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New Materialist Feminist Ecological Practices: La Via Campesina and Activist Environmental Work

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Abstract: Within the context of new theoretical developments in environmentalist materialism, as inflected by gender issues, this paper attempts to analyze the important work of La Via Campesina (women's section) both in grassroots activism and in creating a feminist agenda for the transformation of human-non-human connections. Methodologically, this paper proceeds by historically situating La Via Campesina and the progressive incorporation of women's issues as part of the movement. In parallel, La Via Campesina's insurgent practices of contestation to the exploitation of huge multinational agrobusinesses, to genetically modified crops, and to land-grabbing practices and land usurpation from indigenous populations are illustrated. In conclusion and within the frame of new materialisms, my discussion addresses issues of response-ability, sustainability, and co-habitation to reflect upon the major changes brought about by these new modes of thinking and inhabiting the planet.

Keywords: new materialisms; feminist environmentalism; ecology; grassroots activism; La Via Campesina; political ecology; response-ability; food sovereignty; social justice

1. Introduction

The new relational basis between humans, living and inert matter, technology, and the planet that the new materialisms are proposing is a growing reality that can be observed in many domains, from epistemology to anthropology, ecology, and ethics. It is precisely at the crossroads of ecology and the political that this paper is situated, and it aims to explore how in and through the practice of feminist new materialisms, political ecology, and grassroots activist organizing, significant changes can be brought about to prevent irreversible damage such as climate change, or to eradicate dumping industrial waste into rivers and oceans and to eliminate chemicals and plastic residue from food, shelter, and the daily existence of life on the planet.

Framed within recent developments in the field of feminist perspectives on the environment, my paper will examine a major feminist, political, and environmental project, La Via Campesina's gendered initiative, which exists within the larger context of the struggle of La Via Campesina, in order to reflect upon the political valences both in grassroots activism and in new ecological insurgent practices in which women have become actively involved. It is my contention that currently, La Via Campesina participates of the ethos and concerns of feminist new materialisms, and I will attempt to demonstrate their proximity and similar goals. After an introduction to the most relevant work in new materialist views on the environment which pave the way to my argument, I will address how La Via Campesina came to consider women's social, economic, and labor issues as central to the movement and identify La Via Campesina's major claims and demands in relation to agriculture and agrarian reform. Tenets such as the achievement of food sovereignty for peasants and indigenous populations in their plight against huge multinational agrobusinesses interact with other crucial principles which I will spell out. At those levels, women's labor is indispensable for the maintenance and continuation of

community life. La Via Campesina's gendered insurgent practices will also be analyzed as a response to the deleterious effects which the overexploitation, pollution, and land-grabbing effects produced by late capitalism have had on human and nonhuman actors alike. Finally, and within the framework of new materialisms, I will briefly address issues of response-ability, sustainability, and co-habitation in the planet as parts of the common ground that trans-species engagement,¹ posthumanism, and new modes of thinking and inhabiting the world have brought to our attention. As it has been pointed out, the assumption of one world or one universe is inherently colonial in that "it sustains itself through performances that tend to suppress and or contain the enactment of other possible worlds" (Blaser 2009, p. 16). For Blaser, the idea of the pluriverse is a more adequate concept because it entails imagining the performative enactment of multiple, distinct ontologies or worlds which "bring themselves into being and sustain themselves even as they interact, interfere and mingle with each other" (Blaser 2012, p. 55) under asymmetrical circumstances.

The changing pattern of action between the nation-state and rural organizations at the beginning of the 1980s with progressively more detached policies and a worsening of conditions in the countryside brought about an acute social awareness of endemic problems within peasant organizations. This state of affairs and the peasants' conviction that major obstacles in their work and daily lives had to do with wider oppressive conditions beyond the national borders of ever weakened nation-states is at the origin of La Via Campesina as a transnational social movement. During the 1980s and early 1990s, La Via Campesina emerged out of autonomous peasant organizations first in Latin America and then at a global scale. By being organized globally, in defense of their interests and to protect their working conditions and ways of life, their members seek to advocate a reasonable and sustainable agrarian production which takes as its basis a holistic approach of interaction between the land and its communities. This grassroots organization has become enormously influential in setting up agendas for sensitive agrarian reform and social policies worldwide. According to Martinez-Torres and Rosset, "La Via Campesina today is the leading network of grassroots organizations with presence in the anti-globalization or altermundista ('another world') movement, as manifested in protests against the World Trade Organization (WTO) and Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA), in the World Social Forum (WSF), in its scathing techniques of World Bank land policies and its ability to force the novel concept of food sovereignty into common usage" (Martinez-Torres and Rosset 2010, p. 151).

This paper aims to contribute to a better understanding of the specific actions of the transnational movement La Via Campesina and their proximity to feminist new materialist developments. Methodologically, I have first approached La Via historically in order to show when peasant women start getting organized within the movement. Secondly, I have analyzed three specific actions relevant in three major areas: opposition to large agribusiness corporations, predatory exploitation of water resources, and land-grabbing and farmers' dispossession. These were chosen among other actions because they were carried out by South American (Brazilian and Argentinian) peasant women who were all members of the Peasant without Land movements, and because they are among the most publicized of these actions, as judged by their Internet presence (Google). In my analysis, I have attempted to demonstrate how these actions can be read by recourse to new materialist ideas and concepts.

