Critical Theory and nature in the 21st century

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> *In thought, men distance themselves from nature in order thus imaginatively to present it to themselves - but only in order to determine how it is to be dominated. Like the thing* [...] *the concept is the ideal tool, fit to do service for everything, wherever it can be applied. And so thought becomes illusionary whenever it seeks to deny the divisive function, distancing and objectification.*
>
> Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (2002: 39).

From Karl Marx to the early Frankfurt School theorists, into other critical traditions through the twentieth and into the twenty-first century, critical social theorising has both implicitly and explicitly concerned itself with matters pertaining to nature as part of differing critiques of the destructive unfolding of late-industrial capitalism (and beyond). Horkheimer himself notes, in a defining essay that gave shape to Frankfurt School Critical Theory, *Traditional and Critical Theory* (1937), that "[the subject of critical thinking] is rather a definite individual in his real relation to other individuals and groups, in his conflict with a particular class,

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and, finally, in the *resultant web of relationships with the social totality and with nature*" (Horkheimer 1937 [1972]: 211) [emphasis added].

What, one may ask, is meant by this concept of 'nature'? In Western philosophical thought, there are countless definitions and conceptions of the term, from the Greek and Roman philosophers, through different Christian theologies, the scientific turn of philosophical thought, the reaction by the Romanticists, into the more secular context of modern and postmodern philosophy and related paradigms. Nature is often placed into tension with culture, with nature referring to the separation of human from non-human (ecological environments, animals, plants, minerals, bacteria, weather patterns, etc.). However, more recent writings in the social sciences have questioned this duality as obfuscating their crucial interconnections.

For the paradigm of Critical Theory, the work of Marx and Engels provides a conception of the integration of the human and nature as co-constituting each other (see Foster 2000, Burkett 2014). Foster et al. (2010: 19-20) suggest that "For Marx, all human activity has a basis in nature. [...] Labor and production constitute the active human transformation of nature, but also of human nature, the human relation to nature and human beings themselves." Meanwhile, neo-Gramscians draw from Antonio Gramsci's theories of 'hegemony' and 'political economy' to frame the notion of a 'political ecology', namely that "during ecological crises, nature becomes a terrain for struggle through which hegemony is exercised and contested" (Kalt 2024: 5). This laid the foundation for the concerns located in Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and in much of Herbert Marcuse's work regarding the 'domination of nature' by man as foreshadowing the destruction of the world itself. Adorno (2008: 9) proclaimed, in his lecture on *The Concept of Contradiction*, that instrumental reason and identity-thinking underlies:

> [. . .] the principle of mastery, the mastery of nature, which spreads its influence, which continues in the mastery of men by other men and which finds its mental reflex in the principle of identity, by which I mean the intrinsic aspiration of all mind to turn every alterity that is introduced to it or that it encounters into something like itself and in this way to draw it into its own sphere of influence.

By the second half of the twentieth century, traditions of critical social theories adopted this position of entanglement between man's domination of nature together with his domination of those considered as 'other', and different disciplines in the social sciences began to explore these entanglements more thoroughly. British anthropologist Marilyn Strathern noted in 1980 that "there

is no such thing as nature or culture, each is a highly relativized concept whose ultimate significance must be derived from its place within a specific metaphysics. No single meaning can be given to nature or culture in Westernised thought; there is no consistent dichotomy, only a matrix of contrasts" (Strathern 1980: 177). For intellectual movements such as postmodernism, social constructionism, and postconstructionism, nature is reconceptualised away from that which is non-human to notions of social nature, hybrid nature, second nature, produced nature, encountered nature, or nature-culture, seen as outcomes by human or relational human / non-human agencies (see Haraway 1991, 2003, 2008; Latour 1987, 1993, 1999; Cronon 1995; Macnaghten and Urry 1998; Castree and Braun 2001, Embree 2003, etc.).

