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HOLDING GREEN COMMONS:  
VANDANDA SHIVA'S SPIRIT-LANTERNED GUARDIANS

*Author Bio*

Joshua M. Hall earned his Ph.D. from Vanderbilt University, and his research focuses various historical and geographical lenses on philosophy's boundaries, particularly the intersection of aesthetics, psychology and social justice. This includes 88 peer-reviewed journal articles (including in *The Pluralist*, *Philosophy and Literature*, and Oxford University's *Essays in Criticism*), five of which have recently been republished in Spanish translation, and coediting (with Sarah Tyson) *Philosophy Imprisoned: The Love of Wisdom in the Age of Mass Incarceration*. Finally, his related work in the arts includes 106 poems in literary journals (including *North Dakota Quarterly*) and thirty years' experience in dance.

*Abstract*

Building on a recent article that identifies a "dancing ecofeminist logic" in Australian logician Val Plumwood and pairs it with Australian sociologist Ariel Salleh's "ethics of holding," the present article further elaborates this logical ethics into a transgender ethics of "holding green commons" in Indian philosopher of science and ecological activist Vandana Shiva's *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology, and Development* (2016). I then bolster this ethics by partnering it with Spirit/Dance (a reconstruction of global spiritual practices of the poor) to highlight these spiritual practitioners as "spirit-lanterned guardians," inspired by the heroic protestors of the Chipko land rights movement in India, who channeled Hindu spirits and carried lanterns in the daylight, to symbolize their silvicultural wisdom defending the forest. Finally, I identify five such guardians in the Global North today: three fictional "spirits" (Peter Pan, Green Lantern, and Robin Hood) and two present-day ecofeminist activists, namely martyred "Cop City" protestor and forest defender Tortugueta Terán and the interdisciplinary movement artist jill sigman/thinkdance.

KEYWORDS: *ecofeminist philosophy; Vandana Shiva; dance; logic; transgender*

*Introduction*

In a previous article on the Australian logician and ecofeminist philosopher Val Plumwood, I endorse her deployment of the "dance of interaction" as an alternative logic to the "classical propositional logic" of patriarchal colonialism.<sup>1</sup> The present article further elaborates Plumwood's "dancing feminist logic," already paired with Australian sociologist Ariel Salleh's "holding ethic of ecofeminism," into a transgender ethics of "holding green commons" in Indian physicist and eco-theorist/activist luminary Vandana Shiva's *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology, and Development*, as heroically embodied in the spirit-lanterned guardians of India's

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<sup>1</sup> Val Plumwood, *Feminist and the Mastery of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1993).



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Chipko movement.<sup>2</sup> I then bolster this ethics by partnering it with “Spirit/Dance,” a reconstruction of global spiritual practices of the poor, to highlight its dancing ethical practitioners as “spirit-lanterned guardians,” inspired by Chipko protests channeling Hindu spirits and bearing lanterns in the day to symbolize their silvicultural wisdom defending the forest, as embodied in three fictional “spirits” (Peter Pan, Robin Hood, and Green Lantern) and two present-day ecofeminist activists (martyred “Cop City” protestor and forest defender “Tortuguita” Terán and interdisciplinary movement artist jill sigman/thinkdance).

Before getting into the details, though, at the request of a peer reviewer I will first provide a more robust context. Apologies in advance for the additional length and extensive self-citation, but the present investigation is a continuation of numerous projects from over a decade. To summarize what follows, it (1) clarifies my philosophical methodology, (2) addresses measures taken to prevent cultural appropriation (regarding both the spirits and forest defenders), (3) explains the relationship between its seemingly-unrelated meanings of “transgender,” and (4) evaluates the scholarly debate on alleged essentialisms in ecofeminism and Shiva. Finally, in the process of (1)-(4), it also further justifies the three fictional “spirits” featured in the conclusion. Readers who are not interested in these issues, however, or who would prefer to consider the present investigation on its own terms first, are encouraged to skip ahead as desired.

