The nature of identity: Ecofeminism, women's poetry, and reclaiming power through the recognition of parallel oppressions

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Abstract
The presence of Ecofeminism in women's poetry can empower women today who engage in feminist activism. The systematic oppression experienced by women is paralleled by the destruction inflicted upon nature (including animals). By recognizing these as similar, women can reclaim their connection to nature (while rejecting the idea that this is essentialist); through this connection women as readers find an escape from patriarchy, the male gaze, and sexual violence in Ecofeminist poetry.

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Introduction

How can poetry enliven, embolden or even heal it’s readers? Many forms of art have, throughout history, served as a way for individuals to find comfort and validation in politically strenuous times. Often this art is subversive, outside of the norm, even socially deviant. Due to the power structures in place, the poetry of women is frequently deemed always already deviant, simply due to the fact that it was written by a woman. So, when women began to write about violence - against nature, animals, and even themselves - it did not go unnoticed. In this paper, I will be exploring two main topics: the ways in which the poetry of several authors throughout history exhibit manifestations of ecofeminist theory, and how these poems can become a mode of healing for today’s feminist activists. The exploration the theory of and the arguments against ecofeminism allow a closer analysis of the poetry. Charlotte Mew and Aemilia Lanyer lived and wrote in a time when women had very few rights at all, let alone the right to an opinion. As history moves, it brings along with it the poems of Forough Farrokhzad, Linda Hogan, Marge Piercy and Maya Angelou. These women all embraced the ecofeminist ideal that though women have been socially chained to their biological functions through their association with nature, recognizing and articulating the parallel of violence against women and nature can lead to power over patriarchal forces and a reversal of power structures. Additionally, the way that ecofeminist themes are utilized in poetry throughout history shows a significant pattern of progression: while in early poetry, nature is depicted as a place for escape from patriarchal forces into feminine community, in later poetry the bond that women share with nature is empowering. Instead of hiding, the speakers of these poems resist. In a contemporary context, these poems can become a
source of power and healing for feminist activists who may be feeling hopeless in the midst in a seemingly never ending fight.

**Ecofeminism: Theory Meets Art**

In her text, *The Death of Nature*, Carolyn Merchant describes the goddess Natura as “a replica of the cosmos....set in her crown as jewels were the signs of the zodiac and the planets; decorating her robe, mantle, tunic, and undergarments were birds, water creatures, earth animals, herbs and trees; on her shoes were flowers” (11). This ancient literary figure embodies the classical notions of women’s relationship with nature; she is connected to the cosmos, she lives in harmony with animals and plants. There is beauty here: the ways in which the feminine and the natural are similar can be a very positive thing. Despite this, there is a dark side to the relationship. As Merchant points out though continuing the story of Natura, both nature and women have been systematically taken advantage of: “in aggressively penetrating the secrets of heaven, they tear Natura’s undergarments, exposing her to the view of the vulgar.” (10). Here, Merchant is specifically relating the act of mining to the act of rape. Mining was just the first of many ways in which the Earth has been violated for profit. As both the Earth and animals began to be ravaged more and more for profit following the industrial revolution and the rise of capitalism, feminists began to take notice. Because of this, the movement of ecofeminism was born.

Ecofeminism has been defined in a variety of ways over the years: even the date of the movement’s inception is up for debate. While authors and activists started to use the term “ecofeminist” in the early 1970’s, women were taking notice of the parallels between the treatment of their sex and the treatment of animals as early as 1892. In the introductory essay for
their anthology on the movement, *Ecofeminism: Feminist Intersections with Other Animals & The Earth*, Carol J. Adams and Lori Gruen note that Edith Ward points out the similarities between the treatment of women and animals in her critique of Henry Salt’s book *Animal Rights* in 1892. Despite the fact that there was not a vocabulary for the parallel oppressions occurring between women and nature, feminist theorists and animals rights activists have been alluding to it since long before the 1970’s. Consequently, this means that many philosophers and writers have been using the presumed lower status of women, nature and animals as the basis for their ideas and research for many years.

For almost as long as there have been written texts, we can see that the Earth has been feminized, most likely due to its life giving properties. This is the way in which nature and woman are associated on the most basic level. Working with this idea as a foundation, it can be assumed that many of the great writers and philosophers in history were operating off of the idea that the women, the feminine, animals and nature all inherited similar traits. Going as far back as Aristotle, who died in 323 B.C., there were popular theories centered on the inherent inferiority of women. According to Merchant, in Aristotle’s writings he “associated activity with maleness and passivity with femaleness” (13). This is a philosophical theory that we are still feeling the ramifications of today in the 21st century, as women are not always encouraged or assumed to strive for lifestyles or professions that would be considered “active”, like medicine or law. Even this idea of what is “active” and “passive” is heavily steeped in misogynistic gender roles. As Sherry Ortner points out, men are often seen as actively advancing culture because they are allowed the time, space and economic means to engage in professions which do so. Women, on the other hand, bound to childbearing and rearing by their biological processes, and chained to
nature, which when seen in a binary with culture, is the dirtier, less valued side of the coin. Beyond this, Merchant writes that “Aristotle’s biological theory viewed the female of the species as an incomplete or mutilated male, since the coldness of the female body would not allow the menstrual blood to perfect itself as semen” (13). In this view, not only is the feminine lesser than the masculine because it is passive, but women are not even whole beings, they are “incomplete”. Such strong views on the worth of women and what they bring to society most certainly was both reactionary and a factor of the the ways in which abuse against nature and animals progressed over time.

Despite these ideas about women and femininity, there is proof that up until the industrial revolution and the rise of capitalism, that certain societies did still hold the Earth in high regard as a living mother. Merchant writes that “Popular Renaissance literature was filled with hundreds of images associating nature, matter, and the earth with the female sex. The earth was alive and considered to be a beneficent, receptive, nurturing female” (28). While the traits that were assigned to femininity and the Earth were essentializing and confining, they reveal that there was a still a reverence for the Earth as a mother figure at this time. It was during the Renaissance, in the sixteenth-century that real advances were being made in regards to mining, and it was taking place more and more. Because mining is quite literally an act of penetration, it is often viewed as the rape of the Earth. The widespread acceptance of mining in many ways signified a shift in cultural attitudes and values concerning the value and function of nature. Whereas in ancient Greece, Merchant notes that philosophers “believed that metals were plants growing beneath the earth’s surface and that veins of gold were like the roots and branches of trees. Metals were believed merely to be a lower form of life than vegetables and animals, reproducing themselves
through small metallic seeds” (29). This shift from believing that minerals were a vital and important part of a living, nurturing Earth, to viewing them as a commodity or simply an ingredient in an end product, was a precursor of not only a shift in the ways in which societies viewed the Earth, but in a shift towards consumerism and capitalism. We stopped seeing the Earth as a whole, functioning being, and started to strip her for parts. As Merchant puts it, “the new mining activities have altered the earth from a bountiful mother to a passive receptor of human rape” (39). This is where we can see that the ideas of women as the more passive sex, and the Earth as passive, align and the violation of both escalates from there.

The most basic definition of Ecofeminism is that it is a theory that recognizes and validates the resemblance that violence against women holds with violence against animals the degradation of nature. While this is the most basic tenet, ecofeminism embodies so much more. Incorporating topics ranging from vegetarianism/veganism, race, poverty, violence and the economy, ecofeminism really is a field that fully embraces intersectionality. What an ecofeminist must acknowledge is the ways in which an individual’s gender, race, sexuality, socioeconomic status and health are all impacted by the environment and vice versa. So much racial violence is inflicted via the environment; violence against the Earth and global warming disproportionately affect people and communities of color. In her essay “Women of color, Environmental Justice, and Ecofeminism,” Dorceta E. Taylor writes that:

Environmental justice activists looked at the relationship between class, race, power, control, money and the exposure to environmental hazards and saw that increasing numbers of undesirable facilities and land uses were being foisted on communities after they were successfully blocked in other communities (49, emphasis mine).
In the year 2017, folks can see a concrete example of this unfolding before their eyes: there are concerns as to the actual reasons for rerouting the Dakota Access Pipeline from running through the city of Bismarck, North Dakota (which according to the 2010 census, was 92.4% white at that time) to the Standing Rock native reservation. This resonates deeply with the United States' history of inflicting violence on native peoples via the environmental destruction of their (designated) lands. Andrea Smith offers an explanation for this in her book *Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide*: “Native peoples have become marked as inherently violable through a process of sexual colonization. By extension, their lands and territories have become marked as violable as well. The connection between the colonization of Native people’s bodies - particularly Native women’s bodies - and Native lands is not simply metaphorical” (55). This interpretation could certainly be categorized as an ecofeminist one, seeing that it recognizes the fact that what is happening to native peoples in affected by gender, race and environmental issues.

In addition to gender and race, ecofeminism puts a large focus on the ways in which capitalism and consumerism feed into violence against women and the destruction of the environment. Many of today’s greatest environmental concerns, pipelines and factory farming for example, are continued in the name of demand. We require more meat to fulfill our diets and more oil to contend with our transportation needs. In an overarching culture that is driven by product and profit, the dehumanized Earth will never become a priority. An ecofeminist might also acknowledge that our increased demand on the Earth’s resources is concurrently due to overpopulation. Many women do not have access to family planning, whether through education and/or the ability to obtain contraceptives. The sexual health of women and the right to choose
how many children they have and when they have said children, needs to also include conversations around sexual violence. In this way, ecofeminism extends to include reproductive justice.

