered spiritual ecology: ethnographies in French-speaking Switzerland

IRENE BECCI, ALEXANDRE GRANDJEAN*

Abstract

On the basis of ethnographic conversations and observations made among ecospiritual activists in French-speaking Switzerland, this text aims to locate the discourses and practices regarding gender references, following Linda Woodhead's framing (2013). The observed *gendered spiritual ecology* fosters essentialized gender roles and values over the Feminine and the Masculine. The case description, one *gendering* a representation of nature and the other attaching *gendered* values to human attitudes in order to explain social and environmental disorders, is followed by a discussion of the assumption that essentialization could be a performative strategy for claims over new gender roles, thus depending on the social location of these religious actors. In conclusion, a larger theoretical perspective is offered referring to *queer ecology* and its attempt to overcome the nature/culture divide. The authors consider *performance* and *materiality* as two key-concepts to better understand the gender roles being promoted in ecospirituality and ecofeminist movements.

Keywords: Ecospirituality; Ecofeminism; Power; Queer ecology; French-speaking Switzerland

Introduction: linking ecology to spirituality through gender

"I could practically not find any woman who would come and talk at the «inner transition» events. Finally, I had almost only men."
C.B. (our translation, 07.03.2016)

We met C.B. while inquiring¹, in 2015 and 2016, on various initiatives in

* irene.becciterrier@unil.ch, alexandre.grandjean@unil.ch

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the realm of sustainable transition in French-speaking Switzerland (Roman-die) that referred to religion or spirituality. C.B. used to work as an art-therapist and educator within a large number of local initiatives. One of her most recent creations, as a retired activist, was an association engaging in various forms of public interventions – website, conferences, organisation of workshops during festivals, at schools etc. – with the aim to encourage ecological projects by transmitting the idea that these need to be linked to a change in one's inner attitude towards others and nature. A self-conscious tall woman, she talked during our interview about her participation at *Alternatiba-Léman*, an important ecological festival dedicated to grassroots sustainability initiatives and actors held yearly in Geneva since 2015. For its first edition, C.B. undertook to federate as many associations and organisations as possible engaged in spirituality and “inner transition” movements around a shared space of exhibitions and conferences within the festival. A similar rhetoric has gained much public attention through a series of documentaries that have been produced in the French speaking European context: “Demain” (2015), “Révolution silencieuse” (2016) etc. By “inner transition,” these discourses bring out some of the ideas notably developed within the realm of ecospirituality and ecopsychology. Joanna Macy and Mathew Fox, for instance, stress the necessity that everyone undertakes a process of self-evaluation of one's deep (inner) beliefs in order to reconnect to “nature”. This “inner transition” is supposed to enable individuals to reconsider their values and then engage more efficiently with collective actions oriented toward what some call a “change of paradigm” (Egger 2017, p. 12) or the “Great Turning” (Macy 2008, p.24). C.B.'s purpose was to thematise “internal ecology” (spirituality, self-development through meditation, nonviolent communication, etc.) as a needed complement to “external ecology” (based on technology, alternative gardening methods, energy cooperatives, ecovillages, etc.). Often, she found herself being the only woman to have a leading role in this context. Most of the key speakers during the festival in the sector she was organizing were men. As a matter of fact, our conversation came to this issue since we observed a similar gender-gap on the field when we found ourselves at workshops or public conferences held by associations promoting a spiritual ecology, or on “inner transition” approaches to sustainability. We scouted for explicit ecofeminist groups in French-speaking Switzerland, but hardly found any. On the other hand, within eco-spiritual activism there were numerous women participating, sometimes they were even the majority, but they were rarely the ones on stage. Also, key speakers, rituals and iconography often referred to a “Mother earth” to which one had to connect by developing one's interior feminine side,