*Philosophical methodology.* This investigation is situated primarily within a school of thought known variously as continental (European), phenomenological, or hermeneutic (interpretive) philosophy, which is dominant in France and Germany but marginalized in the U.S. and Britain. In the latter region, the dominant school is analytic (Anglo-American) philosophy, modeled on the natural sciences and emphasizing precision and clarity. By contrast, the continental tradition is modeled on history, literature, and the arts, and emphasizes meaningfulness and depth. It has also been vital in the emergence of decolonizing thought in the Global South, whereas the analytic tradition exhibits lingering, unresolved complicities with colonialism. For example, whereas analytic philosophy denies the label “philosophy” to anything but formalized arguments in prose (often excluding even the rich traditions of China and India), continental philosophy also recognizes other forms of expression as philosophy, including description, narrative, and poetry (such as the verse of the *Daodejing*).

*Cultural appropriation.* Global Northern scholars today who affirm any spiritual practices derived from Indigenous peoples are ethically obligated to perform a tightrope dance between (a) the temptation of a form of cultural appropriation that I have elsewhere termed “philosophical shamanism,” and (b) denying their debt to Indigenous cultural practices in crafting new ones that are similarly sustainable for ecological and social justice.<sup>3</sup> Extending critiques by Native American theorists including P. J. Deloria on “playing Indian,” Geary Hobson on “white shamans,” and Ward Churchill on “spiritual hucksterism,” I have argued that Global Northerners should avoid using the term “shaman” for their new practices, which should instead be grounded in both accountability to their own communities and also a core commitment to social justice for Indigenous peoples worldwide (with an emphasis on political sovereignty, ecological justice, and adequate social welfare).<sup>4</sup>

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2. Vandana Shiva, *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology, and Development* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2016).

3. Joshua Hall, “A Critique of Philosophical Shamanism,” *The Pluralist* 16, no. 3 (2022): 87–106.

My own project in this vein, *Spirit/Dance*, was originally motivated by the lack of an adequate response from the Democratic Party establishment to Kyle Rittenhouse's killing of two Black Lives Matters protesters after the police murder of George Floyd.<sup>5</sup> Convinced that more must be done immediately to repair our world, but faced with a lack of political will for armed community self-defense, I concluded that a reconstruction of social justice-seeking spiritual practices might indirectly empower revolution in the long term. More specifically, having already recounted how (1) the Dionysian Mysteries empowered the overthrow of Athens' neighboring tyrants, (2) Vodou empowered the Haitian Revolution, and (3) Indigenous South American shamanism has empowered the environmental justice movement, *Spirit/Dance* developed in part as a synthesis and improvisation on all three traditions.<sup>6</sup> It begins with Dionysus because that god of dance (identified by some scholars with the Hindu god Shiva) is part of my own cultural heritage, thereby helping *Spirit/Dance* avoid cultural appropriation.<sup>7</sup>

To summarize my previous research on the Mysteries, Nietzsche's modern popularization of Dionysus included a censorship of his androgyny and advocacy for women, queer people, the poor, foreigners, the city, democracy, and peace. But a minority scholarly tradition inspired by Walter F. Otto have recovered the ancient Greek poet Euripides' more authentic depiction. In support of the latter, a standing reward was offered, during ancient Athens' largest annual Dionysian festival, for anyone who brought to the city-state the decapitated head of a tyrant. Additionally, numerous wars of liberation in Ancient Rome were fought under Dionysus' banner, including the slave revolt of Spartacus (whose paramour was a priestess of the god, preaching that Spartacus was divinely chosen by him for a mission of liberation). Finally, a trace of that liberating power can still be found in numerous Global Northern figures originally derived from Dionysus, including Scottish playwright J. M. Barrie's **Peter Pan**, whose name alludes to the Greek god loosely analogous to Dionysus.

