

# Sustainable Cultures – Cultures of Sustainability

## BACKGROUND PAPER 9

by

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### **Sustainable Cultures of Life and Gift Circulation—a New Model for the Green/Postcolonial Restructuring of Europe?**

*The ultimate result of unchecked, terminal patriarchy will be ecological catastrophe or nuclear holocaust. Petra Kelly<sup>1</sup>*

The purpose of this article is to introduce a new matrix of intercultural knowledge circulation and activism centered on archaic and modern gift economies. The vision emerges from the coming-together of several emerging trends within critical white studies, green feminism and postcolonialism.<sup>1</sup> I foster this kind of “hemispheric cross-talk” across disciplinary and ethnocultural boundaries as I find them particularly appropriate and urgent at a moment when Europe is seeking to re-invent itself as a greener and more transnational site of cultural interactions. On the other hand, the short-sighted, profit-motivated ethos of neoliberal competitiveness, productivity and the near-religious obsession with economic has led to the kinds ecosocially unsustainable effects that require compensatory counter-movements, an alternative ethos of solidarity economics and ecological visions.

The theoretical starting point of this article is that within the collective articulation of the conditions that might help bring about a greener and more socially just world, it is not enough to invent green technologies and fund more business-oriented solutions. Together with many postcolonial, Indigenous and non-Indigenous feminist scholars and activists, I put more faith in long-term transformative politics aimed at changing the prevailing asymmetrical power relations and the eurocentered, dissociated scientific paradigms that are themselves an element in the mastery over nature, women and other vulnerable groups. As my own contribution to this debate and to more ecologically, socially, economically, culturally and biologically sustainable engaged research, I will make more visible the exchange economy in its various forms, a logic of master/slave relations that I find at the roots of the neoliberal hegemonic discourse. I will contrast this legacy of eurocentered epistemology, knowledge systems, science and social attitudes with another, submerged but pivotal economic and philosophical logic, the gift economy. Mary Condren (2003; Kailo 2008) refers to societies with a relatively peace- and balance –oriented, ecosocially responsible attitudes and a life-oriented imaginary as “cultures of life” rather than of “death and sacrifice” (with the latter reflecting patriarchal, economically and in terms of religion fundamentalist societies, past and present).

#### **The gift economy**

The matrix of attitudes, practices, rituals and ideas about social arrangements that is referred to now as the feminist Gift Economy (Vaughan 1997, 2000, 2004, 2007), the Give Back philosophy (Caffyn 1994?), the Gift Imaginary (Kailo 2008) or the Indigenous Gift Economy/episteme

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<sup>1</sup> Qtd. in Hedström, 2007.

(Kuokkanen 2007) has emerged recently as an inspiring, hope-enhancing philosophy and ethos of ecoethical community-building relations. The paradigm offers an alternative logic for the European identity and world view while also promising to bring together both Indigenous and non-indigenous “bad subjects” of colonial politics, united by a shared agenda of resistance, even an imaginary community of cross-cultural visionmakers. An artificially created/imposed discourse of neoliberalism and global citizenship is a predatory neo-colonial project and must be opposed if we are serious about saving the conditions of cultures of life (Condren 2003; Kailo 2008), of the very planet: this is possible, however, only if a broad enough critical mass of activists and scholars join forces in providing more viable alternative visions for the planet’s future. I propose the gift paradigm as one such matrix/umbrella concept of revision and as an imaginary yet tangible site for the articulation of ecosocially more sustainable ways of living. Together with other advocates of this matrix of care-oriented worldviews, I find it based on sounder principles of social arrangements and collective representations than the predatory economic fundamentalisms that have dominated patriarchal economics in their contingent, situated, historically specific variations. The anthropocentric and hetero/sexist, blatantly anti-ecological economics institutionalized by Western academic power enclaves have come, increasingly, to reflect an effort to naturalize a competitive and production rationalistic, individualistic *homo economicus*, an aggressive, self-interested, short-sighted, emotionally distant and irresponsible human norm that certainly does not capture the essence of all humans (Korten 1996; Vaughan 2007).