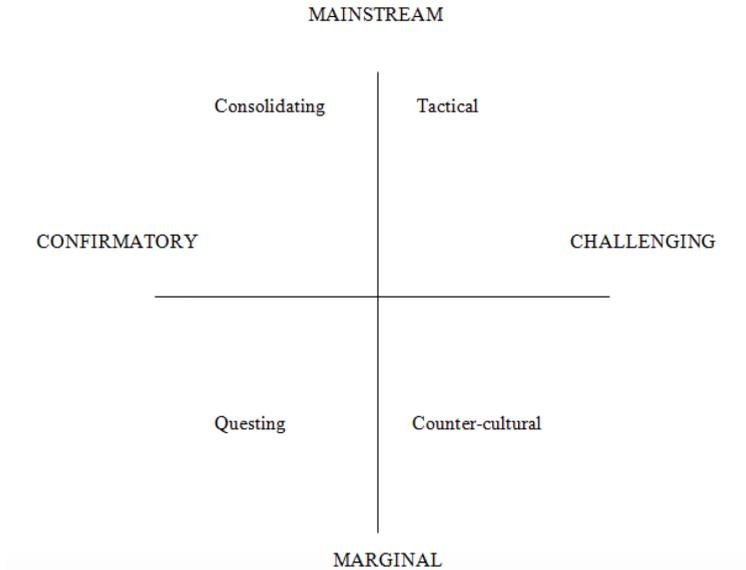
an extended aspect of this research project through the financing by the Swiss National Foundation. The research group comprises also Dr. Christophe Monnot and partially Manéli Fahramand.

to “motherhood,” or to “feminine values” as opposed to “masculine” ones, and considered them as “complementary” and forming, altogether, a *gendered spiritual ecology*. The reference to gender in these contexts often came along with notions such as “spirituality,” “change of consciousness” or “holism.” While such ideas also circulate among neo-pagan and goddess spirituality movements in Romandie, as well as in womb blessing rituals, circles of women and best-seller guides to self-ritualization in nature (Chautems, Micheloud 2016; Chautems, Bressoud 2013), here the emphasis was instead put onto the “sacredness” of the earth and of women’s bodies, a phenomena also observed by Sarah Pike (2001) and Anna Fedele (2012) in their ethnographies of neo-pagan and goddess spirituality. We noticed that these *gendered spiritual ecological* types of initiatives did not intersect with feminist discourses which put forward a more political agenda regarding gender equality. The ecospiritual initiatives in French-speaking Switzerland are scattered and loosely connected actions at a regional level, with transnational lines through the mobility of the protagonists. They place themselves in visibility during larger cultural ecological events.

Looking at the position of women within the authority structure of religious organisations, it is a somehow constant fact that on the one hand, women are far more implicated in religion than men (OFS 2016, Monnot, Stolz in press), but the latter still occupy most authority positions within religious organisations. Linda Woodhead’s elaborations on this situation (2013) can be very helpful to link our observations to larger views about gender and religion or spiritual practices. She analyses and locates religious organisations and movements in relation to two axes: First, she takes into consideration whether a religious or spiritual group has a mainstream or marginal position with regard to society more generally (cf. figure²). Secondly, she focuses on the gender relations within the religious or spiritual groups which can oscillate between the two poles of confirmation and challenge. This theoretical framework leads her to develop a typology of four attitudes towards gender with regard to religious or spiritual groups: either *consolidating*, *countercultural*, *questing* or *tactical* (2013, p.62). If religious organisations or movements are culturally, politically and institutionally dominant in a given society and their theology confirms the existing gendered distribution of power and social roles, they “serve to reproduce and legitimate gender inequality” (*consolidating*), or “they can be integral to the existing gender order.” If actors reinterpret the theology or act within such an organisation “in ways which may be subversive of the existing gender order,” their action can be called tactical. If a religious group holds a rather “marginal position” within the larger society, such as a minority, but does not intend “to disrupt the distribution of that power,” this posture is consid-

2 Taken from Woodhead (2013, p. 62).

ered as “questing”. Finally, “religion may be situated in a marginal relation to the gendered distribution of power, and may be used to try to contest, disrupt and redistribute that distribution” (2013, p.62). This last posture is labelled as “counter-cultural” and can typically be found within the movement of the Goddess spirituality (Figure 1).