In part to avoid ethnocentrism (the opposite pitfall to cultural appropriation), *Spirit/Dance* also draws on Haitian Vodou with its concept of channeling an indefinite number of spirits, and the distinctive conception of "spirits" (*xapiri*) of the Yanomami people of the Amazon rainforest. The latter conception is articulated, for example, in *The Falling Sky*, the autobiography of Davi Kopenawa, a Yanomami shaman who redirects that practice into global activism for environmental and social justice.<sup>8</sup> In essence, Yanomami shamans guide their communities by interpreting, under the influence of a natural hallucinogenic (*yākoana* powder), the communicative dances performed by the spirits, whose closest European equivalent (according

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4. See Ward Churchill, "Spiritual Hucksterism: The Rise of the Plastic Medicine Men," *Native Son: Selected Essays on Indigenism, 1985-1995* (MIT Press, 1999), 355-66; Philip J. Deloria, *Playing Indian* (Yale University Press, 1999); and Geary Hobson, "The Rise of the White Shaman as a New Version of Cultural Imperialism," *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 14, nos. 2-3 (2002): 1-11.

5. Joshua M. Hall, "Introducing *Spirit/Dance*: Reconstructed Spiritual Practices," *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 22, no. 2 (2023): 185-207.

6. See Joshua M. Hall, "Dionysus *Lyseus* Reborn: The Revolutionary Philosophy Chorus," *Philosophy Today* 66, no. 1 (2022): 57-74; "Kopenawa's Shamanic Parrhesia: Wasp Spirits vs. White Climate Epidemic," *Parrhesia* 41 (2025): 85-102; and "Tornadic Black Angels: Vodou, Dance, Revolution," *Journal of Black Studies* 54, no. 2 (2023): 157-78.

7. See for example Alain Daniélou, *God of Love and Ecstasy: The Traditions of Shiva and Dionysus*, reprint edition (Inner Traditions, 1992).

8. Davi Kopenawa & Bruce Albert, *The Falling Sky: Words of a Yanomami Shaman*, trans. Alison Dundy (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2013).

to his translator) is a cross between “fairies” and “angels.”<sup>9</sup> Kopenawa compares these spirits to images from modern media (photos, TV, movies), and claims that white people have their own dedicated “spirits,” which notably wear military uniforms and sunglasses.<sup>10</sup> These white peoples’ spirits, he relates, emigrated long ago with a group of Yanomami who have since become white people, teaching their descendants “to build airplanes, machines to capture songs” and electronic images.<sup>11</sup> Resisting the temptation to capitalize on this logical implication (that Yanomami shamanism belongs, as their own forgotten tradition, to white people today), Spirit/Dance merely follows the Yanomami’s lead, joining them in coalitional solidarity.

Pivoting, on the subject of cultural appropriation, from spirits to forest defenders, multiple theorists of the Earth Jurisprudence environmental movement claim that Shiva’s Chipko forest guardians descend in part from those of premodern Britain.<sup>12</sup> In support of this claim, I note that (a) Chipko was an explicitly Gandhian organization, (b) Gandhi studied law in Britain and derived his concept of civil disobedience (*satyagraha*, “soul force”) from a thinker (Thoreau) in a former British colony, and (c) Shiva earned her master’s and PhD in Philosophy in another former British colony (Canada). Thus, both forest-defending traditions grew from the same roots. And if Chipko is that tree’s most recent harvest, the harvest before that was in nineteenth-century Britain, whose forest defenders (like Chipko) arose as a counterforce to the “enclosures” of the commons. Also in that era, Karl Marx published an 1842 newspaper article on new Prussian laws targeting “wood thieves,” which laws, Marx writes, “turned the ordinary peasant into a ‘criminal’ or ‘enemy of the wood’.”<sup>13</sup> Finally on this note, the first harvest of the forest defender tree was over 500 years earlier, in medieval Britain, whose most famous “wood thief” is **Robin Hood**, another of my three personal Spirit/Dance “spirits” discussed below.<sup>14</sup>

*Transgender defined.* Associated today primarily with the “T” of LGBT, “transgender” is also the term Shiva deploys in 1988 to qualify Chipko’s revolutionary work – to emphasize that it is not limited, in a gender-essentialist way, to ciswomen. The common element to both meanings of the word is the etymological sense of going “across” or “beyond” (trans-) a given conception of gender. For transgender folks, this means moving beyond the gender assigned to them at birth, whether into a nonbinary position, or into the opposite side of an imagined gender binary.<sup>15</sup>

9. Kopenawa, *The Falling Sky*, 208.

10. Ibid, 161.

11. Ibid, 162.

12. Ibid, 162. For two examples, see Peter Burdon, *Earth Jurisprudence: Private Property and the Environment*. London: Routledge, 2017); and Burns Weston and David Bollier, *Green Governance: Ecological Survival, Human Rights, and the Law of the Commons*, Reprint Edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014). Weston and Bollier name, as one of “perhaps a handful of commons ‘stars’,” the “Indian activist Vandana Shiva” (157).