I begin by defining the core of the European corporate identity and proceed thereafter to the description of the kinds of peripheral counter-visions that are emerging in both ecofeminist, Native Canadian and Sami Indigenous scholarship—the Gift imaginary. I believe that we can draw upon both western and Indigenous world views and knowledge systems at the border space of new global cartographies. They can create the kind of synergy of conceptions of social relations, ecology and technology that help bring about a more sustainable and responsible conception of Europe’s future.

### **The Neoliberal Europe**

The current hegemonic discourse, referred to as neoconservatism/neoliberalism is a reproduction of the former colonial discourses and sets of imperial practices from which postcolonial theories seek to emancipate. Rather than advancing democratic processes, it can be seen to have exarcebated various forms of androcentric fundamentalisms with class, gender, ethnicity and other intersectional factors adding to the effects of the politics of othering. The neoliberal forces are seeking to replace the solidarity-based universal welfare systems of Europe with an American-style corpocratic culture of competition and individualized responsibility. It emphasizes individual accountability rather than group responsibilities and devalues, even dismantles the strong state as the guarantor of the fair and egalitarian treatment of citizens. By focusing on the individual’s burden of self-care, it is releasing not only the state but corporations and many other constituents of society from a care-based and solidarity-oriented set of responsibilities towards the more vulnerable members of society. Nothing could be more blatantly anti-egalitarian than the tacit assumption that women, particularly migrant women, as one case in point, enjoy the same equal opportunities to make it in the world as men and elites. As long as women are coerced through economic, political, psychological, educational or religious manipulation, conditioning and powers to shoulder the main responsibility for care work (of children, the elderly, the sick) as part of an asymmetrical sex/gender system, they are not on level playing field in the competition society. On the contrary, they are the buffers of multinational corporations that build their competitive edge and cost-saving capital accumulation on the backs of these vulnerable groups lacking the power of negotiation (Wichterich 2002). As long as the social, pension-related and employment-relevant costs of parenting fall predominantly on women’s shoulders, they do not share the structural, institutional and attitudinal conditions of equality with men. Class, ethnicity, religion, age, geographic residence and a host of other variables impact further on the extent to which women fall short of the illusion of “equal possibilities.”

Also, the notion cherished in eurocentered worldviews and ideologies—autonomous individuality without strings attached—is a totally misleading gendered misnomer. Women and children cannot avoid being dependent on some sort of social or family-based support and men who deny their own dependency on women's emotional, domestic, and other care work are in denial of their privileges and gendered status. Gender relations are not symmetrical and complementary in capitalist societies, even though in cultures of life and abundance, in gift economies, the division of labor did not serve to create a system of hierarchical difference with gendered modes of dependency (Göttner-Abendroth 2007; Eikjok 2000, Gunn Allen 1986). From the point of view of the gift economy, we are all dependent, furthermore, on the free gifts of nature (animals, gas, oil, water, air etcetera). In the old days, those living in gift economies honored and organized feasts to give back to the spirits and guardians of the animals their livelihood depended on (Kailo 2008). The gift relations ensured that people did not take more from nature than was necessary to ensure survival, just as lions do not kill all lambs in their vicinity to accumulate them, but kill what they need to eat. The gift economies had built-in checks against overuse of collective resources—something that cultures of life, mostly eurocentered peoples alienated from their indigenous and ecological roots do well to reconnect with. Hyde (1983) notes that the first-fruits ceremony and its equivalents establish a gift relationship with nature, a formal give-and-take that acknowledges our participation in, and dependence upon it. A most relevant point for green postcolonialism is that gift exchange brings with it, therefore, a built-in check on the destruction of its objects.