2. The Challenges of Ecological Feminism

In recent years, philosophy, feminisms, environmental studies, and biotechnology have alerted people to the current state of degradation of the planet. Contemporary eco-feminist thinking finds its roots in the second wave of feminism, back in the 1970s. In northern India, in the early 70s, many

¹ It was anthropologist Eduardo Kohn who coined the idea of "trans-species engagement." In his view, "[c]reating an analytical framework that can include the humans as well as non-humans has been a central concern of science and technology studies, the multispecies or animal turn, and Deleuze-influenced scholarship [...] And I have been specially swayed by Donna Haraway's conviction that there is something about our everyday engagements with other kinds of creatures that can open new kinds of possibilities for relating and understanding" (Kohn 2013, pp. 6–7).

women took part in the Chipko movement to protect forests from commercial loggers and deforestation. Throughout the 1980s important initiatives spread around the globe, and native American and indigenous women were thought to be the ultimate ecofeminists. The origins of the early Indian feminist green movement can be traced to social critic Vandana Shiva. In her view, Indian women have an inherent connection to nature. She speaks of the “feminine principle,” insisting on the fact that this has nothing to do with an outdated notion of patriarchy but rather with an idea of gender complementarity in sexual divisions of labor. She writes:

In this non-gender based philosophy the feminine principle is not exclusively embodied in women, but is the principle of activity and creativity in nature, women and men. One cannot really distinguish the masculine from the feminine, person from nature, Purusha from Prakriti. Though distinct, they remain inseparable in dialectical unity, as two aspects of one being. (Shiva 1989, p. 52)

Clearly, Shiva’s orientation was essentialist and her work came under strong criticism. However, her ideas were crucial in challenging the hegemony of scientific knowledge in the hands of men and in promoting “global sisterhood” around environmental issues. Also involved in a movement countering deforestation in Australia, and after significant activist work, Val Plumwood became a very influential voice in feminist environmentalism. In *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (Plumwood 1993), Plumwood argues we live in a progressively dystopic world where:

[T]echnological mastery extinguishes both nature and less technologically “rational” cultures, where we face the imminent prospect of loss of the world’s forests along with the bulk of its species diversity as well as human and cultural diversity [. . .] where the dominance of rational man threatens ultimately to produce the most irrational of results, the extinction of our species along with many others. (Plumwood 1993, p. 7)

Ecological feminism identifies this catastrophe as derived from a world dominated by men. In the 1990s Plumwood urged us to move beyond divisions within the women’s movements and join forces to counter the destruction of the planet. She proposes alternatives to rationality “which encourage[d] mutually sustaining relationships between humans and the earth” (Plumwood 1993, p. 195). Her important program for the transformation of those relations involves “creating a democratic culture beyond dualism, ending colonizing relationships and finding a mutual, ethical basis for enriching coexistence with earth others” (Plumwood 1993, p. 196). Plumwood’s important ecological agenda shows respect for alterity and grounds ethical responsibility at the core of human-non-human interactions. The engagement of activists, academics, philosophers, and large numbers of women and inhabitants of the planet has progressively grown into a global green movement with local specificities.

Conclusive findings in sociological research into the late capitalist use of resources and in human adaptation to rapid and definitive changes on Earth urge both the world population and our political representatives to work actively to counter this dismal state of affairs. A call for new forms of ethics and politics has emerged in an effort to counter the destructive, exploitative practices and lethal power upon human and non-human actors in the Anthropocene (Tsing et al. 2017).² Along this line, fresh insight from “Anthropocene feminism” reaches audiences critically with an impulse attentive to global change connected to ecological transformations, technological development, inequitable sharing of the resources for co-existence, and political contestation and resistance. As Claire Colebrook states:

The proposed (and close to consecrated) conception of the Anthropocene epoch appears to mark as radical a shift in species awareness as Darwinian evolution effected for the

² Our currently used notion of the Anthropocene comes from assessing the impact of human settlement, labour, exchange, and other related activities on the planet. The human impact on geology and ecosystems translates into a huge transformation of all other forms of life on Earth. Establishing the beginning of this era is not an easy task but there is a tendency to speak of the Agricultural Revolution, 15,000 years back in time, as a major historical milestone (Tsing et al. 2017).

nineteenth century. If the notion of the human species' emergence in time requires new forms of narrative, and imaginative and ethical articulation, then the intensifying sense of the species' end makes a similar claim for rethinking "our" processes of self-presentation and self-preservation. (Colebrook 2017, p. 1)

The aforementioned problems, closely related to the life/death divide, highlight the inherent contradiction of early feminist theorists that signified what Stacy Alaimo has referred to as the "feminist flight from nature" (Alaimo 2000): the feminist abhorrence of traditional patriarchal metaphors associating women and nature. However, such views resulted from a lack of awareness and engagement in key issues regarding the environment and the current stage of scientific work on the border between the biological and social sciences (Haraway 1991, pp. 184–85), which have, nonetheless, been brought to the forefront by new feminist initiatives on science, postcolonial and decolonial theory, and new materialist philosophy, and have had a crucial impact on the way these disciplines interact and draw from each other's findings. These initiatives, summarized by Garvey (2014), attempt to undermine traditional nature/culture binarisms from different angles, and mention should be made of: Rosi Braidotti's "nomadic subjects/ethics" (Braidotti 2013), and "posthumanism" (Braidotti 2013); Nancy Tuana's "viscous porosity" and "interactionism" (Tuana 2008); Karen Barad's "intra-actionism" (Barad 2007) and "posthumanist performativity" (Barad 2008); Donna Haraway's "naturecultures" (Haraway 2008), "material-semiotic" (Haraway 1997), cyborg (Haraway 1991), and "companion species" (Haraway 2008); and Stacy Alaimo's "transcorporeality" (Alaimo 2008). These concepts help not only to move feminisms forward, but also suggest possible interventions within the material, social, and political domains affecting the world at large. In the political arena, it is crucial that decisions come to be discussed in the open and are the object of participatory democracy, and are no longer debatable by lobbies or by the elite. These proposals do not simply come as a consequence of intersectional feminism³ (often, "intersectional" is only relevant to human lives) but, rather, are interactionist-oriented.