13. Burdon, *Earth Jurisprudence*, 39.

14. In support of Burdon’s account, and its connection to both Robin Hood and Shiva’s forest defenders, Earth Jurisprudence theorists Weston and Bollier cite the “Indigenous law,” of Magna Carta’s companion treaty, the “Charter of the Forest.” On the basis of this charter, which was in force for over 700 years, medieval courts “upheld the right of commoners to stage maypole dance celebrations” on the nobles’ land even after the commoners had been evicted – and these events were dedicated to Robin Hood (108). For more on this Robin Hood connection, see Christopher James Stone, “A Brief History of May Day,” *Whitstable Views*, April 25, 2025: <https://whitstableviews.com/2025/04/25/robin-hood-may-games-morris-dances-and-international-workers-day/>.

15. For more, see for example Sophie Lewis, *Enemy Feminisms: TERFs, Policewomen, and Girlbosses Against Liberation* (Haymarket, 2025); Alok Vaid-Menon, *Beyond the Gender Binary*, illustrated by Ash Kwak Lukashevsky (Penguin Workshop, 2020); and Jules Gill-

And for Shiva, it means that what she terms “nature’s logic” is an abstract principle that similarly transcends the embodied gender of any given human being, as anyone can embody it.

Relevant here is my journal article on contemporary French philosopher Étienne Balibar’s concept of the “trans-individual,” which he borrows from Gilbert Simondon and Gilles Deleuze.<sup>16</sup> In brief, Balibar claims that any individual, rather than being a self-contained unit, both materially and mentally (re)assembles itself by exchanging parts of itself with others. Just so, transgender people mix and match images and representations of various genders, and many also experiment with the material interchanges of hormones, hormone blockers, and gender-affirming surgery. To clarify Balibar’s concept, I link his “trans-individuals” to the pop-cultural phenomenon of the “X-Men” superhero team (who added their first transgender member in 2022), and thereby to the (then) majority-transgender Birmingham Philosophy Guild. (The latter, which my former students and I re-founded in 2012, is a community group who engage in theoretical discussion, support group self-cultivation, and political activism).<sup>17</sup> And the article concludes by proposing the assemblage of teams, modeled on the Guild, of what I term “Prof. Balibar’s X-Mutants,” as a transgender-affirming corrective to his challenge to readers: namely, to choose between becoming “little Eichmanns,” or “citizens against the powers that be.”

For recent evidence of the transindividual Guild-team’s effectiveness in this vein, in 2025 we successfully pressured one of my employers, the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB), to fire a faculty member who was publicly a member of the neo-Nazi organization Identity Evropa. Our undergraduates had been protesting his employment since 2019, but the Guild succeeded through a social media campaign which quadrupled our Facebook group’s membership (now over 1,500 members)—including by deploying another superhero team, the Green Lantern Corps.<sup>18</sup> For two examples, I featured a panel from the comic as our Facebook group’s cover photo, and added a welcome message for new members applying a social justice interpretation of the Green Lanterns’ philosophy (of willfully-imaginative solidarity) to the Guild’s activism as “guardians of the Magic City” (Birmingham’s official nickname). In further support of this strategy, multiple award-winning Black female novelist N. K. Jemisin (whose father was born in the civil rights capital of Birmingham) wrote a 2019-2021 run of the Green Lantern comic thematizing the BLM protests, each issue of which featured an epigraph from a

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Peterson, *A Short History of Trans Misogyny* (Verso, 2024).