Numerous Indigenous scholars and activists have exposed the sweet-and-sour, but mostly sour effects of neoliberalism in terms of increased monoculture, predatory politics regarding Indigenous livelihoods, economic self-determination (Adelkarim-Chikh 2007; Abrahams 2007; Antrobus 2007; Armstrong 1995; Eikjok 2000; Jimenez 2007)-- effects reflected in privatization, biopiracy (Shiva 1993) and the appropriation even of sacred sites for commercial exploitation (Kuokkanen & Riihijärvi 2005; LaDuke 1997; Trask 2007). Ecological sustainability and social rights—although present in rhetorical speeches—have both been submitted to the higher goal of competitiveness, threatening the ecosocial balance of the world at large.

Native North American theorists Yvonne Dion-Buffalo and John Mohawk outline three choices which colonized peoples have in response to colonization in their article "Thoughts from an autochthonous center" (1994, 33-35). They can become "good subjects" of the colonizer's discourse, accepting the rules of law and morals without much question. Second, colonized peoples can be "bad subjects," i.e., they have been subjected to alien rules but they revolt within the precepts of those rules. Third, they can be "non-subjects", acting and thinking around discourses far removed from and unintelligible to the West. The distinctions Dion-Buffalo and Mohawk make between good, bad and non-subjects is useful to the extent that such identity or subject positions can also be applied to non-Indigenous people with their divergent attitudes towards modernity, postmodernity and today—neoliberalist corporocracy. Jurgen Kremer is a psychoanalyst/theorist who has specialized in Indigenous theories and the preconditions of respectful intercultural relations, among them ways of transformation towards healing epistemologies.<sup>ii</sup> The following table represents Kremer's extension of Mohawk's and Dion-Buffalo's tripartite categories of good, bad and non-subjects and modernity (Kremer 2008) and captures what many Indigenous scholars also identify as the shifts of values among their own groups:

**OPPOSING PAIR –  
THIRD PROCESS  
EUROCENTERED INDIGENOUS      PROCESS**

MODERN CONSCIOUSNESS	CRITIQUES OF MODERN CONSCIOUSNESS	RECOVERED INDIGENOUS CONSCIOUSNESS	INDIGENOUS CONSCIOUSNESS
good subject	bad subject	developing non-subject	non-subject
		regaining conscious participation	conscious participation
		re-contextualizing truths and Truth locally & historically	locally & narratively contextualized truths and Truth
his-story	her-stories Story revealed as his-stories	recovering female aspects of stories; remembering multiformous gender identities	multiply engendered stories: metamorphoses, spirit marriages
objective reality	narrative realities	recovering ancestral narrative realities & anchoring them in present ecology & historical moment	communally & locally anchored narrative realities
rationality	recovery of reasonableness	reasonableness	reasonableness
imperial self	non-imperial self	re-connecting self	connected self
individualism	individualism	intentional communities	natural communities
progress	progress (albeit questioned in appearance)	linearity struggling for balance	balance
linearity	variegated linearity	cyclical linearity	cyclical linearity
dissociation	suffering from dissociation	recovering participation	participation
colonialism	post-colonialism	decolonization	beside, outside & inside of colonization

Kremer’s example of his self-reflexive and ecoethical stance is most relevant for this article, and corresponds to a great extent with what North American Indigenous theorists have written about tensions between white and Indigenous science.<sup>iii</sup> Kremer has defined the evolutionary trajectory of the so-called civilizing process as dissociative schismogenesis (Kremer 1997, 10-11) meaning that: “People of European descent or people who have entered the eurocentered process of consciousness have split themselves off from this ongoing interaction of place, ancestry, animals, plants, spirit(s), community, story, ceremony, cycles of life, and cycles of the seasons and ages. This dissociation has created a conceptualization of social evolution, in which a major shift has occurred from prehistory to history, from oral tradition to writing civilization, from the immanent presence of spirit(s) to the transcendence of god(s)” (2008).