3. New Materialist Environmentalisms

It can certainly be stated that our current understanding of the environment has substantially changed in the last three decades. The opening statement of the Paris 2017 Conference on "Environmental Humanities and New Materialisms" announced that these two areas "share an ethic of decolonizing nature and culture, as they depart from anthropocentric and constructivist positions. Our call is to consider ourselves as permeable, part of the ebb and flow of the Anthropocene ... " (Barrett et al. 2017). The conference urged us to adopt an "environmentally ethical sense of matter within a world caught in the throes of change" (Barrett et al. 2017). The shared materiality of all living entities in the planet and their recently recognized sense of connectivity⁴ provides a basis for the acknowledgement of differences, an urge to respect the specificities of elements in their localities, and initiatives to preserve, and also to restore the catastrophic consequences of the systematic erosion and devastation of our habitats.

If we turn to Judith Butler's important work on vulnerability, it is fundamental to listen to her caveat that the condition of vulnerability and the hazards of exposure to potential danger or threat

³ Critical race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) was one of the earliest proponents of intersectionality when she pointed out the inability of a single Western feminist framework to account for the lived experiences of black women. Race, gender, social status, and sexual orientation, among many other factors, were identified as operating in a complex way to produce discrimination. At present, the proximity between intersectionality, ecofeminism, and different interactionist practices has been highlighted. As A.E. Kings, among other scholars, has recently argued, "Intersectionality has helped to develop the practical application of ecofeminism by 'initiating a process of discovery (Davis 2008, p. 7), by acting as an analytical tool or 'lens' to aid critical thinking on ecofeminist debates". The place of good ecofeminist theory is not necessarily to provide ultimate answers but rather to allow for critical engagement with the multitude of experiences contributing to the discrimination of women and the environment, while at the same time recognizing the limitations and constraints of one's analysis" (Kings 2017, pp. 69–70).

⁴ See Barad (2007, 2008) and Bennett (2010).

is distributed in an outright different manner across the world (Butler 2004, p. 24). In Butler's theorization, our lives are dependent on others (Butler 2004, p. 23), resulting in a condition of "primary vulnerability" (Butler 2004, p. 24). Each and every one of us depends on the decisions of others: in a most pressing way, our bodies are "given over" to others to be taken care of, and our bodies are "always something more than, and other than, ourselves" (Butler 2004, p. 25). In one of her examples, the many losses of lives to AIDS in Africa are compounded by their silencing in the media and by the absence of discursive elaborations on the meaning of these losses for their communities (Butler 2004, [p. 25]). These are but examples of how our existence is ruled by interrelationships, and of how it is these relationships, or lack thereof, which determine the livability of our lives. As Butler points out, on the basis of geographic and social considerations, the limits of what is knowable (Butler 2004, p. 27) or grievable (Butler 2004, p. 19) determine "radically different ways in which . . . vulnerability is distributed throughout the globe" (Butler 2004, p. 24).⁵

Along the lines of current studies of vulnerability, Stacy Alaimo proposes the concept of "trans-corporeality" (Alaimo 2009, p. 25). She argues for the "recognition of the substantial interconnections between human corporeality and the more-than-human world," and defines vulnerability as "a sense of precarious, corporeal openness to the material world" (Alaimo 2009, p. 23). In her view, clearly, a pre-condition for the acknowledgement of vulnerability lies in the recognition of differences which compel us to expand our notion of what should be respected and protected, both ethically and within the law. In this sense, human and non-human ecological vulnerabilities should find an equal status in the larger picture of dynamic existence.

Alaimo and Susan Hekman hold that "Nature is agentic—it acts, and those actions have consequences for both the human and nonhuman world" (Alaimo and Hekman 2008, p. 5). They also acknowledge the new political dimension that both the human and the non-human acquire in the light of new materialist feminisms. Along this line, Tuana (2008) has studied Hurricane Katrina as an example to illustrate the many contending forces at play which make it, simultaneously, a natural and a social phenomenon. Her analysis includes "levees, the Army Corp of Engineers, global warming, the hurricane, the local politics of New Orleans, shell middens, the federal government, racial politics, and the poor and disabled populations of New Orleans" (Alaimo and Hekman 2008, p. 13). Tuana demonstrates how our former clear boundaries separating nature and culture, and human and non-human, are no longer epistemologically valid.

When it comes to vulnerability, at present, it is inevitable to pay attention to climate change. Chris Cuomo refers to the huge impact that anthropogenic climate change is having on life and to the different historical conditions of exploitation that different areas, populations, and communities have endured ever since colonial power and capitalism unleashed the terribly unbalanced situation we have now: "Climate change was manufactured in a crucible of inequality, for it is a product of the industrial and fossil-fuel eras, historical forces powered by exploitation, colonialism, and nearly limitless instrumental use of 'nature'" (Cuomo 2011, p. 693). For Cuomo, we are all at risk, "including those who have contributed little or nothing at all to the industrial greenhouse effect" (Cuomo 2011, p. 693).