Ecofeminism, subsequently, is one of the most important intellectual and activist movements to bring these foundational conceptualisations of Critical Theory and nature together, building on the ecological feminist responses to impacts of modernisation on issues such as health and environmental degradation from the 1970s onwards. In the foreword to the book *Ecofeminism* by Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies, (1993 [2013]), Ariel Salleh (2013: ix) maintains that

> [e]cofeminism is the only political framework that I know of that can spell out the historical links between neoliberal capital, militarism, corporate science, worker alienation, domestic violence, reproductive technologies, sex tourism, child molestation, neocolonialism, islamophobia, extractivism, nuclear weapons, industrial toxics, land and water grabs, deforestation, genetic engineering, climate change, and the myth of modern progress.

By conceiving of these inheritances of modernity as deeply interconnected, ecofeminists critically problematise some of the particular issues facing societies and individuals in our historical moment: legacies of colonialism, the North-South dualism, work precarity amongst women and migrants, the destruction of traditional communities, new technological developments that deepen and intensify the deeply oppressive *status quos*, and the ethical-existential imperatives of "degrowth, commoning, and *buen vivir*" (Salleh 2013: xi). Paradigm shifts and a change in consciousness towards consumptive habits, reconsidering our reliance on outdated patriarchal scientific paradigms, reconceptualising our relationship to the earth and all its diversity, reconceiving of human beings as beings within the ecological web not outside it, co-operating rather than competing, and centering subsistence (Mies and Shiva 1993 [2013]: xiii-xxx) – these are the critical imperatives of ecofeminism as a critical ecological feminist theory.

However, the active resistance to capitalism is thwarted by the ever-changing culture industry (Horkheimer and Adorno 1947) that normalises (in the Foucaldian [2004] sense) and expands consumptive practices that are encouraged and provided by governments, corporations, and individuals, that draw from scientific and technological advancements in order to fulfil these social and cultural desires. As such, any critical engagement with the possibility of the transformation of modern capitalist society must include the critical engagement of global and local political economies, reified dualisms (culture vs nature, masculine vs feminine, production vs reproduction [Salleh 2024]), immanent critique, and the deconstruction of dominant discourses and ideologies – what Amy Allen (2016) alludes to as the *critical problematisation of our present historical moment* (Cawood and Amiradakis 2023: 4).

One of the many catastrophic moments which the world is currently facing is that of unrelenting, accelerated environmental destruction. As is noted by the earliest critical theorists, and expanded upon by contemporary critical traditions, the domination of nature has gone hand-in-hand with "capitalist-colonial-patriarchal practices" (Salleh 2024). The environmental or natural is thus also the social, political, economic, and cultural. Any critical analyses of these webs thus cannot insulate the spheres from one another. Luke (2003: 239-240) notes: "Those antinomies of abstract analysis that respect dualistic reification in order to empower 'the economic' to sustainably develop 'the environmental' or license 'the social' to regulate 'the environmental' only perpetuate existing contradictions as they struggle to tidy up around their ragged edges."

There is thus an emphatic argument to be made that the imperative of environmental critical theories, or any critical reconceptualisation of the place of nature in our globalised world, is the demand for social transformation that is guided by a critical interrogation of advanced capitalist or neocapitalist exchange networks – that themselves have been built upon the backs of perpetual and expansive exploitation of labourers, minorities, the colonised, women, and nature. The relation of critiques of capitalism to nature need to be localised and contextualised, as well as do the critiques of political ecologies and resistance movements to and/or within them.

Aligned with this brief introduction to some of the conversations between Critical Theory and nature in the 21st century, the contributions to this edition of *Acta Academica*: 'Critical Theory and nature in the 21st century,' engage with the entanglements of race, class, gender, migration, technology, economy, politics, science, and philosophy, amongst others.

Section one: ecofeminism in the 21st century (Salleh, Simon, D'Alessio)

The first group of papers in the journal expand on the paradigmatic position of ecofeminism. From different yet intersecting perspectives, the theorists reflect on the reified categories of 'women' and 'nature' within entangled patriarchal-colonial-capitalist practices that have arisen from an ontological shift from descriptive to (hierarchical) normative claims about embodied materiality. They extend these critical perspectives to reflect on productive and reproductive labour by women, and how different forms of labour affect their (i.e. women's) socio-political-economic precarity, alterity, and subjection to a damaging social order. All three papers emphasise how there need to be crucial life-affirming eco-centric shifts in value structures of labour, a deepening and broadening of the classical Marxian categories, for both women and nature to have social agency in the future.