This framework enables us to grasp the diversities of postures around gender in the observed situations of eco-spiritual activism. Our starting point shall be to question the gender and power dynamics at stake in contemporary movements that call for ecospirituality and grassroots sustainability. Are we facing, on the one hand, a men-made *gendered spiritual ecology* that supports dominant and established gender relation? Or, on the contrary, are these *gendered representations* in ecology part of a *strategic essentialism* (Carlassare 2016, Hache 2016), which would be an artistic expression aimed at redefining and reclaiming new gender roles and values linked to an ecological engagement through the idea that women and nature are deeply interconnected? If for instance, what has been generally labelled by Carolyn Merchant (1992, p.194-196) as social/ist ecofeminist movements tend, with a marxist lens, to connect the exploitation of resources with a patriarchal violent social order, cultural ecofeminists and ecospiritualists for their part put their emphasis on the association between the exploitation of nature and of women, notably through performative rituals³.

³ For a variety of spiritual ecofeminist positions cf. Starhawk (1979), Mies and Shiva (1993).

In order to respond to these questions, we will first contextualize and locate the ecospiritual and/or “inner transition” movements in French-speaking Switzerland. The brief description of two case studies shall illustrate different occurrences and uses of gendered values and references in rituals and texts. They introduce gender mainly through associations and analogies between natural and cultural elements. Secondly, we will discuss this *gendered spiritual ecology* in the perspective of an *essentialization* of gender roles and values. We will follow Elisabeth Carlassare’s (2016) and Emilie Hache’s (2016) assumptions of a “strategic essentialism” which they consider an artistic and emotional form of resistance that more effectively denounces the denigration of the environment and of women (Larrère 2016).

To conclude, we will place our analysis into a larger framework, in order to point towards the “power structurations at work in contemporary spirituality” (Becci et al. 2015). The recent attempts to formulate a *queer ecology* and Judith Butler’s (1990) queer epistemology offer insights into the nature/culture divide and the importance of *performance* and *materiality* in emancipatory processes, which are concepts that we will link back to our two ethnographies.

Towards a gendered spiritual ecology in Romandie

In our research ethnography conducted in 2015 and 2016, we explored different areas of spiritual ecology in Romandie. We observed street demonstrations (mainly in Lausanne and Geneva) and interreligious initiatives that took place around the COP21 Summit in Paris (2015). We also participated to numerous festivals dedicated to sustainability and grassroots socio-ecological alternatives (*Festival de la Terre* in Lausanne, *Festival Alternatiba* and *New Earth Gathering* in Geneva). These festivals presented public activities such as rituals, guided meditation, shamanic visualization, or healing ceremonies to “mother earth.” In addition, we followed public conferences and conducted interviews with key speakers in favour of ecospirituality and/or “inner transition” movements. Among the different protagonists, we here focus on two actors. The first one regularly performs neo-oriental spiritual rituals. The second is a speaker who usually attracts a large audience in festivals and workshops he is invited to give. He is as well institutionally close to the main Swiss Christian Churches. They both enact a gendered spiritual ecology through rituals, conferences and texts.

Locating key speakers and gendered spiritual ecology

Most of the observed key speakers during ecoactivist initiatives in Roman-

die, who were institutionally tied to the catholic and protestant churches or to new spiritual movements, were calling for a renewal of “spirituality” which they replaced at the center of human life. In doing so, they were relying on classical Christian sources, such as the Pope’s recent encyclica *Laudato Si*, but also on other sources and inspirations, notably of Christian pantheism, “nature religions” such as neo-shamanism, or of oriental traditions such as Buddhism. Explicitly neo-pagan and goddess spirituality movements where women play a central role appeared publicly in far less occasions.

