Reflecting on socio-ecological transformation research: critical questions to consider[1]

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Books have their fate[2]
Ideas have power
Seeds sprout
Consciousness arises
from reflection and resistance
Land connects or disconnects
Political ideas
come from movements[3]
Oceans heal and feed
Forests shield and hold our secrets
Food is life
Women and Nature
are the source.

Over recent years, understanding what socio-ecological transformation means—in particular, its substance and nature—has become central for policy makers, academics, development practitioners, activists and movements around the world engaged with environmental concerns. Responding to calls such as *Socio-ecological Transformation Now!* undoubtedly propels deliberations to find common ground. The nuances however, and in many instances the strategies and policy proposals towards such transformation, underscore the stark

[1] This paper was first presented as a keynote address at the Austrian Development Conference at the Karl-Franzens-University of Graz, 19 November 2017. I am indebted to Julia Gunether for the invitation to speak on the Research for Transformation.

[2] Maria Mies, *Patriarchy and accumulation on a World Scale* (London: Zed books, 1998) vii.

[3] Silvia Federici, *Revolution at point Zero* (Oakland: PM Press, 2012), ix.

differences in analysis. These differences stem most likely from differing assessments of what factors create socio-ecological injustices and, specifically, their structural roots.

This chapter outlines some of the critical components that research for socio-ecological transformation needs to take into account. I contend that exploring these components are necessary from both a theoretical generative point of view but also for enhancing rural women's movements in southern Africa. Furthermore, I highlight a few critical questions which ought to be embedded in this type of research. Specifically, I challenge us to situate our positions of power from which we embark upon socio-ecological transformation research.

The first section of the chapter argues that research for socio-ecological transformation needs to have at its heart conceptions of earth democracy and earth justice. The second section considers what the "costs" of solution orientated research are and I interrogate the gaze of this type of research. The third section focuses on the necessity for research that recognises positionality and ideological orientation. The concluding section reminds us that research for socio-ecological transformation cannot be a substitute for collective people-centred democratic resistance, organisation and demands from communities who carry the brunt of socio-ecological destruction.

An activist and researcher from Africa, engaged with rural and working class women, my work is concerned with why and how socio-ecological injustice is skewed and disproportionately places the burden on rural black, indigenous, peasant and working class communities and, in particular, women from the global South. It is within this context that I address what research for socio-ecological transformation means[4]. I do so from an anti-patriarchal neoliberal capitalist perspective. I contend that questions of radical transformation and its research cannot stand outside of a critique of inequality, exploitation, racism, sexism, homophobia and xenophobia. If it does, it holds limited revolutionary impetus and marginal socio-ecological transformation potential.

Earth Democracy and Earth Justice: Conceptions informing socio-ecological transformation research

Vandana Shiva puts forward that "[w]hen the self is perceived as being at war with nature and society, rather than part of nature and society, alienation and violence become ''natural'' to being. Peace and recovery of our ecological selves requires that we re-embed ourselves in the web of life and the web of social relationships". This signals the consequence of our

[4] The intent here is not to disregard conceptually how socio-ecological transformation is being used within state and academic discourses, but instead reclaim how it forms part of political resistance to the dominant perspective to extractivism and neo-extractivism.

disconnection with nature and each other and the necessity of reciprocity as integral to our collective and individual well-being. It is also a helpful guide for our research towards socio-ecological transformation to consider.

At the heart of socio-ecological transformation is research that seeks to manifest earth democracy and earth justice whilst recognising the challenges inherent in re-establishing a new relationship with nature in this current period[5]. Shiva outlines ten principles of earth democracy which include: species interconnectedness as well as its intrinsic value; defence and promotion of species diversity; protection and reclaiming of commons; protection of all ecosystems and the right to all basic needs and subsistence for all; localisation; unity; dignity, peace and compassion for all life forms[6]. Earth democracy thus refers to a restorative and relational process between humans and the world which they inhabit with all species. At its centre this depends on a transformation of social relations so as to put an end to all forms of exploitation and extraction.

The current dominant mode of production and living however orientates society towards economic growth and "efficiency". This is reliant on the exploitation of all species. This way of living is premised on never-ending production, consumption and waste, resulting in human being's and nature's destruction and exploitation. In this particular phase of capitalism, neoliberalism, we have witnessed unprecedented commodification of nature, pitting peoples, communities and countries against each other.