As the first paper of this section, in the keynote address by Ariel Salleh titled 'Why ecosocialism is not enough: ecofeminist reflections on another value form', Salleh argues that from an ecofeminist perspective, the modern phenomenon of globalisation (and the ecological crises that have manifested as a result), need to be understood and analysed as the effect of "a single entangled system", a unity of "patriarchal-colonial-capitalist" practices. Salleh maintains that while the ecosocialist movement has significantly contributed to the critical investigation of globalisation and ecological crises, it is currently marred by certain theoretical blind spots that need to be overcome, via the inclusion of an additional value form, in order for an effective eco-centric political alliance to emerge. Salleh asserts that while many Marxists and EcoSocialists tend to focus on the various forms of exploitative labour that sustain such a system, she is particularly concerned that there is often a lack of critical reflection pertaining to the "unpaid reproductive work of women". Salleh therefore proposes that in order to effectively address this multifaceted issue, global politics today cries out for a transdisciplinary analysis of "qualitative flows".

Salleh maintains that the traditional Marxian criteria of labour and value need to be expanded upon and that there are at least four kinds of labour one needs to take into account, namely: i) productive labour; ii) discursive labour; iii) reproductive labour; and 4) affective labour. For Salleh, by incorporating such forms of labour into one's analysis, another value form emerges which she defines as a "life affirming 'metabolic value'". For Salleh, this new value form is to be understood as being invaluable as it is both broader and deeper than the traditional Marxian categories of 'use value' and 'exchange value' as it is both relational and grounded in a logic of non-identity, that can result in the emergence

of a "rift-healing", "meta-industrial epistemology". Salleh argues that without a strong sense of the above, EcoSocialist politics will remain unevenly developed, just as environmental politics is right now. Salleh concludes by noting that, to synthesise patriarchal-colonial-capitalist relations as an entanglement, is not to totalise, but invite a deconstructive de-totalisation of multiple intersecting instruments of power.

The second paper of this section by Marie Loslier Simon, titled 'The separation from nature and separated subjects: critical investigations with Theodor W. Adorno and Françoise d'Eaubonne' focuses on the reification of the identity category "woman" as a cipher for explaining the collusion between domination and social reproduction. As such, Simon illustrates how the widely accepted idea of a universal "separation from nature", taken as the bedrock of the ecological crisis, needs to be critically re-examined. To achieve this outcome Simon opens a dialogue between Theodor W. Adorno and Françoise d'Eaubonne in order to analyse how the Western self-proclaimed separation from nature is indissociable from the naturalisation of separated others. Following Adorno's analysis, Simon argues that reified categories of identity serve as *ciphers* for understanding how social domination, subjection and the domination of nature function together. Furthermore, by focusing on the assignation of some human beings to the fixed category of identity "women", D'Eaubonne argues that this assignation of identity is *as necessary as material exploitation* for the reproduction of a damaging social order.

Simon further posits that Western modernity has managed to *recode* the associations of women and nature in order to reinforce enterprises of domestication, domination and the pursuit of profit. What comes into view, as a result of such an analysis, is the difficulty that is posed by the expression "the separation from nature". On the one hand, it encapsulates a palpable reality, that is, a collective denial of our interdependencies with ecosystems, and a denial of embodiment and the materiality of the body. On the other hand, this separation from nature is also a Western narrative of self-constitution, which does not really say its name: there is not really a separation with nature because there are *concrete mediations with nature*, only in the modes of oppression and destruction. In light of the above, Simon concludes by stating that we need to continue enterprises of denaturalisation for dealing with the ecological crisis and furthermore, as surely as we need to historicise our discourses on nature, we also need to recognize the ecological conditions of human history.