Ecofeminism is a theory and area of study that embraces the interconnectedness of all things that are affected by the patriarchal themes that color our world. This being said, themes of ecofeminism have manifested in art, most often by women, from all over the world, spanning many genres. Considering that art is a significant focal point of culture, it is often considered the domain of men. Throughout history, women have received push back when they have engaged with the making or viewing of art of any type. Because of this push back, art created by women is often viewed and interpreted as reactionary or politically charged. Regardless of whether this is always true or not, women’s art is colored by their experiences of violence, oppression and otherness. As Maya Angelou wrote in her poem “My Guilt,” “My crime is I’m alive to tell” (44). The crime of women is that despite sexual violence, despite the systematic devaluation of the feminine, despite burning us at the stake, we are alive to tell, and we tell through art. Literature is one artistic genre in which women have shared their experiences, be it in the form of fiction or nonfiction, prose or poetry. From Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*, Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* all the way to contemporary works by those such as Amy Poehler and Jessica Valenti, women have used literature as a mode to share their experiences and break the mold of passivity that has been set out for them. One genre in particular has attracted many ecofeminist writers over the centuries: poetry.

It is uncertain if the origin of environmental themes in women’s poetry can be traced, considering that for much of history, in many parts of the world, women were discouraged from
engaging in artistic or intellectual behaviors. If they did pursue writing in any form, they likely hid their works and it was a rare occurrence for works by women to be published. For reference, the Bronte sisters felt it necessary to use male pseudonyms at the time that their works were being published in the mid nineteenth century. One of the earliest poets though, to engage environmental themes in her poetry is Aemilia Lanyer. Lanyer was living and writing in the early seventeenth century. She used her writing to question gender roles and religious traditions and her *Salve Deus Judaeorum* was an early major feminist works. She is often remembered as an ecofeminist poet because nature was frequently portrayed as a feminine utopia, or escape, in her work. Like Layner, many of the early women poets to enjoy any sort of success were European. It was not until the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that the poetry of women of color was seen as significant, especially poetry that dealt with any political themes.

The fact that ecofeminism is already such a highly intersectional ideology makes it an ideal platform from which women of color can speak on their race, gender, socioeconomic class and how these are affected by environmental issues. Though this has been expressed through all forms of art, literature is a major one. This paper puts an emphasis on the fact that ecofeminist poetry from women poets has come from all corners of the world, highlighting the experiences of women from all different types of backgrounds. It would not be doing ecofeminism justice to only look at the poetry of Aemilia Lanyer, and not a poet like Linda Hogan, a native woman, for example. Our experiences are colored by our identities, and though they are also incredible pieces or art, these poems are experiences. These poems represent the ways in which women have interacted with nature and animals throughout history, the world over. In many ways, it can
be seen as self-fulfilling prophecy: because women have been labeled as closer to nature due to our reproductive abilities, closer to nature we became.

A special bond formed through mutual suffering at the hands of misogynistic violence. In what can be seen as a great act of irony, women have simultaneously been punished for this unique relationship with nature; witches were burned at the stake for their knowledge on the healing properties of plants and herbs, menstruating women are seen as unclean in many societies and they are separated out from everyone else. The more that industrialism took over, the more that women and nature were seen a something unruly. Carolyn Merchant writes that “the image of nature that became important in the early modern period was that of a disorderly and chaotic realm to be subdued and controlled”...that “wild uncontrollable nature was associated with the female” (127). Many of the same arguments that were used to place women below culture, in their natural roles as childbearers, were also used to inflict unbelievable pain and suffering on women through events like the witch trials. There was a dualism developing: “woman was both virgin and witch: the Renaissance courtly lover placed her on a pedestal; the inquisitor burned her at the stake” (127).

There are many poems by women that deal with gender and the environment in complex ways, but for the purposes of this paper, there are a few qualities that categorize a piece of poetry as an ecofeminist poem. A major over arching theme is escape. As mentioned above, the bond between women and nature was born partially out of the parallel oppressions that both the former and the latter were experiencing in the wake of rising patriarchal customs and cultures. With this rise of patriarchy came violence and destruction, and because nature is almost always portrayed as feminine in art, it becomes a symbol of escape, a symbol for being in community with women.
Not only does nature serve as an escape from patriarchy in general within these poems, but more specifically it is an escape from the male gaze and from sexual violence. The male gaze is a term that was coined by the feminist film critic Laura Mulvey in the early 1970's. It is the idea that art and literature are created from a male point of view, causing women to be made into objects, more often than not for the male viewers pleasure. It is said that art often imitates life, and this is no exception. Art is likely made from the male gaze, because that is how male artists actually view the world and the women around them. In this way, the male gaze comes to life as a very real phenomenon that women live with. Often in Ecofeminist poetry, the male gaze is present, and is representative of the general overbearing presence of patriarchal culture. Nature tends to serve as an escape from this presence, or this gaze. Whereas industrialized society is susceptible to male gaze, and is a space where women constantly feel objectified and commodified, nature, a feminine utopia, becomes a refuge.

In the same vein as the male gaze, ecofeminist poetry also portrays nature as an escape from sexual violence. Just about as long as there have been records kept, sexual violence has been used a method to reinforce the social positions of women. The consumption of women's bodies reinforces their role as second class citizens. Many have even correlated our consumption of women with our more literal consumption of animals. As a means of power and control, sexual violence and the threat of it is almost inescapable in patriarchal societies. Young women are told to protect themselves, while young men are applauded for their sexual conquests. Media and social institutions often reinforce these roles and play an active hand in perpetuating sexual violence. In ecofeminist poetry, nature becomes a place where women can come together, free of the threat of sexual violence and share their experiences, a theme that will play out quite plainly in
Aemilia Lanyer’s poetry. This is not in the least bit surprising, considering that in Lanyer’s time there were likely very few spaces in which women could not only admit to having experienced sexual violence, but where the blame would not be placed on them. Even now, almost four hundred years later, women are still often blamed for the sexual violence inflicted upon them.

When ecofeminist poetry presents nature as an escape from patriarchy, the male gaze, and sexual violence, something very special happens. Even though many of these poems were written in times before today’s activists were born, they are still of crucial importance. Today, the women leading movements around anti-violence, reproductive justice, equal pay and much more, are constantly dealing with the male gaze and sexual violence. Because ecofeminist poetry presents nature as an escape, the poetry itself can transform into a mode of healing. When feminist activists today come to terms with the parallel oppressions experienced by both women and nature, it can become a source of empowerment. This empowerment lies mainly in the idea of intersectionality and interconnectedness. The oppression of women does not stand alone in a patriarchal vacuum. The battles that we are fighting today, against racism, sexism and the destruction of the environment are all connected. Feminist activists can utilize ecofeminist poetry as a mode of escape and subsequent healing from their everyday work. The poets in the coming pages all present compelling and inspiring narratives where women come together with nature to overcome or escape the chains of a patriarchal world. Women living in today’s society can also be emboldened by recognizing shared oppressions and embracing environmental activism as a limb of their feminist work.

**Essentialist Dissociation from Nature**

“Meaning, like life, is interdependent.” -Susan Griffin
Ecofeminism is the recognition that the destruction of our environment is paralleled by violence against and the oppression of women. The common denominator in both of these strains of violence is a patriarchal culture of dominance. Karen J. Warren provides a concise definition of ecofeminism in her essay “Taking Empirical Data Seriously: An Ecofeminist Philosophical Perspective”: “Ecofeminist philosophy extends familiar feminist critiques of socialisms of domination (e.g., sexism, racism, classism, heterosexism, ageism, anti-Semitism) to nature...according to ecofeminists, nature is a feminist issue.” (4).

While ecofeminism in its truest form appears to simply advocate for a more intersectional feminism, some critics have accused ecofeminism as serving as an ideology that essentializes women. This ever present fear of essentializing women is real, and it is valid. Allowing or even encouraging women to be simplified to their most basic traits (for example, the ability to give birth) in order to restrict them to certain spheres of society (motherhood and domesticity) is everything that the feminist movement has fought against. Feminists are always afraid of being oversimplified. This is one of the central reasons that not long after it came to the forefront of the movement, ecofeminism was relegated to a more passive position. Despite the increasing destruction of the environment and the rise of climate change, the clear connections between patriarchal, capitalist control of women and nature were pushed aside. Many feminists were afraid that acknowledging these parallels between women and nature would encourage the essentialization of women; that this connection would further prove, in the eyes of the patriarchy, that women were emotional, fragile beings that needed to be controlled.

Sherry Ortner elaborated on this fear in her classic essay, “Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?” Ortner sets out to explain why “the secondary status of women in society is one of
the true universals, a pan-cultural fact” (67). She compares the secondary status that women take to men to the secondary status that nature takes to culture. Culture is designed to overpower nature, “to ‘socialize’” it. Culture in this way shares traits with masculinity; it is overbearing, invasive and forceful. Ortner argues that women are seen as closer to nature than to culture on three different levels: the physical body, her social roles and her psychological state. Each of these three levels are connected: because of physical traits such as the ability to reproduce, breastfeeding and menstruation, women are seen as more enslaved to the continuation of the species, and therefore relegated to the domestic sphere, defining their social role. After this social role has been determined due to physical attributes, it is assumed that her psyche is closer to nature because her thoughts are more concrete, they have to do with the immediate rather than the abstract or the philosophical. This cycle relegates women to domesticity and when individuals attempt to break the cycle, they are seen as going against nature, as breaking some set of inherent rules.