16. Joshua M. Hall, “Prof. Balibar’s X-Mutant Transindividuals: Civic Disobedience in the Birmingham Philosophy Guild,” *Culture and Dialogue* 12, no. 1 (2025): 123–145.

17. For more on the X-Men’s social justice power, see for example Ramzi Fawaz, “‘Where No X-Man Has Gone Before!’: Mutant Superheroes and the Cultural Politics of Popular Fantasy in Postwar America,” in *American Literature* 83, no. 2 (2011): 355–388. And for more on the new X-Men trans character, see M. N. Negus, “Meet Marvel’s Latest X-Men Character, Trans Mutant Shela Sexton, Escapade,” *CBR*, May 16, 2022: <https://www.cbr.com/marvel-introduces-trans-mutant-hero-escapade/>.

18. For more on the undergraduates’ protests, see Hycall Brooks, “Why UAB won’t fire nationalists,” *Kaleidoscope*, Aug. 31, 2019, <https://uabblazermedia.com/2019/08/why-uab-wont-fire-nationalists/>.

social justice icon (including James Baldwin and Nina Simone).<sup>19</sup> In part for these reasons, **Green Lantern** completes my personal trio of Spirit/Dance “spirits” below.

*Alleged essentialisms.* Beginning with ecofeminism generally, as I explore in the predecessor to the present investigation, Australian ecofeminist and logician Val Plumwood challenges the criticism of essentialism in part through her concept of “the master model.” Whereas “Much feminist theory,” Plumwood writes, “has detected a masculine presence in the officially gender-neutral concept of reason,” her account instead “suggests that it is not a masculine identity pure and simple, but the multiple, complex cultural identity of the master formed in the context of race, class, species and gender domination, which is at issue.”<sup>20</sup> Plumwood calls this the master “model” in part because it has become a template for non-male others to imitate – including even some liberal feminist women – in an attempt to acquire some of that “master” power, at the steep cost of perpetuating its oppressiveness against other disempowered people.<sup>21</sup>

This troubling phenomenon is one way of interpreting much of the scholarly debate about alleged essentialisms (not limited to gender) in Shiva. That is, some of her critics are fellow South Asian women who accuse her of placing too much blame on the “masters” of European colonialism and neocolonialism. Representative of that trend, the most-cited source in the debate is from Bina Agarwal, a socialist feminist whose proposed alternative to ecofeminism (and to “Gandhism and Marxism”) she calls “feminist environmentalism.”<sup>22</sup> In sum, Agarwal accuses Shiva of (1) hastily generalizing from “rural women primarily from northwestern India” to all Indian and Third World women, (2) oversimplifying the internal complexity of institutionalized gender and nature in Indian history, and (3) blaming the oppression of nature and women exclusively on European colonialism, science, and development.<sup>23</sup> Regarding Agarwal’s criticism (1), as illustrated by the Earth Jurisprudence cited above, Global Northern readers have rightly interpreted Shiva’s championing of Chipko as merely one important case study (rather than a blanket claim about all Indian or Global Southern women). As for (2), which is the most impactful criticism from this debate today (given the dominance of Hindu supremacism in India), I address it in my reading of Shiva below. Finally, (3) has aged the worst in light of intervening decades of anticolonial scholarship, which shows how British colonizers deliberately exacerbated precolonial unjust hierarchies. This is not to deny the importance of the latter, especially given today’s Dalit liberation movement, but merely to argue that any critique of pre-colonized peoples’ internal oppression should also incorporate colonizers’ external oppression, including their self-exculpating historical revisionism.<sup>24</sup>

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19. More precisely, Jemisin’s new Green Lantern protagonist, Sojourner “Jo” Mullen (named for slavery abolitionist Sojourner Truth, and modeled on queer Afrofuturist musical icon Janelle Monáe), is a bisexual, Black, former NYPD cop who was fired during the Black Lives Matter, after testifying in court against her partner for near-fatal police brutality against protestors. For more, see Christopher Roman, “Green Lantern, Structural Racism, and N.K. Jemisin’s Far Sector,” *The Routledge Companion to Superhero Studies* (Routledge: 2025).

20. Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, 5.