In the third article of this section by Franscesca D'Alessio, titled 'Women's precarity in a globalised world: an ecofeminist perspective', D'Alessio explores, from an ecofeminist perspective, statistics regarding women's precarity

worldwide, with particular attention to the situation of migrant women in the global North and native women in the global South. D'Alessio contends that this is to be regarded as a crucial line of exploration due to the fact that when the exploitation of nature became a subject of profit and global political discourse, women's situation in the labour market underwent significant changes, resulting in precarity and exploitation due to their perceived proximity to nature. Like Salleh and Simon, D'Alessio notes that for centuries women and nature have been compared and viewed as more similar and interconnected to each another than men and nature. Furthermore, with the advent of scientific discoveries, the perception shifted to view nature as a malevolent and unpredictable woman, "akin to a witch", who needed to be dominated and controlled. As both Salleh and Simon have previously noted, D'Alessio contends that with the scientific revolution, its mechanical order and its associated values of power and control marked "the death of nature" and the shift they brought ushered in a new economic era, paving the way for the globalisation and capitalism we are familiar with today. Additionally, D'Alessio notes that ecofeminists like Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva (and economists such as Rosa Luxemburg and Ester Boserup) have also highlighted the significant role played by colonialism in the history of women's precarity. As such, D'Alessio maintains that it is important to underline that colonialism had an impact not only on women in colonised countries but also in colonising ones.

By drawing from a number of studies conducted by the European Institute of Gender Equality (EIGE), University of Massachusetts, International Labour Organization (ILO) and the European Parliamentary Research Service, D'Alessio concludes by noting that when women's lives and work are closely related to nature for several reasons, environmental problems and the protection of the environment become crucial for them and their well-being because they depend on them. Without the necessary resources to cope with the changes brought by the climate crisis, women's everyday conditions are more likely to worsen. Their low social status will also contribute to their exclusion from decision-making roles, yet governments and environmentalists will continue to expect them to take responsibility for protecting the Earth.

Section two: nature and new humanism (Kruger & Giddy)

The next group of papers address the question of the environment, and the proper human response/responsibility in the contemporary age, from an ethical and metaphysical angle. Both papers point with concern to the lack of an appropriate ethos from which the contemporary human can orient themselves towards the imminent environmental crisis. And both papers, albeit in different ways, look back

to the thought of classical antiquity as a source of inspiration for an ontological orientation that can meaningfully address the conceptual divide between human and nature that ultimately lies at the root of humanity's destructive relations with the natural world.

The first paper in this section, 'Thinking nature as home: from transcendental homelessness to *oikeiosis*' by Jaco Kruger, takes its point of conceptual departure from Georg Lukács's *The Theory of the Novel*, originally published in 1916. In this work Lukács characterizes the condition of modern humanity as one of 'ontological homelessness', a situation in which the individual no longer finds meaning and structure in the natural and social worlds that surround them. The homeless individual is burdened with the responsibility of fashioning their own meaning and then projecting it onto the world around. From this ontological rootlessness, Kruger argues, follows the oft repeated pattern whereby the human tries to overcome homelessness by stamping the pattern of the idea of home that they have acquired onto ever larger parts of their environs. Thereby turning more and more of the world into 'their home' by overwriting whatever lay there before.

From this alienated urge to refashion the world according to our own conception Kruger traces the development of modern capitalism and modern colonialism, and the separation from nature that underlies the ecological crisis. Relief from the individual's ontological homelessness is sought by pitting themselves against everything that lies outside themselves. Kruger then asks what possibilities there are for an alternative way of overcoming this homelessness, of being at home *with* the world but without reducing human existence to nothing more meaningful than the mechanical motions of arrangements of matter. Kruger turns to the Stoic concept of *oikeiosis*, a perpetual process whereby the individual moves on the way towards a homecoming with themselves, and points to the notion of social *oikeiosis*, and understanding of nature that involves a gradual widening of the self so that it brings itself into an ever-greater degree of familiarity with all that is Other. Kruger closes by suggesting that such a notion, ecologically understood, could furnish humanity with a non-anthropocentric way of being at home that also contains an ethical responsibility to value nature.