In this way, Ortner proves women’s association with nature through her dissociation from culture, and argues that this can provide an explanation of women’s near universal oppression. What her essay does not address is the subsequent oppression of nature as well. By neglecting the corresponding oppression of nature, the essay imposes an idea that the connection of women and nature is the issue, that is is negative. In reality, the connection between the two may not be the issue, the issue is rather that both women and nature are regarded as lesser than, and treated accordingly. In her essay, “A Critique of Ecofeminism,” Anne Archambault explains that “ecofeminists recognize that the association between women and nature has historically been used to exploit them, but they choose to embrace this connection as a source of empowerment
and as the basis for their critique of the patriarchal oppression of women and nature" (1). This is certainly not seen as a positive by all feminists. Archambault brings up several counterpoints that can be used to dispute Ortner’s reasoning in placing women closer to nature. One such counterpoint is, if motherhood and breastfeeding are what position women closer to nature, “are women who do not experience these biological processes any less connected to nature?” (2). By putting too much emphasis on women’s biological processes in regards to their identities, ecofeminists step into the same territory as the patriarchy, into essentializing the worth and experiences of women.

This is essentialism, defining the identities of women by their biological features. Essentialism can also be to blame for attempting to categorize and construct gender. Just the idea that there are strictly two binary genders, male and female, goes against feminist philosophy. Susan Griffin explains it this way in her essay “Ecofeminism and Meaning”: “essentialism, a category in thought by which some feminists are accused of using the word woman, as pure idea or pure matter without the more sophisticated knowledge that woman is a fiction of the social construction of gender” (213). To assume that “woman” is a static category is to ignore all of the various intersections that shape women’s lives: race, sexual orientation, religion, age, weight, ability and class. Each and every one of these identities is affected not only by gender, but also by the surrounding environment and ecosystems. Which women have access to clean water? Which women are living in food deserts? Which women are seeing birth defects in their children due to radiation? Gender, varying identities, reproductive justice and the environment are all intricately connected. Thus, even when feminism is intersectional and gender is recognized as a
social construction, not as rooted in some biological truth, the impact of nature on the lives of women and vice versa cannot be ignored.

Griffin closes this theoretical gap between the fear of essentialism and the truth of ecofeminism when she writes that “if and when ecofeminism suggests that some women may at times be closer to nature than men, this closeness is understood as a result of a social construction of gender and of the socialization and division of labor which preceded from those constructions” (215). While this closeness with nature, that so many are quick to dissociate from, may be derived from social constructions, it has real world ramifications. As Ortner wrote, woman's ability to reproduce and her subsequent responsibility to care for that offspring relegates her to the domestic sphere. This work, all domestic work, is not paid, it is not considered professional and it is systematically undervalued. This results in the entrapment of women in the home where they oftentimes experience the economic and emotional abuse which is the precursor for other forms of violence against women. This violence is directly paralleled in nature. The systematic destruction of natural resources stems from the devaluing of the natural world and the glorification of capitalist production. In this scenario, nature is to women’s work as the industrial world is to professional men’s work. While the theory of essentialism seemingly exemplifies these negative connections between women and nature, it can be read a different way through the intersectional lens of ecofeminism.

Essentialism cannot be the downfall of ecofeminism, because the very purpose of ecofeminism is to recognize how environmental issues are impacting women from all different identity locations. In order to do this, it has to be recognized that not only does this constructed connection to nature have ramifications in the lives of women, but that this connection shows us
a parallel between the destruction of nature and violence against women, both of which are a systematic display of power and control from patriarchal forces. This is the standpoint from which this paper will address ecofeminist poetry: that the justification for the empowerment of ecofeminist poetry does not gain strength from some inherent connection that women have with nature, but rather the parallel oppression that women and nature both face at the hands of the patriarchy. When we can see that the feminization of nature and the essentialization of women each have to do with the systematic othering of all that is involved in reproduction and all that lies outside of the reach of capitalism and the patriarchy, we can see that the lives of women and the oppressions they face are not coincidental, but that they are paralleled in nature. This solidarity with nature and thus with other women is the empowerment that can be found within the ideology of ecofeminism and within ecofeminist poetry. Specifically, this solidarity with other women, nature and poetry can create a community and a refuge for feminist activists.

Aemilia Lanyer: Nature and Female Companionship

Aemilia Lanyer in so many ways becomes a beacon for the beginnings of ecofeminist poetry. Up until Lanyer, who would have been writing poetry in 17th century, there were few women writing at all, let alone writing poetry. This alone made her life a deviant one in the context of traditional womanhood at the time. In addition to writing poetry, she dared to publish her poetry and did attain some degree of prestige and recognition, even more rare for a woman in her time. Above all, Lanyer chose to write poetry about women. She questioned the treatment of Eve and argued for equality for women in her poetry. One of her poems in particular, “The Description of Cooke-ham”, focuses in on the relationship that women have not only with nature,
but also with other women. This was an extremely complex portrait of femininity to be presented in the early 17th century. Lanyer did not stop at just comparing women to nature, but further analyzed the relationship through the lens of the dominant patriarchal society she lived in.

Our poet is described as “a gentle-woman in decline, daughter and wife of court musicians and cast-off mistress of Queen Elizabeth’s Lord Chamberlain” by Paula Guimaraes in her essay “Refashioning English Estate as Feminine Paradise: Aemilia Lanyer’s Country-house Poem ‘The Description of Cooke-ham’ (1610)” (2). Almost everything about Lanyer, including her pursuit of writing, set her outside of the domestic realm for women. Lanyer was also the “first Englishwoman to publish a book of original poems, thus introducing a forceful female authorial voice into the Jacobean cultural scene” (3). When reading “The Description of Cooke-ham”, what becomes strikingly clear, in addition to her refusal to conform to the constructed gender norms of her day, is that Lanyer also had an acute awareness of the complex relationship between women and nature.

“The Description of Cooke-ham” is the last installment in Lanyer’s larger work, Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum. The piece is modeled after a poetic style, the country-house poems, which were popularized in early 17th century England. These poems were intended to express and mirror the warm feelings a poet may have towards a friend through complementing their home. It was not always for a friend, it was often commissioned by a patron who was funding the poet’s ability to live off of their talents alone. In this case, the poem appears to be directed towards “the countess of Cumberland and her daughter, Anne Clifford”, at whose “noble country estate” she shared “an environment of sweet companionship” (Guimaraes 7). The poem was commissioned by this countess after it was decided that the estate would be entailed to a male
heir. While the original intent of the poem was to merely flatter both the countess and her country home, the result is a piece that examines women's relationship with nature as a refuge from male dominance and sexual violence, and how that refuge is eventually ripped away from the women.

The poem opens with Lanyer's heartfelt goodbyes to this country home which appears to have become a beacon and a female utopia;

Farewell (sweet place) where virtue then did rest,
And all delights did harbor in her breast;
Never shall my sad eyes again behold
Those pleasures with my thoughts did then unfold. (7-10)

Much of the poem contains farewells, never quite allowing the reader to become totally enveloped in the beautiful nature imagery, always bringing them back to the sadness and injustice of the situation at hand. Within the first 20 lines, Lanyer alludes to the rare female friendship and companionship that was permitted to blossom within the confines of the country home. She writes of:

fleeting worldly joys that could not last,
Or, as dim shadows of celestial pleasures,
Which are desired about all earthly treasures. (14-16)

These “celestial pleasures” can be read as female companionship, life amidst nature, or both. Already, a distinction is being made: if companionship, love and nature are one side of things, there has to be another side to the binary, just as the feminine is opposed by the masculine. By suggesting that the usual pleasures of female companionship will be lost along with the estate, it
can be gathered that such companionship is not valued outside of this utopia, build upon a nonviolent relationship with nature. This is the first of many instances in ecofeminist poetry where nature is depicted as a refuge from dominant patriarchal society where female friendship and community is free to flourish.

This idea that nature acts as a refuge of feminine community comes to the forefront with the allusion to the Greek figure Philomela. Lanyer writes “And Philomela with her sundry lays / Both you and that delightful place did praise” (31-32). In Greek mythology, Philomela was raped by her brother in law, and when she refused to remain silent on the matter, he cut her tongue out. Not only is she a survivor of sexual violence, Philomela was silenced by patriarchal forces. This allusion becomes particularly potent when it is understood that in Middle English, the word “lays” meant a poem or song. In the nature surrounding the country home, in the refuge of feminine community, Philomela is able to regain her voice and tell her story. This could only become reality away from the oppression of male dominated society and the subsequent constant threat of rape. Even now in contemporary times, there are few spaces where women can tell their stories regarding sexual violence and rape without being met with questioning and victim blaming, let alone in the early 17th century. Later in the poem, near the end when the women have been driven out of their utopia, the image of Philomela returns. When the women leave and nature begins to wither, “Fair Philomela leaves her mournful ditty, / Drowned in deep sleep, yet can procure no pity” (189-190). This is the first of several images that equate the absence of femininity, or masculinity, with death and subsequent silencing. Now that the women have left, Philomela is no longer free to sing her song, she is no longer able to tell her story. It was clearly the presence of the women that was empowering her to do this. In this way,
Philomela’s ability to tell her story and to escape sexual violence is tied closely with feminine community and nature.