In any event, it is precisely from the strength and creativity of social movements that a resistance to prevailing discourses of victimization is surfacing:

. . . from indigenous, anti-globalization, feminist, and youth movements for climate justice. These movements point out that many communities are in vulnerable positions precisely because they uphold ecological values that have not been engulfed by global capitalism and

⁵ Butler has been critiqued for her excessive emphasis on discourse as the major force giving shape to human life. In parallel, Butler forgets to give a space to the non-human in her theorization, although she is well aware of the limits of humanism (Butler 2004, pp. 13, 35). The debate on "postmodern feminism[s] retreat from the material" (Alaimo and Hekman 2008, p. 3) is addressed by Colebrook (2008), Hekman (2008), Kirkby (2008), and Alaimo (2008). Along this line, further critiques can be found in Barad (2007), especially pp. 61–64.

technological modernization, recognizing marginal status in fossil-fuel cultures to be a sign of wisdom and resilience rather than weakness. (Cuomo 2011, p. 695)

Stacy Alaimo too, argues that gender violence, limited access to resources, and rent imbalance has deeply affected women. As major actors of social change and coalition-building, “Feminist organizations such as Women’s Environment and Development Organization (WEDO) are careful to complement feminine vulnerability with feminist agency, savvy, and survival strategies, calling for more parity in decision making and leadership” (Alaimo 2009, p. 312). The emphasis on parity and political representation, as much as women’s progress in debunking the epistemological divide in the binary between nature and culture has brought about a paradigm shift in human positionings facing the world at large, human/non-human interaction, and living matter intra-actions. In Tuana’s view, the current field of interactionism ushers us into “a world of complex phenomena in dynamic relationality” (Tuana 2008, p. 191). Environmentalists, green activists, and agro-ecological organizations have explored possibilities for alternative models for rural life. As I will attempt to show, in a domain as important as agriculture (which involves feeding the world, maintaining the biosphere, and preserving biodiversity), movements such as La Via Campesina support the livelihood of farmers by advocating an ethics of care with the land, protecting the rights of local and indigenous communities.

4. La Via Campesina: New Feminist Alternatives for the Environment

La Via Campesina (peasant popular feminism) is a feminist movement which grew out of the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem-Terra (MST) (Peasants without Land), where women identified the contradictions of the masculinized matrix based upon establishing large agrarian cooperatives that competed against big landowners, which proved to be unviable. Striving to reach food sovereignty for the people, feminists proposed to fight the huge agro-businesses in support of a sustainable and organic agriculture. Theirs is a combination of feminism and struggle against capital focusing on the fight against transnational corporations.

As Alaimo claims, we must take activism and other ‘low’ practices seriously “as inventive modes of political contestation” (Alaimo 2016, p. 13). In the La Via Campesina movement, a range of transformative micro-practices are present. Their practices—sit-ins, demonstrations, and performances—go well beyond the status quo in agriculture, land use, and food sovereignty (humans are certainly ‘affected’ by the land throughout their material and discursive practices). Among those practices, I will particularly discuss their resistance actions, their links to other voices of protest (Social and Food Justice), and their resistance to adopt genetically modified crops as major forms of raising awareness and gaining support for their cause.

From a new materialist perspective, peasant farming is respectful to the land with which it interacts by virtue of “intra-actions” (Barad 2007). For Barad, neither subjects nor objects exist outside of any particular practice, but rather, they are enacted in discrete intra-actions to which both human and non-human agencies contribute, affecting and becoming affected by their reciprocal operations. Subjects and objects are inseparably entangled, and indeterminacy is ever present in their associations. Barad’s notion of matter entails a “stabilizing and de-stabilizing process” (Barad 2007, p. 151) and “‘agent’ in its ongoing materialization.” In her account, “Agency is doing/being in its intra-activity” (Barad 2007, p. 235). Among those intra-actions, and crucially influential in the peasant’s environment, the enhancement of biomass recycling and the optimization of the bioavailability of nutrients must be mentioned. From these intra-actions and proper soil management, peasants will end up increasing soil cover, maintaining diversity (humans do belong as another species within such diversity), and enhancing synergies with all the elements which share these ecosystems. Crucial for any approach to the work of La Via Campesina is the notion of indigenous knowledge⁶ (which involves being

⁶ Walter Mignolo has derived an important theoretical concept from Latin American intellectual Anibal Quijano when he speaks of the “coloniality of knowledge.” This crucial idea is based on the erasure that colonial societies systematically

respectful to the land and its creatures), building inter-species and cross-cultural alliances, countering transnational corporations' land-grabbing (in Africa, Asia, and the Global South), alerting local communities (cross-sectionally) of risk, and securing resources for women and the dispossessed which are respectful to the land. Nancy Tuana's "interactionist ontology of viscous porosity" (in [Alaimo 2008](#)) in her commitment to take seriously the agency of the natural acts as an important paradigm for the comments and ideas that follow. In any event, it is the reciprocal insight of Western academia and indigenous philosophies and epistemologies that one should always acknowledge because the "appropriation of indigenous thinking in European contexts without indigenous interlocutors present to hold the use of indigenous stories and laws to account flattens, distorts and erases the embodied, legal-governance and spiritual aspects of Indigenous thinking" ([Todd 2016](#), p. 9). In other words, the ongoing colonial imperatives of the academy must be a continued matter of concern and elicit a responsible engagement as a crucial element in the ethics of research.