Any dislodgement of this dominant paradigm and war against nature needs to be accompanied by a reconfiguration of resources, a new earth ethic and imagination of a different society. It requires new conceptions of work which values and recognises nature, women and social reproduction as a cornerstone of society. Nnimmo Bassey speaks of re-source democracy. For him this concept "hinges on the recognition that a natural 'resource' fundamentally belongs to Nature and secondly to communities of species and peoples who live in the territory or have traditionally held the territory where the 'resource' such as forests, rivers or grazing lands exists."[7] Specifically, re-source democracy is to "re-source, to re-connect with Earth – our source of life – and to respect her as a living being with inherent rights, and not just a 'resource' to be exploited."[8]

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[5] See Vandana Shiva's, *Earth Democracy; Justice, Sustainability, and Peace* (South End Press, 2005).

[6] See Leigh Brownhill, "Earth Democracy and Ecosocialism: What's in a Name?," *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 21 (2010) 96-99, for a quick overview on the ten principles.

[7] Nnimmo Bassey, *Re-Source Democracy* (Health of Mother Earth Foundation, 2014), 6.

[8] Bassey, *Resource Democracy*, 6.

Other scholar-activists and intellectuals offer conceptions and ideological approaches which emerge, in most instances, from existing experiences of living with nature. Many of these conceptions seeks to articulate alternative relationships with nature. They highlight examples in society which attempt to undo the hierarchical and exploitative relationship between humans, as well as the binary relations between humans and non-humans. By implication, it is a reclaiming and re-envisioning of ourselves as part of nature and therefore neither above or dominating it. Rather than implying 'back-to-nature' approach, this is socio-ecological transformation and earth democracy. It is reaching towards a socio-ecological self and new society which strives to embody us as deeply interconnected and dependent.

GoundWork, Historical Excavations, Translations and Arts of Noticing: unearthing the complexity

The work of Gabeba Baderoon, Carolyn Merchant and Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing are examples of research which strives to reconnect, understand and bring to the fore the complexity of reflective research. Baderoon tells of transforming barren lands into life, as expressions of who, and how, we want to be in the world. This is the land of the dispossessed, disinherited, colonised … it is the land of the past, present and future. It is a land where conflict, violence and blood is shed. But it is also the countryside of resistance, resilience, fighting back, re-making and re-imaging. She explains how as a young girl, her contribution to the family garden on the Cape Flats, was to merely take the potato peels and other organic waste to compost. The soil was sandy. But by doing this groundwork over 46 years, it is today a garden that is flourishing. Baderoon reminds us though that it is a garden that is much more than 46 years old. In fact, it took over 146 years to restore, as it was land that was annexed during the period of the Dutch East company and then placed under the group areas act during apartheid.

Baderoon's work illustrates how groundwork and scaffolding is socio-ecological transformation. Transformative because it does not occur overnight and takes into account the generational experiences. It is transformative as it is not linear but relational. Importantly, it is through "doing" – slow, reflexive and non-prescriptive work – that socio-ecological transformation occurs[9].

An all-encompassing understanding of social-ecological transformation requires research that adopts an historical approach. Baderoon's articulation of groundwork is reminiscent of Carolyn Merchant's significant work on ecological revolutions. Specifically, I draw attention to Merchant's thesis "[t]he world in which most Americans live today is the legacy of four

[9] Gabeba Baderoon, "Food and Groundwork" presented at the Food Politics and Cultures Festival November 2017

centuries of transformation of life and land."[10] Although Merchant traces in depth a longer historical period than Baderoon and of a different continent, their research approach navigates both past and present. Merchant's research highlights that people "dominate an increasingly fragile earth, 'mastering' a nature from which we are largely alienated. As a 'people of plenty' we produce a cornucopia of goods and services at the expense of our environment, the Third World, and the labouring peoples"[11]. This quote by Merchant, underscores how Baderoon's gardening in the South Africa is an act of socio-ecological transformation in response (knowingly or not) to the imperialist project of the North. Both Baderoon and Merchant's work is indicative of research that makes the connection between how both human beings and nature transform over time and transform each other.