Numerous scholars (Tucker, Ivakhiv 2012; Merchant 2016) have pointed out that in a genealogy of western concepts, “nature” has for a long time been represented in pre-Christian traditions as “motherly female, nurturing and providing for the needs of her children” (Tucker, Ivakhiv 2012, p.9). Organicist metaphors have long been used to conceive of the Earth as a womb that human activities such as mining violently unseal (Merchant 2016). Under the growing influence of New-Age views on a global scale (De la Torre 2005), indigenous cultures have been revalorised and thereby representations of the Earth as a “mother” have also been revalorised, and the associations of natural and human phenomena, such as, for instance, the growth of plants and birth-giving. Discourses in contemporary spiritualities are also stressing gender issues, defining masculine and feminine principles that one has to “reclaim,” “redefine,” “accept” or “harmonize” (Knibbe, Fedele 2013). Notably, the notion of “gender complementarity” surfaced in contemporary spiritualities as well as in ecospiritual milieus.

This posture can be traced back to modern esotericism (Favre 1987, pp. 237-259). According to contemporary ideas influenced by esoteric traditions and entangled with neo-autochtony (Farahmand 2016), every individual contains inside herself two components: a masculine one and a feminine one. This notion does not consider women and men in a differentialist mode since both contain the two elements. It is nonetheless essentializing gender roles and values as it frames human anthropology into a dualistic tension.

The two case studies that follow present two different ways these associations socially come to be used in ecospiritual discourses and rituals. On the one hand, we observe a process of *gendering* nature, and on the other, *gendered values* are attached to human attitudes in order to explain social and environmental disorders.

A Ritual for healing women and “Mother Earth”

Since 2005 every year in June, a large, mostly open air festival dedicated to “the Earth,” *Festival de la Terre*, takes place in a park in the city center of

Lausanne⁴. During almost one week, linked to a world-wide initiative and in synchronicity with dozens of other countries, people gather around concerts, exhibitions, workshops, conferences, and rituals about such themes as solidarity and biodiversity, culture and natural resources, in a joyful and creative way. Using the famous quote attributed to Mahatma Gandhi “Be the change that you wish to see in the world” on its website and stands, the festival is intended to “celebrate earth.” With about 50’000 visitors, it is a quite successful event for a city of about 400’000 inhabitants such as Lausanne. The organizers write in the promotion that this cool and hype festival is not simply intended for “nostalgic hippies, but open to all creative people dreaming to build a more respectful and solidary world.” They invite participants to become a “guardian angel of the planet” through simple gestures in everyday life (such as producing one’s own cosmetics, polishing powder, eating by finding a symbiosis with the planet, etc.) No fees are requested to enter the *Festival de la Terre*. It was while doing fieldwork in the 2016 festival edition that one of us participated in a ritual proposed by a E. D⁵, a French speaking elderly and casually dressed man. Over twenty people placed themselves in a half-circles facing E. D., who stood just in front of the stage in this public theatre room open during the whole festival. The flyers announced that he proposed to celebrate a “participative and meditative recital” around “harmonious love sounds to mother earth.” Most of the participants were women between twenty-five and fifty years old. E. D. started by welcoming us and telling us that he had already performed this ceremony numerous times, and that therefore he could predict that we would “touch the conscience of the divine mother (.) of the mother, mother-earth who is at the center of the earth”. There is no room really for the participants to ask questions or comment on his saying, so we all continue listening, seated on cushions, to his introduction. He announces that at the end of this ritual we would find ourselves in a state of “unity of body and mind... in our body (.) but at the same time with the universe (2) in a state of well-being”. This said, we all stand up. Before starting the ceremony, he also tells us that the earth reacts to the ceremony. To illustrate this version of Gaia-theory, he talks about one of his experiences, when the earth offered “light balls” which “came out of the earth... thanks to the energy of mother earth.” During another ceremony, when he actually thought he was offering to “mother earth” one pearl, he realized he was actually planting a seed and with “these sounds suddenly a huge entity [appeared?] (.) which was Isis raised to heaven(.)” The frame was hence given by references to pre-Christian myths and a gendered vision of his relationship to the earth. The ceremony itself finally

