

INSIGHTS

Gender queering Mother Earth

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One day not long ago I was practising a specialized form of breath work which is designed to harmonize masculine and feminine energies. The belief system of all the traditions I've studied and taught for many years in my seminars on Pelvic Heart Integration, is that feminine energy is breathed up from the Earth and into the feet and the pelvis, while masculine energy is breathed down from above, into the heart or the crown of the head. Suddenly, I realized I was instinctively breathing masculine energy into my feet and pelvis and it felt so right. In that moment, the thought struck me like a thunderbolt: What if Earth, what if Nature herself, was not mother, not even female, but male, or more likely both? What if Mother Earth and Father Earth were queer polyamorous lovers engaged in Hieros Gamos, Sacred Union, not only with extraterrestrial beings, or humans, but within themselves and with each other?

While the queer deconstruction of gender informs us that we can find both feminine and masculine qualities almost anywhere we look; in terms of both our personal identities and our cultural predispositions, gender plays a significant role. Despite the essentialist critique, historically most cultures have clear, if cross culturally inconsistent, expectations for gender roles and have seen certain natural formations as possessing special powers, either phallic or womb-like. For me, what's important is not the argument about the validity of gender as a concept but rather becoming aware of the assumptions our culture has made about the gender of our planet and noticing the implications of this world view. Perhaps gender

queering Mother Earth is a key not only to our ecopsychological health, but to our very survival!

Modern psychology has accepted for at least half a century that health results from a combination of those traits considered feminine and those considered masculine. Historically, feminism has been a strong voice for the acceptance of traditionally masculine behaviors and roles for women, while advocating for the expansion of our concept of divinity to include Goddess as well as God. Meanwhile, the men's movement has encouraged men to reclaim their so-called feminine attributes, and queer theory has informed us that the very concept of gender is essentialist, that is, socially constructed and artificially confining.

Designations of gendered qualities are always somewhat arbitrary, particularly when we extend our labels beyond the genitals themselves. Genetic variations and surgical interventions can make even this seemingly straightforward categorization of male and female parts ambiguous at times, but despite occasional complexities, sexing of biological life forms is a common endeavor and one not dependent upon genitalia. In the plant kingdom it's not uncommon for an individual to be both male and female. Papayas, for example, can be either male, female, or hermaphrodites. The hermaphrodites are, of course, the tastiest and most desirable. Gender anomalies also occur in the animal kingdom. For example, among parrotfish, if the group loses its solitary male, the most dominant female will gradually transform into a male.

In light of all this gender bending, I find it extraordinary that Mother Earth and Mother Nature are so consistently viewed as female. Once we depart our home planet, gender gets a lot more variable. To this day, the ancient Tantric tradition of India considers the moon as masculine and the sun as feminine, and similar reversals of the Greco-Latin convention of a masculine sun and feminine moon are found in many cultures. But here on planet Earth, even several centuries into our (Western) scientific, secular paradigm, we are taught that Father Sky or God resides in the Heavens while Mother Earth nurtures our bodies by supplying us with food, shelter, petroleum, precious metals, and all manner of consumer goods.

This mythical marriage of Earth Mother and Sky Father is often attributed to the creation myths of "primitive people" but one day I began to wonder – has it always been so? If, as Thomas Berry, asserts, science is giving us a new intimacy with the Earth, why are we still wedded to the notion of Earth as Mother?

Feminist writers such as Susan Griffin (*Women and nature*, 1979) have written brilliantly about the connection between the subjugation of women and the rape of the land and the land's resources under patriarchy. What if this parallel between disrespectful attitudes toward women and disrespect for Nature is not merely a metaphor? What if the pervasive view of Earth as female is a distortion of ancient knowledge? What if what we are dealing with is not just a case of mistaken identity, of essentialist fallacy, or dualistic thinking, but is actually a root cause of the pillaging and objectification of the Earth? Could assigning a feminine gender to Earth and Nature be a critical strategy in the rationalization for separating ourselves from the Nature, and exploiting the Earth? Have we been persuaded that Earth is something less than sacred because she is female? What are the implications of viewing Earth as exclusively female? Did eliminating Father Earth from our collective consciousness create a vacuum for humans to rush in, to "husband" the earth – which in the consciousness of the time equated to ownership, control, and domination?