21. Ibid, 26.

22. Bina Agarwal, “The Gender and Environment Debate: Lessons from India,” *Feminist Studies* 18, no. 1 (1992): 119-158, 146.

23. Ibid, 125.

24. See for example, Thenmozhi Soundararajan, *The Trauma of Caste: A Dalit Feminist Meditation on Survivorship, Healing, and Abolition* (North Atlantic Books, 2022).

Oversimplifying Agarwal's critique in a 2017 review of this debate, A. E. Kings accuses Shiva of generalizing from the Chipko women to, not merely all Indian or Global Southern women, but rather to all women everywhere.<sup>25</sup> Kings also accuses Shiva of being insufficiently intersectional, even though Shiva was a pioneering figure of intersectionality (when *Staying Alive* was first published in 1988), precisely for offering an intersectional analysis of gender, race, class, and nationality. Finally from Kings, she also affirms a polemical critique of Shiva by Meera Nanda, a liberal feminist philosopher of science (and apologist for the Green Revolution), the crux of whose objections seems to be an open disdain for postmodernism, postcolonial theory, and other theories associated today with continental philosophy. As for Shiva specifically, Nanda condemns her alleged "populism," belittles her as a "self-described philosopher of science," and dismisses her use of "trans-gender" outright as disingenuous "skulduggery" [sic].<sup>26</sup> In conclusion, this debate admittedly identifies one significant weakness in Shiva's account, namely a vulnerability to Hindu supremacism (which, to repeat, I address below). Otherwise, however, the debate misses her exemplary interdisciplinarity, and underestimates the degree to which her postmodern-influenced advocacy would eventually ring true in the twenty-first century. To two of Shiva's fellow ecofeminist philosophers, beginning with the abovementioned Val Plumwood, I now turn.

*"Dancing Ecofeminist Logic" and an "Ethics of Holding"*

Counterintuitively, Val Plumwood is famous as both a logician and an ecofeminist, thus helpfully challenging the stereotypes of both (namely that all logicians are white men indifferent to the real world, and that all ecofeminists are passionately irrational). Part of the virtue of Plumwood's approach to logic is that she explicitly names a direct connection between logic and dance. More specifically, in her watershed *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, Plumwood articulates an alternative logic capable of sustaining "the dance of interaction." To elaborate on this dancing logic, her central objection to mainstream western formal logic ("classical propositional logic") concerns its unique concept of negation, wherein there "is no room here for the complexities of the dance of interaction between the one and the independent other."<sup>27</sup>

In contrast to "other logical systems which define much weaker exclusion relationships," Plumwood explains, classical propositional logic deploys "the standard formalism of "p and ~p," which stand for the affirmation, and the negation, of any proposition, respectively. For example, if "p" stands for "It is the case that it is raining," then "~p" stands for "It is *not* the case that it is raining."<sup>28</sup> Of these various alternate logics (to classical propositional logic), Plumwood prefers "relevant logic," which in her view can "claim to be a more adequate expression of actual reasoning practice than classical logic," and whose concept of negation "can be interpreted as expressing a notion of otherness as *non-hierarchical difference*."<sup>29</sup> Put differently,

25. A. E. Kings, "Intersectionality and the Changing Face of Ecofeminism," *Ethics and the Environment* 22, no. 1 (2017): 63-87, 75-6.

26. Meera Nanda, "Is Modern Science a Western, Patriarchal Myth? A Critique of the Populist Orthodoxy," 11, nos. 1-2 (1991): 32-61, 50, 49, 48.

27. Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, 57.

28. Ibid, 57.

29. Ibid, 58.



whereas for classical propositional logic the negation of a thing is absolute (either there is rain or there is no rain at all), for relevant logic the negation can be relative (as in "It's sprinkling," "It's misting," or "It's kind of raining, but not really"). Or, in the domain of gender, from an LGBT+ perspective one can be "not a man" without having to be "a woman," the traditional dichotomous opposite thereof. Instead, there are various ways to not be a "man," including "nonbinary," "genderfluid," "agender," etc. And all these gendered possibilities are understood to exist on one egalitarian plane of difference (not a two-level hierarchy with "man" on the virtuous higher level, and "woman" on the vicious lower level).