In an effort to avoid what Rob Nixon calls the pervasive "slow violence" always present in the "environmentalism of the poor" (in [Alaimo 2016](#), p. 175), La Via Campesina embodies a holistic approach in which there are no detached objects or elements but rather a series of intra-actions among the different realities to be considered. Along these lines, thinking through the relations between individuals and ecosystems seems to be where current research in environmental, social sciences, and feminist thinking is leading. Embodied in the feminist relations to the environment have always been the material and political practices that women have pursued with strategy and tactics. The traditional feminist ethics of care have opened up towards a more comprehensive, global ethics for all "matters of care" (see [Puig de la Bellacasa 2017](#) and below).

Beginning in the 1990s, La Via Campesina has successfully gathered organizations of peasants, farmers, farm workers, and indigenous agrarian communities from across the globe. Its major endeavor has been to build collaborations and cooperation among its membership using various strategies and mechanisms that intersect at the local, regional, national, and international levels. The movement's progressive work on questions of gender inequality and hemispheric and regional differences is a crucial part of its objective of building community and coalition work.⁷

Traditionally, rural women have played a major role in agricultural production and in maintaining the social and economic fabric of their communities. Yet, it is a fact these women still have limited access to policy planning and decision making. In many cases, they continue to be excluded from political power positions, and, consequently, of major involvement in strategic planning and in all issues related to the quality of life of farming communities. Thus, when it comes to gender, with the pressing issues that affect women's economies and lives, La Via Campesina's women took action and got organized. In the Managua Declaration of 1992, women farmers were mentioned only once. In any event, from then onwards there was an increasing visibility of women farm leaders who made up 20% of the participants. It is important to note that at this meeting an effort was made to integrate indigenous peasant organizations, whose goals included to analyze and understand the challenges faced by indigenous peasant women. The worldwide struggle of indigenous organizations for ownership and control over productive resources is absolutely central in how La Via Campesina tackles the questions of ethnicity and contributes to their struggles. Almost from the start, La Via Campesina aimed to integrate both peasant and indigenous identities, since their approaches to the land, the earth, and territory, and their ideas regarding agriculture were substantially different.

Progressively gender concerns have been foregrounded, and ever since the 1993 "Framework for Action", the role that women and youth play in rural organizations has been recognized. Building

perform of indigenous forms of knowledge and their physical forms of transmission. As he writes, "[T]he word *epistemology* was used to disavow epistemological practices that did not correspond to the Western management of knowledge" ([Mignolo 2011](#), p. 172).

⁷ For an interesting and well-documented account on La Via Campesina, which has informed my thinking on this movement, see the important book by Annette A. [Desmarais \(2007\)](#).

leadership capacity among women farm leaders counts among their foremost priorities. Women have also strongly contributed to further define La Via Campesina's position on food sovereignty, which includes: (a) favoring organic production, (b) reducing the use of potentially harmful fertilizers, and (c) initiating an immediate halt to the trade of banned agrochemicals (Desmarais 2003, p. 143). After these early discussions, it became clear that no food sovereignty would be achieved without the strong involvement of women in policy development in the different communities (Desmarais 2003, p. 143).

From 1996 to 2000, La Via Campesina Women's Commission concentrated its work in the Americas in its three major regions: Central America, South America, and the Caribbean. In their discussions, crucial issues such as human rights, struggles for agrarian reform, management of natural resources, biodiversity, and the impact of agricultural trade were considered central for food sovereignty. This period was a turning point in raising awareness of the importance of women working on equal terms with their male counterparts to build an alternative agricultural model. At the third International Via Campesina Conference, a "Via Campesina Gender Position Paper" was approved, placing women and gender issues at the heart of the movement; "... [I]t is fitting and necessary to articulate a gender analysis in order to shape inclusive, just and viable long-term solutions." (Via Campesina Third International Conference, quoted in Desmarais 2007, p. 176). This document elaborated on three main principles: equality and human rights, economic justice, and social development, with "each clearly specifying the role, needs and interests of women" (Desmarais 2003, p. 144); it has been of major importance and has produced a balancing effect in the responsibilities of all actors implicated in the preservation of life on the planet. At this stage in the Anthropocene and in the consideration of women's roles, labor, and social expectations placed on them, new materialist insights into an ethics of care which transcends the human, and, thus, sexual difference, are certainly liberatory for humanity as a whole, and for the environment. As Puig de la Bellacasa insists on "... the moral undertones that invite us to transcend the 'human' for something 'more than.' It also starts from a human center, then to reach 'beyond.'" (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017, p. 2). What we cannot ignore is the fact that,

Care is a human trouble, but this does not make care a human-only matter. Affirming the absurdity of disentangling human and nonhuman relations of care and the ethicalities involved requires decentering human agencies, as well as reminding close to the predicaments and inheritances of situated human doings. (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017, p. 2)

Since its inception, La Via Campesina has opposed the introduction of genetically modified crops into worldwide agricultural systems. While recognizing their potential to alleviate shortages in food production, the organization considers that the dangers associated with their use outweigh any beneficial effect. Apart from any future unknown or unforeseen consequences of the use of genetically modified crops, La Via Campesina sees two immediate problems associated with their use. First is their control by large transnational corporations and second is their negative effects on biodiversity. Regarding large corporations, the development and marketing of genetically modified crops is aggressively promoted by large transnational agribusiness corporations (exemplified by Monsanto) that impose stringent control over the seeds and that require the extensive use of agrotoxics of their own manufacture, thus closing a circle where farmers are absolutely dependent on these transnational companies. This tight control of crop markets by large agribusiness corporations is becoming even more stringent with a recent wave of fusions into mega corporations within the agribusiness market. As part of this wave, Dow Chemicals fused with DuPont, Monsanto was acquired by Bayer AG, and Syngenta partnered with ChemChina. An immediate result of this oligopoly is the ensuing lack of food security for regions where farmers are unable to pay the prices that these corporations establish. Regarding biodiversity, the negative impact of genetically modified crops is two-fold. On one hand, the use of just a few varieties of common crops poses the risk of losing the necessary biodiversity of these crops in the form of less-used varieties as a source of genetic material for the development of new varieties in the future. On the other hand, the increased use of agrotoxics

associated with genetically modified crops determines a high risk of eliminating a large part of the non-crop biodiversity in the planet.