4 Cf. <http://www.festivaldelaterre.ch> (accessed 3.4.2017)

5 This man has been active for years locally as a spiritual coach using the technique of Tibetan diaphonic sounds he calls sacred sounds.

started. In a first phase, he instructed us to oscillate from left to right, move our arms in a circle, breath according to a given rhythm and to stand with our legs apart. The movements we made and our breathing were put in correspondence to a whole series of ideas. We learned that we are actually having a “woman healing session.” Our bodily movements and parts receive entirely new meanings: the inhalations and exhalations are ways to “let an energy enter” and “welcome the life breath,” the “sacred center” is located at our pelvis. He tells us to pay attention to our left foot, smoothly “swing” to the left side and internally say “I honour the sacred feminine in me (.) the energy of the vital mother.” The “sacred masculine in me (.) the energy of the father (.) of the son” is on the other side. When inhaling, we offer the feminine sacred to our “masculine while swinging to the right” and thereby feeding “the masculine within” and vice versa, our “masculin (.) feeds our feminine.” These exercises go on for a while and we can finally stand still. Now we are asked to concentrate on the heart and to make three times the sound [a], which is said to be the richest in harmony. At each repetition, the sound becomes longer and E. D. tells us that “the cells start to react” and that we are now “anchored,” “connected to mother earth.” Once we lie down and remain still, E. D. starts a performance of diaphonic and Tibetan bowls sounds. After the ceremony E. D. asks whether some of us had a particular experience we would like to share. Nobody really answers, apart from one woman who shyly says that the effect on her was very light. The attention of the participants seems to focus on the question of the emotions and feelings raised by the ceremony. However, the most important question for the purpose of our concern in this text, and which remained completely under silence among the participants to the ceremony, is the naturalization of gender operating during the ceremony. Through discourse analysis, one can clearly see that a series of abstract notions were unquestioningly associated to natural elements and thereby naturalized. Mother was associated with earth, the feminine, the left handside, inhalation and woman; father with the right handside, with exhalation, with son, the masculine and a seed. In addition, oppositions have been created during this performance: the body was opposed to the spirit, the earth to the sky, the mother to the father, inhalation to exhalation, left to right, feminine to masculine. Since these oppositions can nurture each other, they are presented in relationship of mutual dependency.

To understand the effects that such analogies constructed through this performance can have, we shall rely on Mary Douglas’ ideas concerning analogies. In her book *How institutions think* (1987, p. 49), Mary Douglas states that the analogy of “the complementarity of the right and left hand and the complementarity of gender provide a great rhetorical resource.” She also states that in the societies she has observed, from a “simple complementarity a political hierarchy has been derived.” Such hierarchies are

constructed by creating an analogy between a natural relationship and a socially constructed one. Her reflections especially make sense to us when she points out that “naturalizing analogies” (1987, p.50) do not actually “symbolize the structure of society, but [...] intervene in it” (1987, p.50). Social institutions such as gendered relations are not given, but need to be constantly actualized and maintained. The naturalizing analogies that we observed during the described performance do not challenge patriarchal orders, and thereby can be considered as participating in maintaining the mainstream gendered order. So, to connect back to Woodhead’s map, while these actors do hold a rather “marginal position” within the larger society, with regard to the existing gender order, they do not explicitly aim at disrupting “the distribution of that power.” Their posture can, hence, at best be described as “questing.”