To further illustrate nature as a safe haven away from male dominated society, Lanyer writes:

How often did you visit this fair tree,
Which seeming joyful in receiving thee,
Would like a palm tree spread his arms abroad,
Desirous that you there should make abode;
Whose fair green leaves much like a comely veil. (59-63)

The tree becomes a shelter and a veil. Traditionally, a veil is worn during wedding ceremonies to shield the woman’s face from the male gaze. In this instance, it appears that the trees, as a part of nature as a whole, function to shield the women from a patriarchal society. They provide shelter. Only the safety of feminine community and its representation through nature could provide that.

Violence, a characteristic trait of male dominated societies, is clearly absent in the natural world of Cooke-ham. This is not only evident through the story of Philomela, but through the lack of violence against nature and animals. Lanyer’s sparkling and sprawling descriptions of the nature surrounding the country home imply that it is relatively untampered with and that the women live in harmony with the natural world:

The trees with leaves, with fruits, with flowers clad,
Embraced each other, seeming to be glad,
Turning themselves to beauteous Canopies,
To shade the bright sun from your brighter eyes;
The crystal streams with silver spangles graced,
While by the glorious sun they were embraced;
The little birds in chirping notes did sing,
To entertain both you and that sweet spring. (23-30)

The trees are embracing each other, the streams are glowing seemingly free to express emotion and love. The natural world is free of the violence of destruction and subsequent usage in systems of production. From a patriarchal viewpoint, nature exists for consumption and for usage by the human population. There is no harmony with or respect for nature. The same goes for animals. In this same portion of the poem, the speaker explains that animals were also living in harmony with the women, along with nature; “The little birds in chirping notes did sing” (29). This is also pointed out in another line later on, when Lanyer writes that:

The little creatures in the borough by
Would come abroad to sport them in your eye,
yet fearful of the bow in your fair hand. (49-51)

The animals are fond of the countess, yet they still realize that they may be hunted. This is not violence and destruction, this is balance. The female utopia that Lanyer has created in this poem is based on nonviolence and thrives on balance.

Much of the remainder of “The Description of Cooke-ham” depicts the ways in which the surrounding nature grieves the loss of the countess and her daughter, and inevitable turning of power into male hands. Lanyer writes that “At their departure, when they went away, / How everything retained a say dismay” (129-130) and that:

The trees that were so glorious in our view,
Forsook both flowers and fruit, when once they knew
Of your depart, their very leaves did wither,
Changing their colors ass they grew together. (133-136)

The absence of the women and the subsequent exit of justice and balance is depicted as killing the nature in quite a literal way. If keeping up the pattern of binaries that exist within this poem, it follows that if death lies in the wake of the absence of the feminine, then life is to the feminine as death is to the masculine. When masculine forces are ushered in, Philomela is no longer able to speak and sing and the trees are withering away. Not only are the women driven out very physically and literally, but the feminine spirit and community that is connected with nature and serves as an escape from sexual violence and the male gaze has been driven out also.

Lanyer's "The Description of Cooke-ham" is a very early example of ecofeminist poetry, which is most evident in the destruction of the female utopia. When the woman are challenged with the threat of infringing male culture, they have no choice but to leave their home and the grieving trees. This powerlessness and necessity to oblige to very reflective of the time in which Lanyer was writing. Just the fact that she acknowledged feminine community and its connections to nature was revolutionary. Women at this time were believed to have had no real intellectual or emotional thoughts of their own, and to be totally void of any type of desire. It is likely that Lanyer simply could not envision another ending to this story. The only hope that Lanyer had of commemorating the relationship that these women had with the nature around them is through her text. Contemporary ecofeminist poetry, which will be explored in later sections, stands as a stark contrast to this ending. In many contemporary ecofeminist poems, women refuse to give up their bond with the land and with nature, often reinforcing it as their fortress and pushing back at
hegemonic male culture. Considering that Lanyer was most likely a woman of color, but was always portrayed as white, it is interesting to consider that many of the contemporary ecofeminist poets are women of color. When looking at later ecofeminist poetry, issues and questions of colonization add another layer to the idea of male culture infringing on feminine nature and community.

**Mother Is a Sinner By Nature: Forough Farrokhzad**

As a poet, Forough Farrokhzad embodies many of the core tenets that make Ecofeminist poetry distinct. One of these tenets of ecofeminist poetry is the flipping of the male gaze. A large part of the domination of women and nature by men is the use of the tool of objectification. As long as women and nature as seen as commodities to consume, then said consumption will be seen as acceptable in the eyes of patriarchal hegemonic systems. Objectification as a tool of power manifests often in varying forms of art as the gaze, particularly a male gaze. In opposition to this gaze, as has been evidenced in other theories and works of poetry, is the concept of escape. Nature can act as a place and mode of escape for those who are experiencing the violence associated with the male gaze. In her piece, "The Wall," Forough Farrokhzad takes this one step further. This poem from the Iranian poet acts as a powerful illustration and allegory for a feminine spirit not only fleeing from the male gaze, but effectively flipping the power hierarchy and imposing her own gaze. In addition to this theme of escape into nature, Farrokhzad incorporates ideas of the parallel destruction of women and nature through common violence. The patriarchal violence that is leaving its mark forever on nature is also the force that is systematically working to disenfranchise women. Farrokhzad does this through her work "I Pity the Garden". With these two works, and many others like them, Farrokhzad secured her place in
the cannon as not only a feminist poet, but one who had the depth to write about the common oppressions of women and nature.

Living in mid-twentieth century Iran, Forugh Farrokhzad was a rebel girl through and through. In a time and society that emphasized women’s roles in the family and their relationships with men as the essence of their existences, Farrokhzad stood out as not only a divorced woman, but as an independent woman. At only 19 years old, she was a divorced woman who had lost custody of her two year old son. She was living in Tehran independently, making a living as an artist and poet. Jasmin Darznik notes that Farrokhzad was the first Iranian woman poet to “rise to fame without the support of a prominent male figure” (“Forty Years Later”). At this point, she did not embody any of the expectations held for women, which meant that she was always already a target for criticism, regardless of the quality or content of her artistic work. Despite her heightened visibility as a single artist living in Tehran, Farrokhzad nevertheless centered the majority of her poetic work on feminism and the issues facing women at that time. Consequently, much of her poetry could later be interpreted as ecofeminist, even though this was not a term or theory that Farrokhzad would have had access to in the years that she lived and wrote. A significant amount of her poetry contains nature imagery, in addition to this focus on women’s issues, positioning her in within the canon of writers who were known for furthering the ideology of ecofeminism. One such poem that embodies these qualities is “The Wall.”

Through the use of a feminine narrator, Farrokhzad creates an escape narrative in this poem. The gaze is intense as she declares in the first stanza that “In the cold flurry of moments / your silent barbaric eyes / erect a wall around me” (1-3). Many of these words were clearly
chosen to have a high impact on the reader, words such as “cold”, “silent”, “barbaric, and “erect.” Within the first three lines, the narrator has set for this patriarchal force and dominating and unforgiving. The feminine narrator is immediately trapped by this wall. These first three lines also constitute the shortest stanza in the poem. This could potentially be interpreted several different ways, one being that the shortness of the stanza simply adds to the terse nature of the words and sentiments. Another possible interpretation is that the reign of this gaze and the patriarchal dominance that it asserts is short lived. Between the choice of words and the length of the first stanza, it is established that this gaze is dominating, oppressive and in opposition to the feminine narrator. The masculine presence is everything that the feminine narrator is not. In this way, a binary is created: light and dark, acceptance and dominance, nature and industry, warm and cold, and feminine and masculine. Throughout this poem, the two binaries are constantly in opposition: it seems that they cannot coexist, they cannot both hold power.

In contrast to this cold and terse masculine presence, the reader is given bright and vivid images of the feminine narrator fleeing this gaze into nature. In the fourth line, the start of the second stanza, the narrator makes a direct statement: “I flee from you through uncharted roads” (4). Already, the feminine is taking control, asserting herself in the face of this “barbaric” (2) male gaze. She continues to give the reader lucid descriptions of the nature she encounters as she flees. She travels through “moon-misted fields” (5) to wash her “body in distant springs” (6) and swell her “skirt with lilies” (8). These descriptions are fairly concrete, providing the reader with images that they can readily conjure in their own minds. From this stanza on, the poem takes on a more abstract element, using images of nature as a way to show the reader that our narrator is
not just fleeing from the cold male gaze into nature, but that it is so much more than that. Nature takes on the qualities of a feminine utopia. A place where sisterhood reigns supreme.

In true ecofeminist fashion, readers are reminded throughout the poem of the relationship between women and nature. One of the more covert ways that this is done in Farrokhzad’s piece is through imagery tied to menstruation. In the second stanza, the narrator travels through “moon-misted fields” (5) and later on in the piece the sea becomes a barrier between her and the oppressive male gaze. It has been believed that a woman’s menstrual cycle can be linked to the phases of the moon. To take this imagery further, the moon is considered largely to be the cause of the tides in the ocean. All of these natural elements are connected, women, the ocean and the moon. The presence of the ocean and the moon in this poem is a reminder of the inherent and even biological connection that women have to nature. The narrator uses this connection as her escape and refuge.