5. La Via Campesina: Insurgent Practices

La Via Campesina opposes the uncontrolled entry of foreign capital into local agricultural and food production. Apart from resulting in an impoverishment of farmers, given that large corporations use their economic might to impose their harsh market conditions on farmers, these corporations are a source of food insecurity for local communities, as food production, rather than being guaranteed, is subject to the vagaries of the markets. A well-known example is that of the fight that MST, an active Brazilian member of La Via Campesina, has been undertaking against transnational corporations in Brazil.

5.1. Cevasa's Occupation: Against Agribusiness

On 9 March 2007, over nine hundred women occupied the Cevasa sugar mill and power plant, located in the region of Ribeirão Preto, São Paulo state. This action was widely covered in the news and has later been reviewed by [Abramsky \(2010\)](#). The previous year, a major part (63%) of the shares of Cevasa were bought by Cargill, a large American global corporation in the food, agriculture, and industrial markets, and the world's largest privately held corporation in terms of revenue ([Bodley 2012](#), p. 205).

Cevasa's was the largest sugarcane mill in Brazil: it produced 1.4 million tons of cane sugar per year or 125,000 L of alcohol. After Cargill bought a large part of the Cevasa plant, the previous owners used the money to buy another mill in the Western state of Acre. This practice of selling part of the capital of local mills to foreign companies with the subsequent expansion of production in other regions of Brazil and Latin America is common in Ribeirão Preto and contributes to an ongoing de-localization of agricultural production.

During their action, La Via Campesina women defended the adoption of an alternative agricultural model which privileges the small farmer (responsible for the production of a good part of the food crops) and that implements an agrarian reform that modifies the land structure of the country. The region of Ribeirão Preto was chosen for this action because it symbolizes the expansion of sugarcane estates, a model based on the overexploitation of peasants (more than 15 workers there have died of exhaustion in the past three years), and the destruction of the environment.

The occupation was part of La Via Campesina's action "Women in Defence of Life and Against Agribusiness". Through this, rural workers undertook to denounce the false promises of agribusiness in relation to sugarcane planting and to ethanol production, alerting people to the real consequences of increased sugarcane cultivation for the environment, the pollution of fires and the respiratory diseases caused by them, the vast extent of land concentration in Brazil, and the consequent increase in social differences.⁸

This action was linked to a large demonstration against the state visit of American president George W. Bush to Brazil. President Bush had been very interested in the promotion of bioalcohol as a fuel for automation because it provided a convenient outlet for the U.S.' large stocks of surplus grains. Following that, major American firms became interested in the production of bioethanol at low cost, and his visit was interpreted as an attempt to negotiate with then Brazilian president Lula da Silva access to Brazilian sugarcane bioalcohol. For MST, bioethanol is not a clean energy but an environmentally damaging one that in addition only serves to convert Brazil into "the backyard of the American elites."

⁸ Subsequently, sugarcane field burning, a traditional practice, has been banned in the state of São Paulo, a legislation that these protests helped implement ([São-Paulo-Environmental-System 2017](#)).

The way the Cevasa occupation unfolded demonstrates how La Via Campesina stages its actions. The occupation by women took place peacefully and no goods were damaged. Not wanting to risk the onset of violence between demonstrators and employees, after being assured that no damage would be caused to the facilities, the plant's directors gave license to workers of the daily shift.

5.2. Nestlé: Predatory Exploitation of Water Resources

Also in Brazil, on 20 March 2018, the MST movement staged an occupation of a Nestlé mineral water processing factory in São Lourenço, state of Minas Gerais. As it was reported (EFE 2018), again, very early in the morning, a group of six hundred women from the MST occupied the plant protesting the privatization of water, which, they claimed, was going to be traded in the 8th World Water Forum to be held in Brasilia. In their denunciation, the MST accused then president Michel Temer of selling their water to international corporations.

The MST accused the Forum of being just a marketplace for negotiations with high executives from companies such as Nestlé and Coca-Cola for the exploitation of Brazil's water resources. The MST cited Nestlé as an example of a transnational corporation established in Brazil for decades undertaking predatory and irregular forms of natural resources exploitation. For the MST water is a common good of humanity and defending it is a matter of sovereignty. The MST further denounced that in January 2018, President Temer and Nestlé President Paul Bulcke met to discuss the exploitation of the Guarani Aquifer, a massive reserve that covers four countries (Brazil, Argentina, Paraguay, and Uruguay). The Nestlé company, which controls 10.5% of the world's water market, has been installed in Minas Gerais since 1994, when it bought the sources and the Parque das Águas de São Lourenço. Since 1997, the local population has denounced the exploitation of mineral waters that were widely used for medicinal treatments before being privatized. Besides the reduction in the available water flow, the MST denounced changes in taste of the water due to over-exploitation. These allegations have been dismissed by the Nestlé company, which accused in turn the MST of causing damage to their São Lourenço plant facilities.