Gender principles and gender complementarity in an “inner transition” movement

Recently, following grassroots ecological activists inspired by the Rob Hopkins’ *Transition Towns* (2006) and the *Colibri movement* based on the French agro-ecologist Pierre Rabhi (2006), we have been observing the emergence of networks in favour of an “inner transition” in Romandie. One main representative of “inner transition,” alongside C.B mentioned in the introduction, is M.E.

M.E. is a former journalist previously engaged in political lobbying with *Alliance Sud*, one of the main charity and development NGOs uniting Catholic and Protestant organizations in Switzerland. At some point, he started what he called a “spiritual path” that led him to practice zen meditations, and after certain specific experiences and encounters, he converted to Christian Orthodoxy. During an interview we conducted with him, this energetic man in his late fifties went on to narrate his progressive involvement, first in ecospirituality, and then in ecopsychology. He admitted that he saw little difference between those two postures involving human’s interiority as a mean for changes. He explained to us that he would speak of ecospirituality with religious actors and institutions and of ecopsychology with more secularized audiences. “I do not have the impression to betray my cause while trying to meet the ‘other’ where he stands, and speaking a language he can therefore understand” he told us when we asked him how he distinguished the two registers in order to avoid misunderstandings. He added with humour: “fourteen years of parliamentary lobby work taught me to adapt my language to anyone.” He then mentioned all political parties except the most populist and conservative ones in Switzerland. When we asked him about that omission, he laughed and answered that it was of no use to try to reach them.

In the summer of 2016, the NGO *Pain pour la prochain*⁶ commissioned him to set up a *Laboratory for Inner Transition* that would be complementary to their campaigns of sensitisation around issues of global development. The aim of this *Laboratory* is to find and network with other initiatives in sustainability in order to “contribute to transition toward a fairer and more respectful world,” as we can read on the promotion flyer of the *Laboratory*. Since he was hired in *Pain pour le prochain*, the organisation’s website advertises “inner transition,” stating that the ecological crisis is also an economic and a spiritual one which needs to be faced comprehensively. In preparing the *Laboratory*, M.E. contacted us because he was interested in finding ways to collaborate with scholars, into his approach and eventually become what he calls *meditating-militants*⁷. This attitude is significant of the integrative approach of M.E. and his strategies for sustainable and deep societal transition. Indeed, in the field of religion and ecology in Switzerland, he is one of the actors who knows best how to constitute a synthesis between different thought systems and references, either situationally claiming to be a sociologist, a theologian or an ecopsychologist. With regard to this setting, his first book, *La Terre comme soi-même* (2012), depicts the necessity of an “inner change” through Christian resources and theologies. During the interview, he was telling us that: “If I want to reach people in the Christian milieu, I need to be able to show them that all of this has to do with their faith. And for real, there are fundamentals in theology that can give meaning [to them] and be translated into [their] language.” This notion of adaptability of semantics, as we have already mentioned, is one key-feature of M.E.’s promotion work.

One point is striking if we consider the wide range of registers he could deploy in his public interventions that we have been following over more than six months. As in his books, he claims that “inner change” cannot operate unless human beings accept that “inner attitudes correspond, in fact, with essential qualities that are part of the feminine within” (our translation 2012, p. 273). As in gender clichés, attitudes such as “welcoming,” “intuition,” “cooperation,” “understanding,” “concreteness” and “deductive skills” are associated with feminine values. These values are to be enhanced as they are an “antidote” that enables a positive balance with masculine values such as “competition,” “analytic intelligence,” “abstract rationality,” “domination” and a “spirit of conquest” (2012, p. 273).

According to M.E.’s writings, these gendered values are to be found both

6 This protestant NGO is well-known in Switzerland and perceived as rather secular. Its headquarter in Lausanne is located in the same building as *Alliance Sud*.

