

Marti Kheel Remembered (1948–2011)

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In the 1970s, philosophers began wondering whether we needed a new, an environmental ethic.¹ Most of the people publishing in the new area of environmental philosophy were men, but there were a few women, one of whom—Marti Kheel—challenged dominant trends in environmental philosophy and animal ethics. Marti wasn't a professional philosopher; she was a bold, bright feminist scholar and activist who had the courage to take on the men who were tussling with each other to have their preferred theories of our obligations to nature take hold. In 1985, she published a groundbreaking article entitled "The Liberation of Nature: A Circular Affair" in which she argued against the dualistic thinking that "sees the world in terms of static polarities" (Kheel 1985, 136). In its stead she proposed a type of holism, distinct from the holism that was becoming common in environmental ethics that placed greater value on the whole ecosystem or entire species rather than on recognizing the significance of individual animals. Marti's holism "perceives nature as comprising individual beings that are part of a dynamic web of interconnections in which feeling, emotions, and inclinations play an integral role" (141).

Her appeal to "feeling, emotion, and inclinations" led a number of feminist thinkers, myself included, to question forcefully the rationalist terms in which many of the arguments about our ethical commitments to the more than human world were couched. Marti highlighted the ways that even those who purported to be engaging exclusively in rational arguments often appeal to intuitions (which are not always rational), and she suggested that many rational arguments were used in "emotionally selective ways." For example, taking the arguments being made in Leopoldian-inspired environmental philosophy to their logical conclusions would suggest that the human species, in our inevitable disruptions of the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community, should become extinct. Yet none of the proponents of this philosophy take reason *that far*. Rather than seeing oppositions between humans and the rest of the natural world, Marti argued that when we truly perceive ourselves (and perception draws on both reason and emotion) as a part of nature we become open to wonder and more sensitive to the profound harms we are causing to the planet and all of its inhabitants.

Marti was at the forefront of ecofeminist ethics and practice, though the full statement of her view wasn't published until 2008. In *Nature Ethics: An Ecofeminist Perspective* she engages with four holist thinkers—Theodore Roosevelt, Aldo Leopold, Holmes Rolston, and Warwick Fox—and draws insightful connections between them by revealing the ways in which, though quite distinct, each idealizes transcendence from the natural world. This longing for transcendence is canonically masculinist, and Marti characterizes it as a fixation on abstract unities that relegates particular pains, joys, interests, and relationships to the background. By denying individuality and ultimately difference, each of these male thinkers overtly or covertly endorses the sacrifice of women, animals, and nature to achieve their ideological aspirations. In contrast, Marti situates nature ethics in our capacity for empathy and care for others and advocates a nonviolent, emotionally responsive holism.

Marti, like many ecofeminists, was accused of being essentialist about women's emotional connection to animals or about women being closer to nature, and she worked to correct such erroneous characterizations. Much like her critique of rationalist thought in which she noted unacknowledged appeals to emotion, she criticized those who thought ecofeminists were essentializing by pointing out that they may be engaging in a form of essentialism themselves. "Often descriptive analyses of the historical treatment of women and nature under patriarchal society are mistaken for universal or ontological claims. Although the original fears that fueled the early essentialist critiques are legitimate and important, the heightened state of surveillance directed toward essentialism seems to have lost sight of the original intent underlying the critiques" (Kheel 2008, 9). Women are not inherently closer to nature or essentially emotionally drawn to other animals, but women have been variously positioned that way and as a result of their standpoint have situated insights to offer. Rather than reject affect, embodiment, and relationships in a longing for transcendence, Marti, using a strategy familiar within feminist scholarship, turned to these traditionally devalued features of our lives to re-examine our place in the more than human world with a desire to contribute to making a deep and lasting change.

Marti Kheel was an engaged scholar. Her friends Batya Bauman and Carol Adams reminded me of the history of Feminist for Animal Rights (FAR) that she cofounded in the early 1980s. It began with a small study group in which the members formulated the philosophical and theoretical underpinnings for the organization. FAR situated itself on the boundary between the animal liberation movement and the feminist movement—reaching out to activists to highlight the connections between these movements, exploring sexist images and behaviors in the animal rights movement and the presumption in the feminist movement that animals are ours to use and consume. Before any state passed legislation to incorporate companion animals in orders of protection for battered women, before humane and animal advocacy organizations recognized the

connection between harm to other animals and domestic violence, FAR developed a program of foster care for companion animals of battered women so that the women could safely leave their batterers without worrying about the abuse or death of their animal companions. And Marti, along with others, regularly sponsored conversations at conferences and events so that women could discuss their experiences of marginalization and abuse at the hands of other activists.

As one of the first people to draw critical connections among the oppression, exploitation, and abuse of women, other animals, and the rest of nature, Marti Kheel paved the way for the very possibility of feminist animal studies. I would have relished a conversation with my friend about the content of this special issue; instead, in grief but with hope, we dedicate it to her vision and her memory.



Figure 1 Marti Kheel and Carol Adams at the first March on Washington for Animals, 1990. Photo by Bruce A. Buchanan.

NOTE

1. This is a reference to Richard Routley's paper to which his then wife, Val Plumwood, no doubt contributed (Routley 1973). In addition to Val Plumwood, Australian ecofeminist Ariel Salleh was also an early pioneer.

REFERENCES

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