5.3. Punta de Agua: Countering Land-Grabbing

One of the aims of La Via Campesina is to help farmers, who are often associated with native minorities, fight against land-grabbing by large agroindustrial corporations or even by local authorities, who are usually acting on behalf of hidden economic interests. In land-grabbing, an established pattern emerges. Farmer families, who have worked their land for generations, are confronted by large agribusiness who take advantage of the fact that these families seldom register their lands to inscribe them in their name. They then exhibit titles of ownership of the farmers' lands and try to expel them. This is a dramatic matter of concern for La Via Campesina's activism. As Puig de la Bellacasa has argued, "Soils are now up on the list of environmental matters calling for global care [. . .] [soils] are a new frontier for knowledge and fascination about the life teaming [sic] in this dark alterity. Human persistent mistreatment and neglect of soils is emphasized in calls that connect the economic, political and ethical value of soils to matters of human survival" (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017, p. 169).

La Via Campesina organizes actions to resist these evictions and to force authorities to recognize ancestral ownership rights for farmers. A case in point took place in June 2016 at Punta de Agua, in San Rafael, Mendoza, Argentina (Unión de Trabajadores Sin Tierra-Movimiento Nacional Campesino Indígena (UST-MNCI) 2016). There, mapuche farmers who have lived off their land for generations were ordered to vacate their land by legal representatives of the transnational company Laguna Blue-Agua Segura, who exhibited titles of ownership, trespassed their fences, threatened them, and used physical force trying to expel them. The La Via Campesina-affiliated UST-MNCI movement immediately mobilized its members to counteract these actions. Some years back, the same company, claiming property rights, had fenced off the Punta de Agua village, effectively isolating 300 families on the basis of claimed property rights of land surrounding the settlement. Mobilizations of UST-MNCI had then forced the company to remove the fences.

Following the June 2016 threats, UST-MNCI mobilized their members in the region, including women and men, who demonstrated in Punta de Agua and publicly denounced these actions. On 27 June 2016, UST-MNCI activists blocked streets in Punta de Agua and in the presence of San Rafael municipal workers and two members of parliament demanded that authorities recognize ownership of traditionally farmed land and block new registrations of previously unclaimed lands. They further demanded the presence of authorities to enforce removal of wire fences in community land now claimed by the transnational corporation, stating that inaction on the part of authorities would be answered by “farmer’s justice” and forceful removal of these fences. After this action, attempts of the corporation to reclaim farmers’ lands continued. Finally, in light of the UST-MNCI resistance, in August 2016, local authorities annulled newly issued property rights and recognized ownership of the land by the mapuche families who had traditionally farmed it. As activist Paula Gioia remarks, “The land where our cattle grazes, where we produce our hay, where we grow cereals and vegetables, the forests from where we make our heating wood and the water sources for our drinking and for irrigation can not be handled as commodities!” ([La_Via_Campesina \(@via_campesina\) 2018](#)).

With the kind of activist protests I have described, La Via Campesina has come to represent in many ways the entanglements that for Karen Barad redefine the human in light of its connectivity with non-human others and “the relationalities of becoming of which we are a part” ([Barad 2007](#), p. 393). Recognition of such entanglements, in other words, shifts the focus “from unitary to nomadic subjectivity” ([Braidotti 2013](#), p. 49). Barad’s understanding of connectivity and relationality eschews unitariness and self-centeredness and leads in the direction of Braidotti’s views on nomadic subjectivity. This “nomadism” emerges when the subject resists being fixed within a rigid frame constricting its movement and expansion:

Though the image of “nomadic subjects” is inspired by the experience of peoples or cultures that are literally nomadic, the nomadism in question here refers to the kind of critical consciousness that resists settling into socially coded modes of thought and behaviour. Not all nomads are world travelers; some of the greatest trips can take place without physically moving from one’s habitat. It is the subversion of set conventions that defines the nomadic state, not the literal act of traveling. ([Braidotti 2011](#), p. 5)

Acknowledging that the human is embedded within a large network of other social, biological, political, semiotic and other forces opens up a trans-species network where non-human others are recognized as co-participants and bearers of agency and accountability. These non-human others include other biological entities such as water, soils, geological layers, seeds, bio-fertilizers, and a long list of elements whose contribution to life as we know it in the planet would be unthinkable. As I have attempted to show, the intra-actions among deeply connected environmental and social issues have become an inexhaustible source of “transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities [. . .] as one part of needed political work” ([Haraway 1991](#), p. 154). As Mozambican activist Graça Samo, International Coordinator of the World March of Women, reminding us of the importance of ancestors for indigenous populations, asserts, “The moment in which we are living now is a time of extremes . . . This has to be something that makes us as a global feminist movement to come together and say, what is our strategy in this moment? What is the right way to position ourselves to take control of the political struggle? [. . .] We are not inventing, we are reclaiming the forms that our ancestors have been using” ([Samo 2019](#)).

6. Concluding Remarks: Re-Distributing, Re-Thinking, Responding to the Planet

Prompted by Jacques Derrida’s philosophical considerations on his visual interaction with his cat ([Derrida 2002](#)) and by Barbara Smuts’ baboon ethology studies ([Smuts 1985](#)), Donna Haraway has argued that, as it is with humans, interacting with non-humans is not simply about reacting to them, but rather about establishing a bidirectional communication ([Haraway 2008](#), pp. 19–27), about

“looking back,” (Haraway 2008, p. 106), and about accepting that one can establish communication in a reciprocal way.