Kremer claims that the European Enlightenment Philosophy put the final touches on the development of a non-participatory, dissociative mind process, the enthronement of linear causality, and the imperial grasping of the appearances of reality in a globalizing quantitative reduction (presumably resulting in the control of what is conceived of as objective reality itself) (Kremer 2008). Kremer emphasizes that all peoples have (pre-patriarchal) indigenous roots the recovery of which might at this historical juncture bring about ecologically important effects, more than even the various postmodern strands are able to see or willing to admit. Epistemic violence and harassment, as well as the academic silencing of non-european paradigms, world views and epistemes (Kuokkanen 2007) have much to do with the roots of the ecological crises and the mastery over nature. They have served to ensure that no other voices, perspectives on life, truths or visions can be accommodated, let alone discussed in the epistemic enclaves of power. Admittedly, critical white studies have likewise not addressed the above dimensions of Europeanness which tends to be restricted to colonial or androcentric power relations.

What we need to address in decolonizing philosophies reflecting the mastery over nature, in particular, is the institutional, societal, civilizational or philosophic eurocentrism—and I add, particularly epistemic eurocentrism (Cf. Harding 1998, 13). We can only build an ecosocially viable future with an in-built openness to all ethnocultural knowledge and wisdom, i.e. the recognition of the survival value of diversity rather than monoculture and monoacculturation in their nefarious forms. Civilizational or philosophic eurocentrism occurs according to Harding when the beliefs and practices at issue are held by entire “civilizations” over large periods of history, not just by one of their subcultures. These are the most difficult to identify because they structure and give meaning to such apparently seamless expanses of history, common sense, and daily life that it is hard for members of such “civilizations” to even imagine taking a position that is outside them. “The scientific worldview,” the modern worldview,” the Christian, Judaic, Islamic, Ancient Greek, or Chinese worldview provide examples of such widespread and long-term belief systems within which, in spite of great diversity of many beliefs and practices over time and between subcultures, distinctive shared or continuing beliefs and practices nevertheless can be identified (Harding 1998, 13 ). Harding looks upon eurocentrism as itself a particular ethic, an ontology, and an epistemology (Harding 1998, 14). Kuokkanen reflects aspects of Kremer’s chart of “Indigenous recovered consciousness” to the extent that she identifies the differences between western and Indigenous philosophical discourses and their uses of the concept of epistemology: “In the former, epistemology is usually applied to denote a (theoretical) study of knowledge, while in the latter, the application is much wider; it is commonly used as a synonym for system of knowledge, way of thinking, worldview, traditional philosophy etc.” (Kuokkanen 2007, 85??). There is much evidence within both Native Canadian and Sami theories that, indeed, indigeneity has more to do with the attitudes Kremer lists than with the “good subject” attitudes of Eurocentric scholars towards science and life (E.g. Nahanni 1993; Colorado 1998). In contrast with the more atomistic, bounded, individualistic tenets of eurocentered science and knowing,<sup>iv</sup> what however is the ecological effect of such non-european styles of knowing and thinking? For Kuokkanen, as for many other Indigenous scholars, the gift or give back paradigm is precisely the overarching, but not essentialist principle or logic that unites many Indigenous worldviews and practices (see also Armstrong 2007, Benally 2007, Muthien 2007, Maracle 1992). It is particularly useful and appropriate as a third process or way to unite the bad or non-subjects of neoliberalism, as Indigenous as well as non-indigenous people share important, even central aspects of such a worldview and logic.

### **The Gift economy as an intercultural paradigm of healing and non-gendered care provision**

Kremer includes the gift economy among the new paradigms providing the possibility of healing the splits created by the reified separation of the mind and the body, humans and animals, and all the other binaries serving to create hierarchical difference. Indeed, the initiator of the research/activist group, the International network of feminists for a Gift Economy, Genevieve Vaughan (1997, 2004) describes the gift economy as a submerged human logic of responding unilaterally to needs, of giving value to another, a form of rationality of care that has been made invisible by the masculated exchange economy and its focus on *homo economicus*, ego-oriented transactions and a metalogic

that does not value giving and the circulation of care.