If Nature had been seen for the last millennium as the home of the stern, judgmental, and punitive Father God, would humans have dared to disrespect him? Dared to rip his treasures from his belly, dared to pollute his waters and carelessly destroy his forests? What if we believed in a Mother Sky Goddess who made humans from the clay of Father Earth, infusing them with the life force of her breath? Would patriarchy be so blasé about his destruction?

When feminist writers, such as Merlin Stone, whose 1976 book, *When God was a woman* dared to propose that God includes the Divine Feminine, many found this notion blasphemous. Others knew, at least sub-consciously, that God has no gender, but had never heard this spoken aloud. At the time it was a very radical notion.

It is still quite radical to propose, as sexecologists Annie Sprinkle and Beth Stephens have done, that Earth is not Mother but rather Lover. Nevertheless, coming as it does from queer activists and Lesbian partners, Sprinkle and Stephen's shift from Mother Earth to Lover Earth does not necessarily imply a gender change.

All but the most rigid fundamentalists have relinquished the idea that God is exclusively masculine. The women's spirituality movement has largely succeeded in revisioning Spirit as androgynous. It's now widely accepted that at one time in

our evolution the Goddess, in her many guises, was indeed the primary deity. She was not just an earth goddess or love goddess but also Queen of Heaven, Lady of the Evening Star, Goddess of the Hunt, and even Goddess of the Sun in ancient Japan. And yet, the habit of thinking of Earth and Nature as exclusively female persists. Mother Earth, Mother Nature – in the Western world, these archetypal images are strongly imprinted upon our collective psyches and they have helped shape a dysfunctional relationship with the natural world.

I specify Western world because I recently stumbled upon the elusive evidence my intuition told me must be there if only I could trace the image of earth back far enough into pre-history, prior to any influence or interpretation by the civilized world. I was leading a sexuality seminar in Sydney, Australia and the mostly queer audience went ballistic when I used the terms feminine and masculine to refer to a basic polarity. Hoping to re-establish rapport I began talking about my research into the projection of an exclusively feminine identity onto the earth and was quickly informed by several anthropology graduate students in the group that among the aboriginal peoples of Australia whose culture and oral tradition can be traced back over 30,000 years, Earth and Nature are clearly understood to be both masculine and feminine.

Encouraged by this validation of my hunch that the identities of Mother Earth and Father Sky were relatively recent inventions, I was electrified when the following month a student at another seminar in Sedona, Arizona referred to Father Earth. When I mentioned my interest in this designation, she brought me a pile of books on ancient Egyptian mythology. It seems that Geb, who is often shown reclining beneath his sister-wife, the sky goddess Nut, was a nurturing god of the earth and fertility. He was typically colored green or had plants growing out of his body and was sometimes portrayed as ithyphallic. In addition to being seen as the source of life, he was also god of the underworld – ruler of everything in the earth – minerals, precious stones, and the souls of the dead - as well as the plants and animals sustained on his surface. Unlike the European pagans' Green Man, Geb's power was impressive and not entirely beneficent – earthquakes were said to be caused by his laughter, he was hereditary chief of the gods, and kept the souls of the damned imprisoned in his bowels.

Several sources mention that Geb was later associated with the Titan god Kronos, father of Zeus and Aphrodite. Kronos was said to be the son of the Earth Goddess

Gaia and Sky God Uranus. Somewhere between ancient Egypt and ancient Greece, Earth's gender changed, roughly corresponding to the rise of patriarchy. Hints of Kronos' origin can be found in his association with the scythe and with the Athenian harvest festival, but following his later association with the Roman god Saturn, Kronos is remembered today not as a fertile and nurturing Earth Father but as an aging Father Time.

Research has shown that the linguistic gender of nouns strongly affects how people perceive the world. Moreover, as cultural historian Thomas Berry and cosmologist Brian Swimme (*The universe story*, 1994) have noted, our creation stories shape our relationships with the natural world. Perhaps it's time for a new mythology! The Gaia Hypothesis is a step in the right direction, and the next step may be to re-invent Gaia as genderqueer. I'm eager to trace this transgender transformational journey back into the shadows of prehistory and forward into a sustainable future.

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