Merchant's approach to research for socio-ecological transformation assists us to understand how, and why, the dominant Western way of living has become hegemonic. It also shows how this world view developed over time and is constructed and not fixed and immovable. Merchant's (1989) work compels us to take into account the first transformation, namely the colonial ecological revolution, and the second transformation, the capitalist ecological revolution. Of particular significance, an historical political theory approach will assist in ensuring that research for social-ecological transformation will convey that the current Western way of living was itself contested and resisted in Europe then as it is today by peoples across Latin America and Africa.

Tsing's research takes us on an expansive transatlantic journey of discovery. By following the intricacies of Matsutake mushrooms, Tsing brings our attention to the multifaceted dimensions of all things Matsutake. She takes us into deep forests of Oregon, numerous communities, languages, foods, smells, taste, webs of place and belonging, tensions of new and old worlds and invites us to explore and create new imaginations of exchange, freedom and being. Her work looks for "non-capitalist elements on which capitalism depends"[12]. Through understanding various assemblages; highlighting translations, interpretations and performances among actors; and bringing our awareness to "arts of noticing", Tsing makes us acutely aware of interspecies relationships as necessary for reproduction[13]. Her work re-examines and re-considers "species by species reproduction"[14] thus widening our research on socio-ecological transformation and deepening our understanding of webbing and re-webbing and connecting and re-connecting.

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[10] Carolyn Merchant. *Ecological Revolutions: Nature, Gender, and Science in New England* (University of North Carolina press, 1989), xiii.
[11] Merchant, *Ecological Revolutions*
[12] Anna Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibilities of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton University Press, 2015), 66.
[13] Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, 142.
[14] Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, 139.

It is in this sense that Tsing's pioneering work on Matsutake connects to that of Merchant who writes that "[c]onsciousness is totality of one's thoughts, feelings, and impressions, the awareness of one's acts and volitions … A society's symbols and images of nature express its collective consciousness. They appear in mythology, cosmology, science, religion [etc] … used by controlling elites, while rituals, festivals, songs, and myths provide clues to the consciousness of ordinary people."[15] It is through Tsing's deep listening and search for ordinary and thus invisible folk that "the possibilities of life in capitalist ruins" act as a flashlight for socio-ecological transformation.

In the contemporary period, we need not look far for examples and lived experiences of socio-ecological alternatives and resistance and struggles against dominant exploitation of 'modern' nature-society relations. The Amadiba Crisis Committee in Xolobeni, KwaZulu Natal, South Africa, has since 2007 resisted mining as well as the building of a national highway; Mikae hunter-gatherer resistance in Madagascar against deforestation since 2000; Chipko women's struggles against multinational logging companies in India; Rural Workers Union of Xapuri and Peoples of the Forest Alliance resistance in the Amazon against deforestation are some examples. Nor do we need to start afresh with concepts and research. Ecofeminists have for decades now put forward examples and research with regards to Subsistence Living[16]. This research has however been marginalised[17].

In recent decades there has been extensive discussions and important research regarding the indigenous concept of Vivir Bien; Ubuntu; principles of sufficiency; food sovereignty; solidarity economy; degrowth; deglobalisation; rights to Mother Earth and more recently Re-Source Democracy[18]. Similarly there are numerous examples of resistance across the world insisting that not only is another world possible but that another world is necessary[19].

Socio-ecological transformative research fosters the construction of an earth ethic. Such an ethic seeks to keep human need in check. It recognises and nurtures all things "wild" as Joel Kovel and David Johns suggest, and encourages us to relinquish the obsession with "man" and its control over nature[20].

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[15] Merchant. *Ecological Revolutions,* 19.

[16] See the work of Maria Mies, Vanadana Shiva.

[17] See Silvia Federici; Donna Haraway; Carolyn Merchant; Ursula Huws; Mariarosa Dalla Costa.

[18] For Buen Vivir refer to the research by Beyond Development research group; Systemic Alternatives; for the logic of sufficiency refer to Thomas Princen; for Enough is a feast see Neville Alexander drawing on André Gorz; for re-source democracy refer to Nnimo Bassey.

[19] See the Belem ecosocialist declaration by Michael Löwy and Joel Kovel.