The next paper in this section, 'Ecomodernism – defending a new humanist approach to nature' by Patrick Giddy, also takes as its starting point the deeply felt division of the human from the rest of nature. Giddy traces this schism to the Enlightenment conception of humanity, which positioned the idea of a contextless rational subject over against the social and natural order. Such an abstract conception, Giddy suggests, leads to a self-understanding that is utterly removed from the concrete values and meanings that people experience in their lives. Nor can an alternative source of value be found by making an anti-

transcendental turn, as Giddy, following Ferry, suggests has occurred with the attempts to ground values in immanence to be found in diverse ecological movements. Such attempts, by making humans mere functional components of natural systems, either remove the intuitive sense of human agency or else fail to provide an adequate account of the human capacity to evaluate and choose from amongst ethical possibilities.

Giddy turns to Ferry's ecomodernism, supplemented by Aristotle, as offering an alternative to the aforementioned positions through the idea of transcendence in immanence. Giddy argues that transcendence, rather than being a source of difference between the human and the non-human, is a shared feature. Humans, like other animals, have an experience of transcendence ultimately grounded in the experience of loss and finitude. The experience of our own agency in immanence, as evidenced by our capacity for sensation, is found to be isomorphic with the agency of non-human others. And on the basis of this, Giddy suggests, lies the foundation for a non-metaphysical humanism, one that can ground a non-anthropocentric environmental ethics.

Section three: ecological philosophical anthropology (Hay and Hoffken)

The next two articles fall within the sub-theme of ecological philosophical anthropology where Emma Hay and Ole Hoffken focus on a 'crisis of thinking' and 'a crisis of being' respectively, arising out of capital accumulation and its effects on the individual psyche.

Hay uses Félix Guattari's "three ecologies" (see Guattari 1989) or in her terms, 'ecologics' to make visible the connection between environmental crises and a range of other crises related to debt, energy and inequalities. In bringing to bear the interrelationality of mental, social, and environmental "registers" on ecological economics and the latter's relation to ecopsychology, Hay argues that the effects of "ecologics of growthmanship" (bigger, faster, more is better) has been alienation, which detaches the individual from wider nature. Hay refers to this as an "ecology of bad ideas" and hence explains it as a "crisis of thinking", where a basic error continues to propagate itself resulting in disastrous consequences. Hay argues that the basic error here focuses on the primacy of capital accumulation and obsession with gross domestic product (GDP) as a driver of economic activity which in turn abstracts social relations and effectively "disconnects the human economic system from the biophysical reality".

Hay emphasises renewing our understanding of interconnectivity, inter-relationships and interdependencies as a counter to the alienating effects of growthmanship. She suggests that an alternative to the dominant ontology of

separation emerging out of capital's primacy, could be an ecological complexity lens which holds the possibility for the re-envisioning of relationality, and hopefully lead to functioning with socio-ecological agency where individuals may exercise constraint, gentleness and less absolutism to ecological issues.

Hoffken discusses the crisis of being by unpacking natural and cultural evolution in modern societies and the conceptualisation of a/the 'good life'. Of significance is Hartmut Rosa's resonance theory which contributes to understanding evolutionary approaches (natural/biological and cultural) in relation to the concept of a good life and well-being. Rosa proposes resonance as a counterpoint to the states of alienation emerging from "escalatory capitalist regimes of modernity". The desire for resonance is an aspect of human nature, where the individual and the world with which the individual interacts are both responsive and open to influence, and as neither dominates there lies potential for both to be transformed. Hoffken indicates that resonance catastrophe (inhibition of resonance or discord as per Bjørn Grinde's coinage) has emerged as a symptom of modernity due to dynamic stabilisation of the orientation towards expansion of one's share of the world. Since material wealth can only be sustained through continuous efforts towards growth, it opens unending areas of competition.

Hoffken then argues that while cultural emotional evolution may be seen as a major drive towards realising favourable conditions of resonance, cultural evolution itself creates discord or adverse conditions for experiences of resonance. The relatively rapid changes in cultural evolution creates mismatch between biological traits and the modern environment which is complex carrying an overabundance of stimuli and resulting in cognitive and emotional overload. Hoffken indicates this as a major cause for inhibition of resonance and hence further attention is needed on the context of natural-cultural co-evolution to promote resonance on both the individual and collective level.