7 As our research institute is hosted in a Faculty of Theology and Science of Religions, which until a dozen years ago had a strong confessional connotation, frequently we are considered “partisans” of a religious and/or spiritual approach.

in men and women⁸. Following his theological interpretation and his biblical exegesis, God created men and women in his own image (Gn 1.27). In M.E.'s theological synthesis, Creation and "inner transition," "misericord" – the act of mercy – are conceived as the "other feminine face of God, the motherhood dimension of the Father" (2012, p. 269). Neo-orientalist references also appear in M.E.'s work. This is for us a second indication that his endeavour is also a mediation work between religious tradition and new forms of spirituality. For him: "To live fully, is to enter the dance and the everlasting interpenetration of masculine and feminine, of yin and yang" (our translation 2012, p. 273). M.E. maintains this idea of a "gender polarity" in his further books centered on ecopsychology (2017, p. 45) as well as on his website⁹. His publisher, *les Editions Jouvence*, is one of the leading publisher in self-development in French. This is notably a sign of a wider popularity and success of the communicative strategies of M.E. One last point has to be underscored. What has been presented, even though it is clearly an *essentialization* of gender roles and values, is not presented as differentialist: men and women as entities are not different by "nature" or "culture." Differently from the first case described above, such an actor can be positioned between a consolidating and a tactical quarter of Woodhead's plot.

Considering a "strategic essentialism"

These case studies present two options of mobilizing gender and connecting it with ecospiritual rituals and theories. Taking up a critical perspective in gender studies about the *essentialization of gender roles* in ecological movements (Carlassare 2016, Merchant 1992, Bauhardt 2013), we think we can interpret our observations further, especially with regard to the power relations at stake in the realm of ecological activism. We question the assumption that cultural ecofeminism and ecospiritual movements have produced a "strategic essentialism" that enables new performative enactments of womanhood.

The tendency to *naturalize gender* through the mobilisation of organic metaphors and their association to values in the Swiss context can be related to a growing influence of New-Age views on a global scale (Frisk 2010). Worldwide spiritual and/or religious key-actors integrate and mobilize in their discourses a whole spiritual subculture, fostering images such as the "sacred feminine," the quest for a "lost femininity," the notion of "gender complementarity" and "harmony with nature," the latter being perceived

8 We never observed any ethnographic *situations* in which such a "gender complementarity" was enacted.

9 <http://www.trilogies.org/blog-notes/ecologie-interieure-56> (access on 05.04.2017)

as a feminine entity. This interpretation strongly values the importance of transnational networks.

However, we contend that within this general tendency towards the popularization of New Age spirituality (Lüddeckens 2010), essentializing can still be a social art (Carlassare 2016, p. 323), and therefore at times be a strategy of resistance in order to denounce in a more effective and emotional way the denigration of the environment and of women (Larrère 2016). If this was the case, our case would slip from a quest position to a subversive one in Woodhead's graph. Hache, in her preface to an anthology of ecofeminist texts recently published in French, argues that this "strategic essentialism" could be understood as a positive revalorisation of women's bodies (2016, p. 31). Rather than being a patriarchal reiteration, these discourses on a *gendered spiritual ecology* could actually be healing and empowering speech acts. Such a position is difficult to pin down on Woodhead's diagram. According to Hache, these uses of *gendered values* would be pragmatic and performative attempts in order to restore centuries of cultural denigration which have affected perceptions regarding womanhood as well as nature. Following these assumptions, the tension with historical feminist movements lies rather in the mode of communication, ecofeminists preferring poetry, rituals, symbolic performances, or the use of metaphors such as in Goddess spiritualities (Fedele 2012), to a scientific mode stressing analysis, legal battles, political lobbying, public demonstrations or academic symposiums.

Now, considering our observations, since most of the protagonists are men, can the *gendered spiritual ecology* enacted in this context, which is often quite politicised, be considered a "strategic essentialism"? Which difference does it make if women, instead of men, were promoting such gendered spiritual ecological values and discourses?