[20] David Johns, Joel Kovel & Michael Löwy, "Has Ecosocialism Passed on the Tough Questions?," *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, 14 no 2 (2003), 120-128.

Problematising Solution Orientated Research

Often, however, the dominant mainstream research regarding social-ecological questions veers toward control over nature and is solution orientated instead of offering systemic alternatives. In many instances, the discussion on sustainable development prioritises economic considerations such that they overshadow the social and environmental. There are research institutes developing batteries of technological solutions and one-size-fits-all models which tend to be technicist and aimed at quick fixes. International policy makers and development practitioners drive these agendas. More often, research tends to be about innovation and technology. Specifically, it focuses on how to replace or renew limited natural resources. This preoccupation manifests with regards to research on climate change, biodiversity, waste, food security, natural resource crimes, drought and the like. Here research is often coordinated by academics in the sciences with large governmental and corporate social backing. Unfortunately, much of it is drives a green economy agenda hence not tackling the critical question of the limits to growth, productivism, extractivism, worker exploitation and anthropocentrism.

Research on socio-ecological transformation ought to address the critical question of "endless" growth, the natural limits of nature and destructive violent social relations in society. These pertinent research questions are not conducted in laboratories with hypothesis, scenarios and data sets. It needs to resist taking on notions of "objectivity" and of being "scientific" as "truth". Solution orientated research regarding innovation and technology are rarely "objective" as they're driven by policy directives which are overtly embedded in political, economic, social and cultural power relations.

Research in this area requires us to grapple with asking complex questions instead of focusing on finding a quick and "correct" answer. By implication this requires interrelated, interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approaches for research in socio-ecological transformation. We need to draw on the arts and humanities to open critical questions and spaces that are ordinarily one-dimensional. Baderoon, Merchant and Tsing's research is illustrative of transdisciplinary approaches.

It is incumbent upon us to open the academic research space so that it is truly a collaboration between communities, academics, intellectuals, activist-scholars, practitioners, creative, artists, governmental officials and those directly affected by socio-ecological injustices. Socio-ecological transformation requires ground up and rooted research for it to seriously point to different ways of being with nature and each other, that will take effect and have meaning. The

researchers from the Systemic Group put forward that "[a]lternatives do not emerge in the vacuum. They emerge in the struggles of social movements, in their concrete experiences, initiatives, victories, defeats and resurgences. They emerge in a process of analysis, practice and proposals that are validated in reality."[21]

Thinking that the socio-ecological research agenda must be guided solely by social or natural science architectures is not to acknowledge the critique laid at our doorsteps or the inadequacies of our disciplines. If socio-ecological research is dis-embedded and disconnected from community's realities, it has limited traction and we need to question its relevance. If policy and advocacy research is about and for "others", it reinforces the very power-relations we seek to undermine. Any research that is "othering" cannot and will not be transformative regardless of its good intentions. It, in its very essence, becomes the antithesis of an emancipatory and liberatory project.

It is important to acknowledge the neoliberal capture of the academy and, specifically, the diminishing academic freedom and freedom of research from both state and corporate influence[22]. More and more, research agendas are being defined by the needs and wants of transnational corporations and right-wing governments. These heavily funded directives, with a push towards research agendas that are output-driven and solution-driven, are manifold. Academic buildings and research labs built by corporations, the location of investment of university pension and more, speak to the corporate hold that is slowly enveloping the academy. The public research purse has shrunk dramatically steering academics and researchers at large to affirm the status quo and decrease scholarships and fellowship for critical studies.

Suzuki notes us that:

We are part of a vast web of interconnected species, that is the biosphere, the zone of air, water, and land where all life exists. It is a very thin layer…. That is our home … and if we don't see that we are utterly embedded in the natural world and depend on nature, not technology, not economics, not science … for our well-being and survival, if we do not see that, then our priorities will continue to be driven by [hu]man-made constructs, like national borders, economies, corporations, and markets. Those are all human created things; they shouldn't dominate the way we live.[23]

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[21] Systemic Group, introduction (RLF, 2018).

[22] See Desiree Lewis, "Neo-liberalism, the humanities and feminist intellectuals in South Africa," JAIS presentation March 2016. Access at http://jias.joburg/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/neoliberalism-and-feminism.pdf.