In this next leg of the poem, readers are reminded that patriarchal dominance thrives on power dynamics and Farrokhzad is building this poem on the idea of power as well. The idea that one person can “gaze” upon another indicated that whoever is in possession of that gaze is also the one in possession of power. In the beginning, the cold male presence is in possession of the gaze, and therefore in possession of power. This is representative, in an allegorical way, of the society Farrokhzad was writing in, not just in the Middle East but all over the world. These themes still ring true today, as we are still fighting the same power dynamics. We are still fighting the gaze and working through complicated issues regarding the gaze. In an increasingly abstract way, Farrokhzad writes the narrative the this feminine character reclaiming her power through nature, and fleeing the overbearing male gaze. In the third stanza, she writes:
I flee from you
to watch from high up on a boulder
lost in dark clouds, the distant sea's
dizzy dance on an abandoned beach. (14-17)

A shift in the poem happens at this moment, the narrator goes from, in the first stanza, being the one who is being being watched and becomes the one doing the watching: "to watch from high up on a boulder". Not only is she now the one watching, seemingly protected by the presence of the sea, but she is "high up". This phrase is indicative of a shift in the power dynamic. Nature has been her conduit and path to power. From here on, the narrator is speaking from a place of power. Despite this, she still struggles with the gaze.

In the sixth stanza, the narrator describes these struggles with the gaze, even after she has fled into nature and into feminine community. She describes the gaze, "the mute roar of your eyes / blurs all passages of my view" (28-29). Despite the fact that she has fled into nature, into the feminine, the gaze is still around her. The gaze, "in its cunning secret dark / erects a wall around me." (30-31). This appears to be representative of a process, just because one has fled into a community of the feminine, this does not mean that power dynamics are any different. Farrokhzad clues her readers into this by writing that the narrator still has the wall around her. She is still trapped by the gaze.

Through abstract language and images of nature, the narrator ascends through a literal and metaphorical hierarchy, until she is in "the bed of a gilded cloud," (39) in the "jocund sky" (38). She is above the world literally, as she is in the sky, but she is also in the process of
completing her escape: she has to subvert the power dynamic. In the powerful final stanza, from the sky “uncaged and carefree,” (41) the narrator flips the gaze. She proclaims:

I will gaze on where your shaman eyes
blur all passages to my view
and in their cunning secret dark
erect a wall around that world (42-45).

In becoming the one who looks, rather than the one who is looked at, this feminine presence has completed her journey. She is no longer trapped by oppressive patriarchal forces. She used nature and the power of the feminine in order to free herself from the gaze and from violence.

Farrokhzad’s influence on the poetic canon as an ecofeminist writer did not end with “The Wall.” A great deal of her work revolved around themes that would be considered ecofeminist. One of these major themes is that of violence and how it affects women, nature and animals. “I Pity The Garden” prominently displays this theme. In this piece, it appears the garden is both literal and symbolic: it is operating on two levels at once. The garden is an actual garden that is dying along with much of the environment and ecology. The garden is also women and femininity. This is very reflective of the ways in which Ecofeminism operates, shedding light on the oppression of women and nature. This means that when the garden is discussed in this piece, it likely is representative of both a literal garden and of women as a group.

Throughout “I Pity The Garden,” the plight of this dying garden is told through the eyes of four speakers; the mother, father, sister and brother. The poem begins with the speaker asserting that “No one thinks of the flowers. / No one thinks of the fish. / No one wants to believe the garden is dying.” (1-3). If one follows the theory that the garden represents both
nature and women, this is a declaration is shared oppressions, and it insists that this shared oppressions are not getting the attention that they need. This idea that “No one wants to believe the garden is dying.” (3) is reminiscent of all of the backlash and denial the women’s movement has always faced. Throughout the majority of the poem, the garden is referred to as “Our garden” (6). This line is repeated four times throughout the poem.

The first perspective the reader experiences is that of the father. He is negligent and even hostile towards the garden stating that “I’ve carried my burden. I’m done with my work.” (16-17). He sees that the garden is dying, but he refuses to be part of the solution. His hostility towards the garden comes out only when he addresses the mother:

Damn every fish and every bird!

When I’m dead, when will it matter

if the garden lives or dies.

My pension is all that counts. (21-24)

The father is selfish and short-sighted, he cannot see the importance of the garden to his family, he can only see the importance of money. This is not the only time in this piece that there seems to be a thread of commentary about capitalism and the effect it is having on women and nature.

Through the father’s dialogue with the mother, the reader is led to the mother’s thoughts. The reader is told that “Mother’s life is a rolled out prayer rug,” (25) and that “She lives in terror of hell” (26). In an extremely potent line, the narrator goes so far as to divulge that “Mother is a sinner by nature” (30). This line is startling and the fact that it is a complete sentence in the middle of a line, punctuation and all, leads to a powerful impression being left on the reader. The only precursor that readers have for this inherent sinful nature of the mother is her femininity, her
connection to the dying garden. We are convinced further that she is connected to the garden when she chooses to take care of everything the father hates and rejects, including herself; she “blows on all the flowers, all the fish / and all over her own body” (32-33). Despite this, she is described as waiting. The mother is a passive force who is incapable of helping the garden, which is dying before her very eyes. This matronly figure appears to represent a long tradition of women being denied validation of their humanity from the patriarchy and further pushed into self-loathing by organized religion.

The brother, unlike the father, is denied his own stream of direct dialogue. The reader hears about the brother through the eyes of the speaker. We learn that “My brother calls the garden a graveyard” (36). This short statement shows that the brother, like the father, is detached from the garden. He can call the garden whatever he wants, but he does not live it and he cannot feel it. The brother is distant, and simply theorizes about the garden, “My brother is addicted to philosophy. / He sees the healing of the garden in its death.” (40-41). The brother is only able to theorize because of his distance from the destruction. He takes no real action. This may be interpreted as being symbolic as the passive forces of art and academia, largely standing by to watch the destruction of women and nature all the while theorizing about it.

Finally, the sister comes into focus. The reader is first told that “My sister was a friend to flowers” (49). Surprisingly enough, this tells us that not only is the sister currently disconnected from the garden, but she was never connected, she was simply a friend. Despite her womanhood and femininity, her connection to nature appears to have been severed at some point. The theme of capitalism as a destructive force resurfaces when the speakers writes, “She now lives on the other side of town / in her artificial home, and in the arms / of her artificial husband she makes
natural children” (55-57). The sister has knowingly removed herself from the garden and her life is now made up of artificiality. This artificial life revolves around a heterosexual relationship and the children that are a result of it. She is no longer valuable in her own right: she appears to have given up her autonomy as she moved away from the garden and towards artificiality. In this way she has become a tool of capitalism, a handmaid of the patriarchy. To make matters worse, the speaker reveals that “Every time she visits she is with child” (61). This feminine member of the family whose relationship with the garden, with nature has been tainted, is actively advancing the destruction of the garden.

Why was this image of a family used? Each member can be read as representative as a force revolving around and interacting with the parallel violence waged against nature and women: the hostile father, the oppressed mother, the academic/apathetic son, and the misguided daughter serving as an agent in her own demise. Following up this extended metaphor, the speaker declares, “Our garden is forlorn.” (62). Despite the negligence of the family, the garden still collectively affects all of them. At this point, the poem shifts its close focus from the family to the broader community. We find that “Instead of flowers, our neighbors plant / bombs and machine guns in their garden soil. / They cover their ponds, hiding bags of gunpowder.” (67-69). This family is not the only one complicit in the violence, it is their neighbors too. Another shift happens as the poem intensifies, instead of “Our garden is forlorn” (62) it becomes “I am forlorn” (78). This reveals that there is indeed a speaker, a narrator that is telling the reader about their family from their perspective. If this speaker is the daughter and the garden, the allegory is complete. This family of patriarchy, capitalism, religion and academia is neglecting their daughter of sorts, the garden, and the destruction that is coming down upon her. Despite the fact
that the garden is obviously dying, the family and the community are actively inciting violence and planting more hate. How is a garden or a daughter meant to grow in the midst of hostility and violence?

Together, these two poems from Forough Farrokhzad incorporate many of the core themes that make ecofeminism relevant for feminist activists today. Though Farrokhzad lived in mid-twentieth century Iran, the ways in which she creates thought-provoking and empowering ecofeminist poetry is important for women today. In “I Pity The Garden,” readers are faced with recognizing the ways in which, on one level, our own families and communities are complicit in ecological destruction, but on another level how social systems are responsible for the oppression of women and nature. This is eye opening not only to the role of social institutions in violence against women and nature, but it reveals the inherent connections of women and nature by blurring the lines as to whether the speaker is a woman, sister and/or is the garden. In “The Wall”, Farokhzad encourages women and activists to not only flee the male gaze and escape into nature and the feminine, but to flip the gaze. In each poem, the feminine is equated with nature and the role of patriarchal systems in the destruction of each one is put prominently on display.

A Flower That Blooms Madness: Linda Hogan

A look at ecofeminism and how it interacts with the lives of women through poetry would not be complete if it were not intersectional. Following Forough Farrokhzad, these next poets are from several different backgrounds and lived experiences. Linda Hogan is a native woman and the Chickasaw Nation’s Writer in Residence. Marge Piercy is a Jewish poet from Detroit. Maya Angelou was a black poet and activist who spoke out against the injustices that
black women in America face. All of these women make up a larger tradition of poets from all traditions exploring how their feminism interacts with the environment.

Not all women have the same experience when it comes to systematic oppression, gender based violence or their relationship to the environment; this is why it is so crucial that a look at ecofeminist poetry takes on an intersectional lens. Although many different communities have had their share of struggles when it comes to colonization and environmental warfare, it is a fact that indigenous peoples have suffered greatly. When looking back to the model that men are to culture as women are to nature, it is easy to see why indigenous people were the target of colonization, along with the land that belongs to them; they were seen by colonizers as not cultured or advanced enough, therefore associated with nature and femininity, something to be changed and controlled. One form of this cultural change and control was capitalism, as Eliane Potiguara discusses this issue in her essay “The Earth Is the Indian’s Mother, Nhandecy”: “The capitalist economic model transformed the indigenous way of life as the Indian encountered the notions of wealth, products, metals, currency, and private property” (141). Many communities like the Iroquois had matriarchal systems, which no longer existed after white European colonization introduced capitalism and ultimately the systematic destruction of the environment.