Section four: an ecological critique of capitalism in the post colony and beyond (Konik and Blotta/Thaís)

In the final section, the following two papers 'Problematizing the discursive bases of contemporary ecopolitical vanguardism in social ecology and ecosocialism' by Adrian Konik and 'The nature of communication and the communication of nature: revisiting critical theory and nature through decolonial environmental communication and human rights education in Brazil' by Vitor Blotta and Brianezi Thaís, critically engage with political and ecological crises in the context of capitalism and neoliberal hegemony through an archaeological and deconstructive approach in the case of the former contribution, and in terms of decolonial thought and centering non-Western voices in the latter.

Adrian Konik's archaeological and deconstructive analysis problematises the lingering epistemic roots and rhetorical tendencies found in ecopolitical vanguardism's anachronistic approach to ecological and political crises today. It is surprising that vanguardism remains a salient ecopolitical position, despite having lost its epistemic foundation after 1968 with the ecological movement's epistemic shift toward those discursive relations identified within Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's concept of radical democratic politics. Konik's analysis shows that vanguardism's lingering historical-discursive bases in social ecology (directed around pre-1968 grids of specification) and ecosocialism (in its schizophrenic attempts to 'negate' social ecology) remain deeply problematic. He suggests that "perhaps this schizophrenic vacillation [...] is an effect of ecosocialism's emergence as an authority of delimitation on a historical-discursive cusp". Konik argues that while ecosocialists tried to distinguish themselves from social ecology and deep ecology, the movement exhibits paradoxical rhetorical and strategic tendencies that mirror those it critiques, particularly in terms of its quasi-religious framing of the ecological crisis and its reliance on binaries like "ecosocialism or ecocatastrophe."

However, while the foundational claims of vanguardism have been criticised, the accompanying habits of thought are harder to address since the movement appears to offer a single correct criterion for the formulation of strategies for ecological change. Konik posits that while theorists such as Graeber (2003) describe how the end of vanguardism has been decried for almost half a century, such ecopolitical strategies endure within the grids of specification of a previous episteme and run contrary to post-1968 agonistic collective strategies that effectively engage with the growing power of neoliberal hegemony. This is achieved through advanced mechanisms of corporate collaboration that are necessary to confront and surround neoliberal configurations. Though seemingly aligned with contemporary transversal approaches, Konik highlights vanguardism's divisive impact on collective strategies necessary to confront neoliberal hegemony. More specifically, vanguardism undermines the effectiveness of fostering dialogical and inclusive strategies akin to Laclau and Mouffe's radical democracy, which emphasises the extension of equivalences among diverse struggles to build a broader left-wing hegemony.

In their paper, Vitor Blotta and Brianezi Thaís criticise the limits of Western critical theories of communication and nature, particularly Habermasian concepts of communicative and instrumental reason, in terms of their capacity to address hierarchical, instrumentalising, and exploitative human-nature relations rooted in capitalist and colonial frameworks. The authors argue that such frameworks are unable to critique contemporary lifeworld colonisation processes, thereby furthering more significant forms of violence against peoples, communication,

and natural environments. As a corrective, the authors posit that a deep-seated reciprocity, or life condition, in decolonial and Global South philosophies may productively structure new thinking at the intersection of critical theories of communication and nature. The authors show how indigenous and decolonial principles, which emphasise reciprocity and respect, can foster more equitable and integrated relationships between people, media, and the environment.

Drawing on case studies like the Amazon news agency *Sumaúma* and Brazil's *Human Rights Observatory in Schools Project* (PODHE), the authors propose a radical rethinking of communication and nature as intersubjective entities worthy of intrinsic dignity and rights rather than as resources (public goods that are also complementary to human beings). Such entities reveal a sacredness that derives from their shareability, and thus the authors introduce expanded "notions of intersubjectivity and public discourse, transcendental and authentic personalities, or 'spirits' with other beings" as potential correctives to Western critical communication theories. Blotta and Thaís emphasise decolonial and original peoples' concepts and principles of multi-naturalism, perspectivist shamanism, good living and educommunicatio, arguing that respecting the 'voices' of both natural and human actors may provide a means to address systemic exploitation and violence in order to develop new forms of collective understanding and action. This may only be achieved, however, through a new critical theory of communication and nature grounded in relationality and horizontal engagement.

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