[23] David Suzuki quoted by Stefano B. Longo, Rebecca Clausen, and Bret Clark, "The tragedy of the commodity: Oceans, Fisheries, and Aquaculture," (London: Rutger University Press), xii.

This reminder by Suzuki is important as it highlights that the ecological crisis confronts us directly and shows us clearly that when research is not embedded within resistance, struggle, reflexivity and solidarity, it has little resonance and traction beyond peer-review journals and lags behind what those engaged on the ground theorise through action. The dominant western and hegemonic knowledge system, which is often imposed through academia and heralded as "scientific" cannot grasp and make room for "knowledges" in which academia has no expertise on or over. Therein lies the rub. Being "all knowing" holds power – material, intellectual, social and political power. "Good", "necessary" or "useful" research is not synonymous. We should remind ourselves of this. We need research that takes risks, that opens oneself to contradictory, messy and open-ended knowledge-making.

We must recognise that radical discourse and the language of resistance is quickly usurped. The tools of resistance, counter-narratives and alternatives are made shallow and hollowed out by pervasive academic jargon and often turned inside out and invalidated if they do not conform to the knowledge forms and truths that affirm our disciplinary fields. Quickly, the research becomes only about mitigation, adaptation, litigation etc., and we are cautioned to be realistic and pragmatic. Qualitative is set aside for quantitative methods as if to say that numbers and scale hold some mystical truth. The voices of those affected get marginalised and the expert is elevated. This is equally true in quantitative methodology where the researcher speaks about their positionality to excruciating length. In an attempt to justify why they are talking about a particular issue this yet again, detracts from the focus of the research; and so we research and speak on the behalf-of. This is a place of power and if we are not held in check and called to account, we can easily erase the pertinent voices and alternatives from movements.

Positionality, methodology and accessibility: Some thoughts on our research

Being self-critical about our methodologies and the positions of power we occupy when conducting research requires that we consider questions that move beyond the operational and functional. We need to consider positional, methodological and accessibility issues. We need to ask ourselves what the political objective our research is.

Firstly, from the perspective of positionality, we need to consider the vantage point from which the research is conducted. Here we can identify at least three possibilities. One, whether the research on socio-ecological transformation is done from preconceived imposed frameworks which are developed and constructed in the North. Examples of this are instances in which the 'West' studies the 'Global South', imposing frameworks and contextually inappropriate solutions. Examining whether a particular sustainable development goal is being implemented is one such instance. We are aware that concepts of growth and development are themselves being re-evaluated with the specific focus of calling into question these historically externally

imposed concepts that are currently so deeply internalised with the state machinery of most governments of the South. One illustration of this is the development of waste management in South Africa, another is the National Development Plan. In the initial stages the development plan focused on pre-determined categories which reveal particular ideological positions on society, the economy and the environment rather than, for instance, consulting and working with workers to consider alternatives. This vantage from above often gives rise to autocratic policy development which is uninformed and misguided, usually resulting in a 'one-size fits all' approach to the issues under consideration.

The second possibility is the research done alongside those directly affected by it. When those affected are integral to the research and part of defining the problem, research is likely to be more holistic. This research often requires more time and openness. In such research the silences are often of equal importance. Recognising that hierarchies of power exist everywhere, it is necessary to be vigilant of not reinforcing them. It is critical is be attentive to one's own assumptions and training.

The third possibility is that the research endeavours to bring to the fore the complexity of social-ecological relations. It needs to stay alert to inherited assumptions. In doing so, it is able to consider if the political demands, forms of struggles and organisation augment and perpetuate social-ecological injustices or reverse them. In some instances, this could be research that actively seeks to illuminate how the commons are being defended against encroachment. Or, see how encroachment has decimated communities and more nurturing socio-ecological relations. Or, by drawing on existing struggles, reflect on the decisions made during the process which potentially undermined more just social-relations. Or by drawing on policy debates in, for example, waste management; conservation; water managements; energy delivery; food management; land rights; fishing rights; mineral rights and the like, evaluate the extent to which socio-ecological issues are marginalised or seen as irrelevant to the policy issue at hand. In so doing, research can make us aware of how fragmented policy is and how policy formulation in silos take us further away socio-ecological transformation.