This colonization that began so many years ago, and it still happening today, has had terrible and lasting effects on native communities, often involving ways in which environmental degradation can harm native peoples. One of the most obvious ways that the native community has been affected by colonization is the fact that they have, for the most part, been removed from their historical lands. Potiguara writes that “the social disintegration of indigenous peoples affects even more the acculturated indigenous communities and the displaced and marginalized
Indians who live in the city, with the following results: illegal ghettos, deaths and suicides, rapes, massacres, alcoholism, insecurity, timidity, discouragement, and mental illness" (147).

Specifically for the topic of ecofeminist poetry, the fact that native women are much more likely to experience rape and sexual violence than most other groups of women takes on importance. According to the YWCA, native women actually experience sexual violence at twice the rate as any other racial group. Andrea Smith echoes these sentiments in her book *Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide*. In the chapter "Sexual Violence As a Tool of Genocide", she writes that “if sexual violence is not simply a tool of patriarchy but also a tool of colonialism and racism, then entire communities of color are the victims of sexual violence” (8). In this way, Smith makes the point that sexual violence is experienced by women of color in a very different way that it is by white women. Considering this, it is important to look at the ecofeminist poetry of native women because their experiences not only with colonialism and the patriarchy, but also with the environment are wholly unique. The colonial violation of and violence against native women strongly parallels the violation of and violence against the environment. Both were/are seen as something that needs to be changed, to be controlled.

Linda Hogan is a native woman from the Chickasaw Nation. Born in 1947, she is not only a poet, but she is a an activist, an academic and an environmentalist. She has written several volumes of poetry, novels, essays, historical works and autobiographical works. A common thread throughout much of her work, particularly the poetry and theoretical work, is the connection between women, animals and the environment. The connection made between the three in much of her poetry is also reflective of the current and historical damage that each has experienced at the hands of colonization and the patriarchy.
One volume of Hogan’s poetry in particular speaks greatly to the issue of ecofeminism and how it can provide an escape for feminist activists from the male gaze and the ever present threat of sexual violence. In *The Book of Medicines*, written in 1993, Linda Hogan seamlessly weaves together themes of nature, women and animals and how they specifically interact in the lives of indigenous women. In much of her work nature becomes, at the same time, an escape, a home and a danger to the women in her poems. Much more than any other poet discussed here, Hogan uses animals in her poems, especially sea animals, as a symbol for women. This symbolism may be a method used to depict that the way in which animals interact with and are one with nature parallels the ways in which women do the same. Women and animals are seen as both being part of nature, and working harmoniously together, as is made evident in Lanyer’s work. By often comparing, or using animals to symbolize women, Hogan is inherently drawing distinctions between women and nature, and men and culture.

One of many poems from *The Book of Medicines* that embodies these principles is “Hunger.” As only the third poem of the collection, it plays a part in setting the tone for the rest of the poetry that follows it. In the first stanza, hunger is personified: “Hunger crosses oceans, / It loses its milk teeth. / It sits on the ship and cries” (1-3). It is almost as if hunger is being infantilized until she writes that this hunger has set out to catch whales, whales that are so large that “the men grew small / as distant, shrinking lands. / They sat on the ship and cried” (7-9). Through this line, it became evident that the hunger is indeed men, it almost cannot even be called symbolic because of the obvious nature in which the speaker narrates this poem, as in line 3 they write, “It sits on the ship and cries” which in the second stanza, the “men” (7) are mentioned and then followed up with “*They* sat on the ship and cried” (9). In this piece, it is
apparent that men are “hunger”. They are not hungry or in need, rather they themselves embody hunger. The idea of hunger has a number of associations that come along with it, among them notions of industrialization, production, consumerism and the subsequent ways in which these processes are actively destroying nature, as they are always hungry for more.

The idea that because men are associated with culture, they are free to take from nature and all of its resources, translates directly into the perceived social justifications for sexual violence. If women are a part of and associated with nature, then they too are for the taking. The speaker addresses this parallel head on in the third stanza when she writes:

Hunger was the fisherman

who said dolphins are like women,

we took them from the sea

and had our way

with them. (10-14)

The men, the hungry fishermen, felt that it was within their rights and within their privileges to take the dolphins from their home, from their sea, their utopia in order to have their “way with them” (13-14). Once again, the parallels and symbolism have been laid out quite clearly for the reader in this piece. This may been seen as making things too obvious, but given the importance and the urgency of the subject matter, sexual violence against indigenous women, the moral may prove to be more important than the mode of conveyance.

Throughout much of the poetry in *The Book of Medicines*, sea animals are used often as symbols for women and womanhood. This is significant considering that there is already a great deal of history and symbolism connecting women to the sea. The sea, the entity that binds the
cycles of nature, and its tides are said to be controlled by the moon. Tides, in sync with the moon, are associated with moods, mood swings and menstrual cycles. In the same vein, the moon has also historically been tied to notions of madness, specifically in women, originating the term “lunacy,” like lunar or luna. In this way, it can be established that the sea is both culturally and historically associated with women and the feminine. As an element of nature that is associated with femininity, and as the place where the dolphins (who are like women) reside, the ocean becomes a place where the feminine can thrive, a place away from the fishermen, hunger and sexual violence. The sea becomes a feminine utopia of sorts, much like the estate in “The Description of Cooke-ham.”

By the fourth stanza, the imagery of the feminine ocean gains strength. The speaker states that “the sea is pregnant / with clear fish / and their shallow pools of eggs” (21-23). The image of maternity deepens the parallels between nature and women. This means that the ocean is a nurturing, life giving place. Immediately after placing the sea in this category, the speaker admits that it is more complicated than that:

the ocean has hidden

signs of its own hunger,

lost men and boats

and squid that flew

toward churning light. (24-28)

While the sea may be a motherly, nurturing place, it has also shown its darkness, lashing out at the men and the boats that bereaid it so. If this follows as an allegory for women, it comes as almost a warning. That the sea, that women, can only take so much of the hunger and the
violence before eventually showing signs of their own darkness. This warning serves as a great example of the turning point that ecofeminist poetry took in the 20th century. In much of the earlier poetry, like Lanyer for example, the women and the animals are removed from their utopias due to acts of violence, and they never return. In Hogan's piece, the dolphins may be taken from the sea, from their feminine utopia, but the sea ultimately has the ability to lash out and to get even. The sense is that dolphins may be taken from the sea individually, but ultimately the sea still belongs to the animals and to the women. There has been a progression: what was once stolen can now be kept. Finally, Hogan leaves the reader with a haunting image. She writes that:

hunger lives in the town
whose walls are made of shells
white and shining in the moon,
where people live surrounded
by what they've eaten
to forget that hunger
sits on a ship and cries. (29-34)

The speaker is expressing that the sins of men, of consumerism and hunger, cannot go unnoticed by the moon. The moon sees all, and as Sylvia Plath writes in her poem "Edge", "The moon has nothing to be sad about...She is used to this sort of thing" (17,19). The moon, one of the ultimate feminine figures in nature, has seen so much violence that she almost becomes a passive observer. What she observes is a city of people who are “surrounded / by what they’ve eaten”. On one level these people are forced to remember the dolphins that they have eaten, but through
the allegorical lens, they are haunted by the memory of the women that they have raped and abused. They walk the streets with the very women that they have committed violence against. They have done this in order to "forget" that hunger is still out there. As long as there is patriarchy, there will be violence.

Linda Hogan weaves together themes of colonization, violence, women and nature throughout her poetry in *The Book of Medicines*. In addition to "Hunger," her piece "Harvesters of Night and Water" exemplifies all of these themes. The poem, once again, is set on the water. In Hogan's poetry, the ocean becomes the utopia where nature, animals and feminine energy and thrive together in the absence of violence. From the start of the poem though, it is clear that not all is well:

\[
\text{In night's broken waters}
\]
\[
\text{here is the boat}
\]
\[
\text{white and small}
\]
\[
\text{with impotent nets. (1-5)}
\]

The waters, usually a harmonious utopia, are "broken" as these men sail them. The boat is "white," which brings about images of European colonizers. These two images put side by side, the white boat and the broken waters, becomes symbolic of the damage that colonization has done to women, particularly native women. To juxtapose the small white boat, the other creatures in the ocean are large and vibrant:

\[
\text{a blue crab, tender inside its shell,}
\]
\[
\text{a star from another night of darkness than ours,}
\]
\[
\text{a glass-eyed halibut}
\]
so much larger than death. (14-17)

This describes nature as big and colorful, it cannot be contained, much like the feminine spirit that the fishermen are attempting to put into captivity.