According to Linda Woodhead's map, "strategic essentialism" would foster a "countercultural" attitude if the essentialisation was aiming at valuing what is devalorised in the larger gender order and questioning its construction. The protagonists of our observations instead reproduce such an order by idealizing a dual view of society as harmonious and complementary as "nature" appears to be. There is indeed a whole panoply of ways to introduce a gender perspective within ecological concerns different from what our ethnographies have shown. Queer theorists have notably been active in deconstructing current epistemologies that tend to "naturalize" gender roles and values (Butler 1990). In our questioning of the gender and power issues at stake in ecospiritual milieus in Romandie, current attempts to establish a *Queer ecology* (Gandy 2012, Morton 2010) are providing an alternative perspective.

Conclusion: including more perspectives

Our theoretical reflexions on *essentialism*, *gender* and *power distribution* (Becci et al. 2015) shed some light on the complexity and ambivalence of new spiritual practices in the realm of ecological activism. More ethnographic work, focused in particular on the perspective of simple participants and less on key-speakers, could offer a better insight into what we labelled as the “power structuration” at work in contemporary spiritualities (Becci et al. 2015). The observations and analysis of micro-strategies of negotiation, contestation, or nuance that actors enact in such situations, and how they conduct their lives beyond the scope of ecospiritual movements, would clarify whether they encounter participants in other networks acting in favour of changes in gender roles and values or not. Maybe a long term research could answer these questions.

In a radical tension, queer theories and the attempts of queer ecology have been very critical of the “organic palpability” over the definition and qualification of gender and nature that “has so often been adapted to authoritarian masculinity” (Morton 2010, p. 276). For queer ecologist Timothy Morton, nature “isn’t soft and squishy like many of the organic metaphors favoured by environmentalism (the “web of life)” (2010, p. 276). Rather, “nature is aggressively healthy, hostile to self-absorption. Despite repressive images of Mother Nature, Nature is not feminine” (2010, p. 279). “Life” is rather to be conceived as “a process, not a product” (2010, p. 274) and “biology shows us that there is no authentic life-form” (2010, p. 275).

In that perspective, opening the Pandora box of “nature” leads us to redefine the positions. On one side, there are those in favour of naturalized gender distinctions referring or reclaiming their holistic representability (“the web of life,” “the cosmos”) like ecospiritualists and cultural ecofeminists. On the other side, we find those who wish to think hybridity like Donna Haraway and her concept of “natureculture” (2003), or those like Morton (2010) who provocatively claim that there is no such thing as “nature”. Hence, in the view of “queer ecology” cultural ecofeminists and ecospiritualists are still perceived as essentialists, even though “nature spiritualities” such as neo-paganism tend to include more and more LGBTIQ perspectives and seem to be more gender fluid (Pike 2001).

It is through Judith Butler’s concept of “performance” that the Pandora box of “nature” can be closed or neutralized, at least for a while. Ecospiritualists *gendering* nature, or integrating gender roles and values into common theological interpretations, can be seen in a similar way as performers claiming *queerhood* or *queerness* and challenging heteronormativity through arts, texts and rituals such as those that scholars tend to observe and analyse in the field of contemporary spirituality movements and in *gendered spiritual ecology*. Though, as our ethnographies illustrate, no emancipatory agendas accompany the observed practices.

If “life is a process, not a product” as claimed by Timothy Morton (2010), this process nonetheless affects and effects bodies and materiality (Butler 2011, Bauhardt 2013). As Mary Douglas advised, one should be attentive to the ways in which ideas about the nature/culture divide is actually also transforming social roles. Our two ethnographies hence present situations where naturalized gender roles and values are meaningful of social and power structuration. This leads to situations where actors – either queer or ecospiritualist – could be promoting radically different lifestyles and ecopolitics, or paradoxically similar ones, either consolidating liberal emancipatory agendas, or backlashing against them in static naturalized norms and categories. Strategic essentialism being precisely the junction point and the “grey zone” between these two options.

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