Depending on the purpose–sometimes one process serves a particular goal—it is important that research with regards to socio-ecological issues pays close attention to delineating the various ideological perspectives regarding socio-ecological transformation. The various schools of thought have different diagnoses, drivers, initiators and specific processes towards transformation.

We need to consider how ideological positions prevent research from gaining traction. At the outset of the chapter I noted that socio-ecological injustice falls disproportionately on women from the global South. Feminist theory provides another vantage point from which to consider

our research. How, in our research, do we take forward the particular exploitation of rural women from the global South as well as their shared experience of extractivism with nature. How do we move beyond Cartesian binaries and reconceptualise life and work - moving from its industrialised, formalised, regulated, extracted, waged, commodified and alienated conception to one of which is un-exploited, respected, valued and visible? These are the critical questions for our research.

Secondly, from a methodological perspective, we need to consider how the research is conducted. All methods have limitations and, arguably, the more comprehensive approach is using mixed methods. While quantitative research that provides generalisable statistics is useful it is not enough on its own. Often, this type of research is also top-down in its approach. For example, conducting a survey without a bottom-up approach to defining the indicators is likely to reinforce predetermined agendas. Rather, indicators should be generated by those participating in the research, using a participatory methods and tools such as participatory action research and focus groups, amongst others. Establishing what should be counted and considered in collaboration is necessary. An illustration of this approach is research conducted about starting up an aquaculture farm. While researchers may be interested in knowing how many people will be employed and what the local wage rate is etc., people in the community may want to know about how this would affect their access to water, ability to work on their land, time to rest etc. Quantitative work should be accompanied by in-depth qualitative work, using traditional methods such as focus groups, but also more creative forms like collective memory work, theatres of struggle, 'speak outs', drawing sessions, etc.

Thirdly, from an accessibility perspective, we should consider how research is disseminated. As most research is published in journal publications, we need to ask who these publications benefit and how they are created. We need to pay attention to the language and tone in which our research outputs are written as well as who we are in conversation with. While journals are important to push theoretical boundaries, we should guard against them being a means of exclusion. We must facilitate dialogue and debate. More so, we must write in collaboration with others and recognise whether affected communities are marginalised by them or are unable to publish in them. Alternative means of communication and ways of communicating research, such as the use of graphic novels, social media, theatre and documentaries - and here examples such as The Shore Break, Bitter Harvest, Miners Shot Down spring to mind - should be considered.

As researchers we have to constantly ensure feedback with each other, the communities we work with and the larger activist-scholarly fraternity and probe the intentions of our work. Often we can be in a narrow, even if important debate, with a very few at the expense of a broader process of moving us closer to understanding the questions we are grappling with. Our

method and approach is the content as much as it is the content that seeks to influence policy, ideas and political processes.

Walking together towards socio-ecological research for transformation

I conclude, as I have started, with a short poem. The poem was written by a litigator, a peace practitioner and researcher at the WoMin feminist school on extractives in Africa, in Ghana 2017. In many ways it exemplifies that we cannot substitute movement building, reflection and political struggle with socio-ecological transformation research. It can however shine a light on the contradictions of policy and struggle, uncover the assumptions and implications of the ideas we hold and calls made, and suggest processes and avenues towards a socio-ecological just society. It is incumbent on us as researchers and activist-scholars to practice reflexivity.

We walk alongside you as you make your balloons of freedom,
We walk alongside you as you organise and change your world,
We walk alongside you as you confront multiple oppressions,
We walk alongside you as you make and take the alternatives
in your homes, organisations and the space that you go into,
We walk alongside you as you colour and paint the world you want,
We cannot walk for you, nor should we try
We cannot pretend to walk in your shoes,
But we can work to understand your terrain,
We can struggle alongside you to craft and co-create a new me,
a new society and new place to call home.[24]

[24] "Re: Ecofeminism as a provocation and a challenge", from the WoMin Feminist School June 2017. Access at:
https://womin.org.za/images/resources_pdf/Notes%20and%20Reports/Ecofeminism%20as%20a%20Provocation%20and%20Challenge%20WoMin%202nd%20Feminist%20School%202017.pdf