In the following stanza, a struggle between the sea life and the fishermen is described. Hogan writes:

the octopus,
the men pulling at it, but its many arms
fight hard, hold fast and tight
against the held boat
in struggle with air and men. (26-30)

This struggle is reflective of the violence inflicted by cultural invasion. With colonization of native cultures, came the introduction of patriarchy and sexual violence as a way to systematically oppress women and give oppressed men a sense of "power over. The men in this white boat are struggling with the sea and the life that it holds. They are not at peace with it; they are at war and fundamentally different. The sea creature the men are trying to capture "will sell for two hundred dollars" (36). This is a very direct way of alluding to the ways in which capitalism plays in to colonialism, the ways in which patriarchy profits off of violence. The colonizer has been systematically taking land from native peoples for countless years, and using the destruction of this land, and therefore violence against native peoples, for profit. The idea that animals can be captured for profit, or in the extended metaphor, women can be oppressed for profit, is explored by Andrea Smith in *Conquest*: “Unlike Native people, who see animals as beings deserving of bodily integrity and, furthermore, view their identities as inseparable from
the rest of creation, because colonizes see animals as rapeable and expendable” (117). Nature or the ocean, animals, the feminine, are all seen as rapeable and expendable for the colonizer and the patriarchy. This is further explored in the poem as Hogan writes:

it will be cut into pieces,

will be taken

from the cut insides of halibut

and used again. (37-40)

Through all of this violence, colonization and death, the poem acts as a sort of call to action for women. At a point about halfway through the poem, an “I” emerges. This speaker can see the colonization and the violence, she can see the struggle between the men and the sea: “I want to tell them what I know” (52). This speaker is a mother that appears to have the knowledge of many women:

My child saw a tentacle come

over the boat.

She is the girl who loves fish;

she kissed one once.

She doesn’t understand death” (82-86).

With these few lines, the violence of the men in the white boat is juxtaposed with the love and authenticity of this little girl. “She has not knocked on its door the way I have. / She does not know the world is made of arms. / She keeps the lens of the halibut eye” (87-89). The speaker acknowledges that this young girl is the answer; she is kind and can still see through the eyes of the halibut. This can be read as a call to women, to educate their daughters about nature, and to
be this young girl. Trying to remember the young girl that we once were, and recommitting ourselves to the prevention of violence against women and nature. In many ways, this poem takes the parallels between colonial violence against nature and women, and turns it into a call to action. It is women who can still find that empathy with nature and animals and use that to educate on non-violence.

**Progressions: Ecofeminist Poetry Then and Now**

There are several ecofeminist poets who have written prolifically on the themes of women, nature and how they interact with a patriarchal society. Linda Hogan, Forough Farrokhzad and Aemilia Lanyer each based a great deal of their works on the similar struggle that both women and the environment face, so much so that each poet could easily have a lengthy analysis written on their engagement with ecofeminist theory. There are several other poets though, whose use of ecofeminist themes is more subtle. While their works may not deal as explicitly with themes of women and nature, this does not diminish the contribution that they have made to the genre, or the impact that their works can have on young women’s lives.

These poets include Charlotte Mew, Maya Angelou and Marge Piercy. One of the aims of this paper was to thoroughly represent the intersectionality and diversity that is present within ecofeminist poetry, and these final poets do not stray from that intention. Charlotte Mew, a British poet, lived through the late 19th century and into the early 20th century. Though she was a white European woman, Mew finds her way into this analysis as a queer woman. There was much suspicion that Mew may have identified as lesbian, and we do know that she challenged gender norms by always wearing suits and keeping her hair short, both of which were quite contrary to the expectation of women’s looks at the time. While her insistence on an authentic
life was enough to challenge a patriarchal society, Mew also did so by incorporating themes of women and nature into her poetry. One poem in which these themes appear is a piece titled “The Farmer’s Bride.” The poem first appeared in a periodical in 1912 and would become the poem that brought Mew to the public’s attention. It was this poem that introduced her to the great literary circles in London and the name of the poem would be adapted to also serve as the title of her first collection of poems. “The Farmer’s Bride” additionally deals with themes that place it into a cannon of memorable Ecofeminist literature.

The ecofeminist themes in “The Farmer’s Bride” manifest in several ways, first of which is the young girl’s connection to nature and animals. The subject of this poem is a young country girl who has just been married to an older man, who is the speaker. The speaker himself points out that she was “too young maybe” (2), and considering that the marriageable age at the turn of the 20th century was already much younger than it is now, she may have only been in her early or mid-teenage years. Instead of fulfills her duties as a wife, the young girl has retreated away from not only her husband, but all men: “So long as men-folk keep away. / ‘Not near, not near!’ her eyes beseech / When one of us comes within reach” (24-26). She also appears to be very afraid of her situation, and that she may be suffering from some level of stress or anxiety, “lying awake with her wide brown stare” (13) when she should have been asleep. In place of her desire to have connections to men, she has formed relationships with the animals and the nature around her. When she ran away, she was found “‘Out ‘mong the sheep’ (10) and she is “happy enough to chat and play / with birds and rabbits and such as they” (22-23). On a more literal level, considering how young she is, she may have been traumatized by marriage and her retreat and companionship with animals can be interpreted as a coping mechanism. Children and teenagers
often have a stronger and more pure relationship to animals and nature, as they have not yet been taught by society to degrade and devalue both the former and the latter. She really does appear to have a special connection with nature, as the speaker describes that “the women say that beasts in stall / look around like children at her call. / I’ve hardly heard her speak at all” (27-29).

In addition to her retreat and trust in nature, the young girl herself exhibits qualities reminiscent of nature and animals. She is described by the speaker as “flying like a hare” (15), doing house work “like a mouse” (21), she is “straight and slight as a young larch tree” (31) and “sweet as the first wild violets” (32). Through these descriptions, the young girl starts to make the transformation from simply having a connection to nature to actually being apart of nature itself. The idea that the girl is herself a part of nature is one of the central ecofeminist themes in this piece. The way in which Mew takes her imagery one step further (not only is the girl connected with nature and animals, but she is like them) is a progressive ecofeminist technique for her time period. The ways in which the girl is like nature serves also as a device in amplify the ways in which she is different or separate from the men. In this way, the reader comes to understand that if the girl is like nature, and she is unlike the men, then the men are the ones who are estranged and separated from nature. One possible interpretation could be that this is a commentary on the unnatural state of child marriage; that this man-made tradition goes against the natural progression and tendencies of a girl child, who should be allowed to spend her years growing up in the company of animals and flowers, not grown men.

Finally, this poem exhibits a third major theme of ecofeminist poetry: nature as an escape from sexual violence and the male gaze. The young girl is described by the speaker quite explicitly as having run away from her husband and their home into nature. She clearly feels
uncomfortable. unwanted or unsafe in this home, feelings which cause her to take refuge in nature. The speaker explains:

so over seven-acre field and up-along across the down /

We chased her, flying like a hare /

Before out lanterns. To Church-Town /

All in a shiver and a scare /

We caught her” (14-18).

When the men did “catch” her, she was with the sheep. This young girl clearly views nature as a safer place for herself as opposed to the home in which she has been placed, most likely against her will. This action of fleeing into nature, in search of feminine solace, by such a young girl suggests that there may be some kind of inherent understanding of the connections and parallel oppressions experienced by women, nature and animals. Whether this is true or not, the young girl in this poem becomes part of a larger narrative of women fleeing patriarchal domination, be it marriage, the male gaze, or sexual violence, into nature and finding solace in feminine companionship.

Looking forward to about fifty years into the future, one of the most prolific and well known modern writers is born: Maya Angelou. Born in St. Louis, Angelou was more than a writer, she was an activist and a revolutionary. Through both her poetry and her memoirs, she wrote openly and fearlessly about her experiences with sexual violence and racial injustice. Today when people think of the struggle both for women’s rights and racial equality, her words echo in our heads. One such poem that has become an anthem for many women, especially women of color, is “Still I Rise.” Considering that this poem has become one that is familiar and
dear to many feminist activists, there is importance in providing an ecofeminist analysis of the piece.

While “Still I Rise” may be seen for the most part as addressing women’s empowerment, or even as sexual liberation, there is an element that harkens back to the long standing tradition of ecofeminist poetry. The women in this poem is consistently described using images of nature. The speaker reveals, “You may trod me in the very dirt / But still, like dust, I’ll rise” (3-4) and that “You may kill me with your hatefulness, / But still, like air, I’ll rise” (23-24). This woman, who is constantly being pushed down by an outside force, appears to be summoning the qualities of the elements to gain the strength to rise after each setback. While this differs from the narrative that has been presented about ecofeminist poetry up until this point, she may not be retreating into nature for solace and protection, but she is turning to nature as an example on how to rise and rise again in the face of patriarchal domination. To add to this interpretation of the evolving narrative, it may seem as though the speaker no longer needs to retreat into nature. She is now able to embrace and take on the qualities of nature, and use them to rise above patriarchal domination and the male gaze.

Looking back to Carolyn Merchant and her timeline of the increasing degradation of women and nature in *The Death of Nature*, another layer of the ecofeminist theme can be uncovered in “Still I Rise”. The speaker in the poem makes several allusions to resources that require some of the most invasive procedures to obtain: “’Ca’se I walk like I’ve got oil wells / pumping in my living room” (7-8), “’Ca’se I laugh like I’ve got gold mines / Diggin’ in my own back yard” (19-20) and “Does it come as a surprise / That I dance like I’ve got diamonds / At the meeting of my thighs?” (27-28). Oil, gold and diamonds are all substances that require mining or
drilling deep into the earth. Merchant reminds readers that “the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century imagination perceived a direct correlation between mining and digging into the nooks and crannies of a woman’s body” and that “digging into the matrices and pickets of earth for metals was like mining the female flesh for pleasure” (39). The speaker drawing connections between herself and these substances is another way in which she is like or connected to the earth as mother. Additionally, she is taking these violations and injustices, and using them to her advantage. She is confident and can be interpreted as reclaiming her power over these injustices. Once again, the speaker is taking the more traditional Ecofeminist narrative and advancing upon it.