What then does the third process—a resisterhood of non-subjects of neoliberalism—involve, in more concrete terms? I believe the gift economy offers a much-needed alternative—albeit by no means the only one—to the ethos of competitive and profit-oriented neoliberal colonialism and the reified splits of us/them. Today’s archi-utilitarian ethos is epitomized in the neoconservative economy, where the rights of stockholders are placed above all other considerations, as a kind of modern “first principle.” We need to circulate and institutionalize a new “first principle”, one that, paradoxically, we can locate easily in the archaic seed-beds of our ancestral archives—our ecomythologies (Kailo 2008). Even if the view of history from an organic to a mechanistic worldview hardly reflects developments in Indigenous communities, for everyone to become more aware of the differences in the two logics is vital for the survival of the Earth. In gift-based societies people were (and in many cases still are) related to their physical and natural surroundings through a particular land ethic, through genealogies, oral tradition, and complex rituals aimed at social bonds, ecological balance, and sustainability. In many of these systems of knowledge, concepts do not stand alone, as Kuokkanen also noted, but are constituted of “the elements of other ideas to which they were related” (Deloria 1999: 48). The Gift functions primarily as a system of social relations with various types of alliances, forms of solidarity, and communal activities binding the groups together in a locally situated ethos of mutuality and survival, stressing local democracy, self-sufficiency and sustainable communal infrastructures and relations.<sup>2</sup>

The Gift or give back (Caffyn, 1992) –oriented philosophy represents a concretization of the abstract, theoretical principles and discursive dimensions to which Kuokkanen and Kremer make reference. Through the gift economy, humans feel themselves as one part of a large self-regulating system where what happens to one pearl in creation’s necklace affects them all. Hyde in *The Gift* (1983) has analyzed the notion of an Indigenous “return gift,” called among the Maori a “nourishing *hau*,” as interspecies feedback. Without the gestures of giving back, humans act through greed or arrogance of will and thus the cycle of human/animal interdependency is broken.<sup>3</sup> Ecological salvation should not be sought in women or Indigenous peoples as reverse categories to be glorified (angels in the ecosystem); rather, the worldview and the social attributes coded as “feminine” or “Native” need instead to be extended as the human norm to all subjects of European and globalized cultures.

The gift economy has many affinities with ecofeminist and ecocritical theories, particularly when we focus on a key difference between the patriarchal hegemonic master identity with its hierarchical dualisms, and the gift paradigm with its focus on honouring, creating ties with and giving importance to “another.” According to ecofeminist Ariel Salleh (1997): “Both dominated and empowered, women and other colonized subjects are well equipped, at this historical conjuncture, to take up the case for the preservation and respect for life. This does not imply a simple-minded essentialist way that women or natives are somehow ‘closer to nature’” (179). Rather, echoing the many ecofriendly views in this anthology, for Salleh “it is to acknowledge a complex socially elaborated difference and its agency. For the most urgent and fundamental political task is to dismantle ideological attitudes that have severed the human sense of belonging to nature; and this, in turn, can only happen once nature is no longer fixated, commodified as an object, outside of and separate from humans” (178). If masculine agency produces knowledge by splitting subject and

2 Marcel Mauss (1923/1924) first wrote about various “primitive” cultures practicing gift “exchanges.” Although he has brought the knowledge about gift economies into general consciousness and has provided valuable descriptions of various gift practices, his interpretation has been colored by his androcentric, western, patriarchal values, his own lens as someone who apparently took human competitive and aggressive drives to be natural and universal. Thanks to Indigenous scholars, today there is a better understanding that giving to gods and nature is a reflection of worldviews founded on active recognition of kinship relations that extend beyond the human realm—quite beyond the ego-oriented and rivalry-motivated impulses that Mauss took for granted.