As I have attempted to show, it is imperative that an engaged involvement with the current status of the degradation of the planet at this stage of late capitalism gains momentum. Through grassroots activist actions, organized protest, and strategic communication, social movements urge us to move towards an ethics of care, protection, and respect for the planet. It is only by means of a cultural and educational awareness, deeply inspired by the teachings of new materialist philosophies, deep ecology, practices of re-distribution of resources, and social justice initiatives, that current practices of labor, consumption, and development can make progress and bring about significant changes in the relations of all elements and actors at play.

When it comes to the shibboleth of “sustainability”, philosopher Val Plumwood has argued that “[t]he often-invoked term ‘sustainability’ tends to obscure the seriousness of the situation [of ecological crisis]; clearly no culture which sets in motion massive processes of biospheric degradation which it has normalized, and which it cannot respond or correct can hope to survive for very long” (Plumwood 2002, p. 1). Along the same lines, Benson and Craig have argued that sustainability might no longer be an appropriate course of action under current conditions, given that “‘sustainability’ refers to the long term ability to continue to engage in a particular activity,” and “assumes that we (a) know what can be sustained and (b) have the capacity to maintain stationarity,” (Benson and Craig 2014, p. 107). For them, “with climate change, we face a future in which we have no idea what we can sustain” (2014, p. 107), a future where “resiliency” is more likely to succeed than sustainability because “resilience thinking acknowledges disequilibrium and nonlinear, continual change—often as a result of crossing a ‘tipping point’ or threshold [. . .] and reorients us to focus on coping with change” (2014, p. 107). Coping with change, recovering quickly from difficulties, and being “resilient” also implies being able to redefine our interactions with an environment subject to critical modifications. Would it be possible—indeed, one cannot not acknowledge the possibility—for (multi)species relationships “to avoid commensalism or parasitism while yet occurring inside differential relations of power? [. . .] Mutualism is not so much about equality as reciprocity across difference” (Garvey 2014, p. 143). According to Canadian *métis* anthropologist Zoe Todd, “[T]he climate, Sila, is an incredibly important organizing concept for many actors in Inuit territories [. . .] Sila is both climate and a life force” (Todd 2016, p. 6). Todd denounces the absence in Western academia of indigenous voices who are strongly engaged in crucial issues for the survival of the planet, such as climate change. Millie Thrasher, Rosemarie Kuptana, and climate change activist Sheila Watt-Cloutier (who was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize alongside Al Gore in 2007) deserve a special mention for their sustained activism and scholarly work on many fronts. Todd raises the poignant question of when Euro-American scholarship will take the intellectual labor and activist work of Inuit women seriously (Todd 2016, p. 7).

Revisiting Donna Haraway’s recent ideas in *Staying with the Trouble* (Haraway 2016), she elaborates on the symbiotic entanglements within the natural world in the direction of creating a multispecies ethic of “living-with”: “Living with and dying with each other potently in the Chthulucene can be a fierce reply to the dictates of both Anthropos and Capital” (Haraway 2016, p. 2). Nonetheless, Haraway’s caveat should also be addressed; in her view, “Symbiosis [living with, my emphasis] is not a synonym for mutually beneficial” (Haraway 2016, p. 60), and *sympoiesis* (her coinage), entails “‘making with.’ Nothing makes itself; nothing is really autopoietic or self-organizing” (Haraway 2016, p. 58). Haraway’s “with-ness” helps us respond and become “respondents” to the inequalities and differences populating our planet, integrating material practices and situated knowledges. Staying with the trouble implies learning to coexist respectfully with the world of matter. Environmental geographer Juanita Sundberg states that “indigenous authors in the Americas [. . .] outline complex knowledge systems in which animals, plants and spirits are understood as beings who participate in the everyday practices that bring worlds into being. These epistemic traditions are not organized in and through dualist ontologies of nature/culture” (Sundberg 2013, p. 35). Along these lines, Sami political scientist Rauna Kuokkanen differentiates between learning to know the other and learning as

an engagement with the other, and calls for learning as “participatory reciprocity”, i.e., being attentive to other epistemologies (indigenous, black, . . .) as part of the geopolitical present (Kuokkanen 2007, p. 118; quoted in Sundberg 2013, p. 40).

It is precisely at this point where a feminist, new materialist, and environmental-justice-informed activism can have a larger impact: though humanity and the practices of extractive capitalism⁹ have profoundly transformed and damaged life in the planet for years to come, a new generation of green activists can claim redress and gain visibility and political representation for a new reparative agenda. In the face of this bleak panorama, there remain submerged perspectives and other modes of perception that see, hear, and imagine life-worlds that escape the current corporate, extractive impulse. Indigenous epistemologies, grassroots ecological initiatives, and transnational protest movements should probably join forces in this common endeavor to save the planet. It is in the creation of emergent spaces through collective action, politics, writing, art, and community building that an engaged humanity can strive to counter destruction and death. Only at this stage can we expect to remedy the ills of overexploitation, exhaustion, and ravaging the resources of the Earth in our endeavor to remain cohabitants of the planet.

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⁹ See Gómez-Barris’ important *The Extractive Zone: Social Ecologies and Decolonial Perspectives* (Gómez-Barris 2017). Here, the author analyses the oppositional practices that have forcefully emerged in different locations against extractive capitalism, including not only the intellectual and theoretical basis of these resistances, but also the work of artists and activists in response to those exploitative and abusive practices.

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