Finally, there is one line in Angelou’s poem that solidifies its identification as an ecofeminist work. The speaker reminds her audience that:

Just like moons and like suns,

With the certainty of tides,

Just like hopes springing high,

Still I’ll rise. (9-12)

If there is one key indication of the presence of ecofeminist themes in a literary work, it is allusions to the moon and the tides. These elements are so strongly tied to femininity, menstruation and notions of women’s sanity, that they are not easily disentangled. Once again, on her journey towards independence, self-love and an existence that rises above patriarchal domination, the speaker is summoning natural elements that are historically linked to the growing devaluation of both women and nature.
While some poets make the connection between the moon and femininity in a more subtle way, Marge Piercy does no such thing with her collection of poetry, *The Moon Is Always Female*. Cited as a feminist literary classic, this volume of poetry deals primarily with themes of activism and romantic relationships. In much the same way that Angelou does, Piercy brings ecofeminist themes into the context of contemporary women’s lives. The poet was born in Detroit in 1936, and is of Jewish heritage. Considering that her poetry so directly deals with both social and personal issues, Piercy seems an excellent poet through which to express the purpose of ecofeminist poetry in an activist’s life.

One such example comes early on in the collection. In “The Inside Chance” the speaker can be interpreted as comparing the phases of a relationship to the passing seasons. She laments that “Yesterday / the chickadees sang / fever, / fever, the mating song” (5-7) and subsequently that

Just one week ago a blizzard
roared for two days.
Ice weeps in the road.
Yet spring hides
in the snow. (14-18)

Making the connection between interpersonal relationships and the passing of the seasons, the speaker is revisiting the connection between women and nature. At the same time, this piece can be interpreted as modernizing the bond between women and nature. Commonly, contemporary theorists have a tendency to see ecofeminism as essentializing. This means that it is seen as an oversimplification of women to say that women have a unique bond with nature and animals. On the contrary, the speaker in this poem can be read as presenting an alternative, yet equally
contemporary view, of the way that many women can feel in tune with nature due to parallel oppressions.

The speaker in the poem appears to be taking comfort in the cycles of nature and what they can mean for the phases of life. She writes that:

inside the fallen brown
apple the seed is alive.

Freeze and thaw, freeze
and thaw. (31-34)

This acceptance takes readers back to Maya Angelou and the manner in which her speaker was seeping with confidence. These speakers can be read as representing a more contemporary genre of ecofeminist poetry. While earlier poets utilized their connection with nature as a way to seek refuge, more contemporary writers are able to take that connection and use it to make sense of the world rather than retreating from it. The women and activists reading this poetry can connect not only on the level of connecting with nature, but also can know that this connection brings confidence. The speaker in this poems shows her readers a path on which nature can inform them about life, love and relationships, and this is really just another way of taking refuge in nature.

In this collection, Marge Piercy also touches on a topic concerning ecofeminism and animals. This paper has focused thus far primarily on the parallel oppressions that women and nature experience, and animals are clearly a central element of nature. It is not even remotely a stretch to say that there are parallels to be drawn between the ways in which the bodies of animals and women are consumed. While in western culture we tend to believe that we have a right to the consumption of animals, there is a similar belief that women's bodies are at the
disposal of the male gaze and its objectification. Carol J. Adams draws this link through her concept of the "absent referent" in her work *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory*. This theory refers to the idea that "just as dead bodies are absent from our language about meat, in descriptions of cultural violence women are also often the absent referent" (22). Just as we refrain from referencing the dead bodies of animals, we also stray away from explicitly talking about sexual violence and its perpetrators. We use phrases like "battered women" which puts the focus on the victim, as though she by her own will became battered. In this way, and in many others, violence against and consumption of the bodies or women and animals become intricately intertwined.

Adams pushes this argument further with the idea that violence against both women and animals become culturally acceptable through the process of "objectification, fragmentation, and consumption" (27). Adams describes this as "parallel trajectories: the common oppressions of women and animals, and the problems of metaphor and the absent referent" (27). First, the objectification "permits an oppressor to view another being as an object...the rape of women that denies women freedom to say no, or the butchering of animals that converts animals from living breathing beings into dead objects" (27). Fragmentation happens literally when we sell animals by the body part, and it happens more figuratively to women in the realm of marketing where we often see images of just legs or just breasts, not the entire woman. Finally, Adams describes consumption as "the fulfillment of oppression, the annihilation of will, of separate identity" (27). Through this process, it is clear that the treatment of animals is not only an ecofeminist issue, but that it is very much connected to the treatment of contemporary women. In this light, it seems
only natural that the parallels between women and animals would be present in Piercy’s collection.

In this piece, “The Ordinary Gauntlet”, a woman comes into bloom just as the month of May does: “In May when the first warm days / open like peonies, the coat, / the jacket stay home” (1-3). This is a woman, like any other, enjoying a spring day until this vision is violently changed by the presence of sexually charged violence. As she walks, she is “impaled / on shish-kabob stares, / slobbering invitations” (5-7). Straight away, there is a theme of meat imagery. In the midst of the speaker’s spring joy, she is met with the ever present threats and stares of men harassing her on the street. This is highly representative of Carol J. Adams’ stage of objectification. Through street harassment, the intent is to take away the agency and individuality of this woman. The speaker goes on to describe that:

I, red meat, cunt
on the hoof, trade insult for insult,
balance fear on coiled rage. (18-21)

Here, she herself recognizes that in the eyes of these men, she is meat. She is enraged, she meets their insults with her own, but underlying it all is fear.

This potent description of being objectified by insistent street harassment has an impact that is two-fold: it works to draw attention to the common experiences and oppressions of women and animals, while it also denotes an experience that is common amongst many female-bodied people. The former is illuminated under the light of Adams’ stage of objectification. The latter, is the culminating theme of the poem. The speaker laments:
I grimace, I trot.
Put on my ugliest clothes, layer over sweltering layer.
Sprint scowling and still / they prance in ugly numbers. (13-17)

Despite the best efforts of the speaker, she has put on her meanest face and as many layers as she could, attempting to smother both her joy and her body. Despite this, the harassment persists.

The poet can be read as drawing attention to the shaming tendencies of our society in this passage. Could she have done something differently, worn something differently? It is pointed out here that even when she changed herself, the harassment did not end. At the end of this piece, there is a wish. The speaker declares:

On the first warm day
let me shoot up twelve
feet tall. Or grow
a hide armored as an
alligator. Then I would
relish the mild air,
I would stroll, my jagged
fangs glinting in
a real broad smile. (31-39)

Expressed here is the sentiment that if only women could be twelve feet tall, or have the hide of the alligator, maybe we could enjoy that spring day, and smile widely, without the threat of harassment: the threat of being seen, treated and objectified as meat. The prevalence of the common oppressions between women and animals is so widespread, that it is almost inescapable.
While Piercy may not be proposing any kind of escape into nature or feminine utopia in this piece, she still offers comfort to the women experiencing violence of this kind. The comfort can be found in the common experience of women and animals. This is why support groups and consciousness raising groups have in many cases been the backbone of the second and third way feminist movements: oftentimes just knowing that you are now alone in your experiences is enough to ignite anger or passion. Piercy uses ecofeminist themes in her poems not as a means of escape, but rather as a means to embolden women and to point out where some of their common experiences lie.

**Destroy the Patriarchy, Save the Planet: Conclusion**

There is a clear trajectory that can be seen in ecofeminist poetry. Whereas Lanyer, Mew and Farrokhzad may have needed nature to act as a hiding place from patriarchy and sexual violence, these more contemporary poets are taking their connection to nature and facing those common oppressive forces. What modern day feminist activists can take away from this, is that while women and nature do face parallel oppressions, and nature can be a place to seek solace in a feminine utopia, there is no need to hide anymore. We as women and feminist activists have moved on from the world that Aemilia Lanyer lived in, where it was often safer to seek the company of women and nature and take refuge there, to a world where we have many more opportunities to take our activism and advocacy into the public. While there is not as much of a need to hide, feminist activists can still take the solidarity that they have with nature, and all of the strengths of nature and animals into their very public battles.
In January of 2017, it is estimated that upwards of 4.8 million people marched for women's rights worldwide (Women's March on Washington). These were people marching for equal pay, reproductive justice, improved maternity leave and many other issues. Clearly, women's rights activists are needed now more than ever. Subsequently, activists and advocates are needed. Regardless of the area in which individuals are involved in the feminist fight, feeling healthy and whole is a crucial key to keeping up that fight. The saying goes, you cannot pour from your cup if it is empty, you cannot give to others if you are empty. There are endless ways to engage with self-care and to insure that your cup is full. What this paper proposes is that ecofeminist poetry, the poems discussed and so many more, can serve as just one of these many methods of self-care. For some, it could be the bond that results from realizing common oppressions that can be empowering. For others, it can be recognizing nature as an escape from the male gaze and sexual violence, or even as a metaphor for female companionship that can be comforting. Readers could even find that their newfound connection with nature emboldens and empowers them in their everyday battles. In this way, while many may see the social parallels between women and nature as essentializing, one can choose for it to be empowering. In the end, ecofeminism, just like feminism, is centered around each woman finding what is empowering for herself.
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https://www.womensmarch.com/sisters