3 The Gift economy is intimately connected with the principle of sustainability and an in-built ecological ethics. In discussing this archaic/modern land ethic, one must distinguish between the oppressive and sentimental patriarchal glorification of maternity, “noble savages” and the feminist/Native revalorization and renaming of a mothering or ecosocially sustainable logic (Vaughan 1997) beyond gendered or ethnocentric dualism. We need to reclaim a sensuous, participatory interspecies conversation where we recognize our position on the continuum of life forms, and posit other radical imaginaries, social arrangements and methodologies that allow us to conceive of difference itself differently.

object, dividing the object into discrete units in order to remake it, what might be called a feminine or communal approach to knowing, expresses, according to Salleh (and to another Sami scholar Helander-Renvall 2008), a sensibility that is not alienated from itself or its environment.

## Conclusion

I have limited myself, within the restraints of this article, to merely sketching the outlines of a more ecological, sustainable and ethical cultural matrix of "life" rather than death and violence. Although I have circumscribed in other writings, what a utopian, ideal society of balanced human/animal, male/female and intercultural relations might look like (Kailo 2007, 2008), this paper served to merely to hint at the differences of ethos, attitude and notions about human nature, that we can find in different ethnocultural narratives, cosmologies, worldviews, epistemes (Kuokkanen 2007) and social arrangements. I believe that the keys to a more responsible, just and ecologically sound society are located in shared gift economies beyond any monocultural assumptions that one culture might have all the answers. However, I do not advocate a postmodern free-for-all relativism. I believe the gift economy matrix needs to be grounded in pluralism and a politics of affinity (Kailo 1998) and difference, while, at the same time honoring the UN declarations on human/woman/indigenous and other rights that have already been passed and signed. The gift economy and paradigm promises to become a new pivotal matrix of alliances where local and global knowledge, insights, technological and humanistic/feminists wisdom and insights can be brought into a useful, mutually enriching tension—and synergy, if not, gynergy. We cannot move towards a more egalitarian and sound social structure before we identify what is wrong with what we have had. The role of critical men's/white and women's studies has been to deepen the postcolonial studies, anti-racist feminist and ecofeminist debates on white mythologies, hierarchical and dualistic master narratives and other paradigms that have contributed to the current crises of ecology, energy, food and employee rights. Biological diversity in nature has served to ensure the health and renewal capacity of nature; the same applies to human society. Without the diversity reflected in different epistemic styles of knowing and living, we can only build a boxed-in future of monocultural hegemonies out to exploit whomever they can. Gift economies as a shared forum for feminist, Indigenous, white and other heuristically distinct ideologies and worldviews are in my view the most promising—as well as empowering—model for beginning the work of radical green restructuring. It does not mean throwing out the baby—western technorational worldview—out with the bathwater. But it does mean outsourcing the injustices, dominator relations and nefarious racial/sexist fictions with which the elites have, in the colonial history, ensured their mastery over nature, women and all freefloating "resources" (=gifts) of planetary life.

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- <sup>i</sup> We also need to have a working definition of the term "indigenous." According to the UN definition, as an independent nation, the Finns, for example, although themselves colonized by Sweden and Russia until 1917, no longer fit the *political* definition of "indigenous": "The term Indigenous People refers to a people a) who lived in a territory before the entry of a colonizing population, which colonizing population has created a new state or states or extended the jurisdiction of an existing state or states to include the territory, and b) who continue to live as a people in the territory and who do not control the national government of the state or states within which they live; and not yet engaged in an armed national liberation struggle" (Kuokkanen in Kailo & Kuokkanen, 2009).
- <sup>ii</sup>
- <sup>iii</sup> Andrea Smith (1991) and John Mohawk (1994) both encourage non-indigenous scholars to recover their own indigenous roots or identify whatever is good in their own cultures. After that, they are willing to embark on cultural exchange.
- <sup>iv</sup> Kuokkanen refers also to Ong (1969), who has made incisive comments about the western tendency to privilege sight at the expense of the other senses. Indeed, he notes that world view as a concept emphasises the importance of visuality rather than recognizing the knowledge that flows through other channels than the sight.