Plumwood later acknowledges borrowing this "dance of interaction" concept from U.S. American psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin, who defines it as "the process of mutual transformation or recognition," which in turn serves as "the basis for the formation of self through mutuality, a process in which an external other sets a boundary or limit to the self and its desires."<sup>30</sup> Plumwood later deploys the phrase "dance of interaction" once more in her book, on the concluding page of Chapter 6, "Ethics and the Instrumentalizing Self."<sup>31</sup> Applying this ecofeminist logic more explicitly to the realm of ethics is Australian sociologist Ariel Salleh *Ecofeminism as Politics: Nature, Marx and the Postmodern*. Significantly for the present article, the "Foreword" to this book was written by none other than Vandana Shiva.<sup>32</sup>

Salleh introduces the term "holding" in paraphrasing U.S. philosopher Naomi Scheman's claim that "men are free to imagine themselves as self-defining – but only because women hold the intimate world together."<sup>33</sup> Later in her book, Salleh explicitly thematizes this concept of holding, beginning with a discussion of another U.S. philosopher, Sara Ruddick.<sup>34</sup> "Ruddick's concept of 'holding'," Salleh claims, "is especially relevant to ecopolitics," involving reconciliation, harmony, sustainability, and repairing the world. Salleh then claims that "Australian indigenous workers also practice a kind of holding in their traditional nurture of sustainability," for example insofar as they "move through country [the preferred Aboriginal alternative term for "wilderness"] in the knowledge that nature will replenish and provide for them again when they return."<sup>35</sup>

Moreover, and reaching beyond an Aboriginal Australian context to a global one, Salleh affirms U.S. political scientist Nancy Harstock's observation, regarding what she calls "mothering practice," that "this gentle labor by mediation distinguishes enduring work from slave or proletarian labour, which must break Nature's back at the master's command."<sup>36</sup> More generally, Salleh claims that holding "is based neither on separation and control of Others, nor

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<sup>30</sup>. Ibid, 156.

<sup>31</sup>. Ibid, 164.

<sup>32</sup>. Ariel Salleh, *Ecofeminism as Politics: Nature, Marx and the Postmodern* (London: Zed, 2017).

<sup>33</sup>. Ibid, 144, quoting Naomi Scheman, "Individualism and the Objects of Psychology," in S. Harding and M. Hintikka (eds.), *Discovering Reality* (Boston: Reidel, 1983), 234.

<sup>34</sup>. Sarah Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace* (Boston: Beacon, 1989).

<sup>35</sup>. Salleh, *Ecofeminism as Politics*, 216.

<sup>36</sup>. Ibid, 217.

on some ephemeral cosmic fusion, but on practical deferral," and it "exemplifies a strong, decentered subject."<sup>37</sup> It is decentered, I interpolate, because it moves in a non-hierarchical dancing partnership. Salleh later elaborates on holding via "decentered oscillation," elaborated as follows: "People who are privileged enough to work with all their senses together, come to a kinaesthetic awareness of the multiple timings embedded in what is handled"; in short, such people "learn holding, synchronizing their agency with the rhythms of growth."<sup>38</sup>

This holding, in Salleh's view, is nothing less than the linchpin of the entire ecofeminist movement. "The common denominator of women's struggles for survival North and South," she writes, "is their holding work and consciousness of enduring time," as exemplified by "Vandana Shiva's forest dwellers."<sup>39</sup> (The latter is a reference to the Chipko forest conservation movement in India, whose female activists embraced "the living trees as their protectors," thus inspiring the environmentalist epithet "tree hugger").<sup>40</sup> Additionally, and recalling Plumwood's "master model," Salleh concludes that "Mastery is not the only model of agency," because of the "alternative" case of "holding actions," including "organic cultivation."<sup>41</sup> In short, Salleh is calling for a "holding ethic of ecofeminism."<sup>42</sup> Finally from Salleh, as also with Plumwood (and Shiva), she too connects this ecofeminist concept explicitly to dance, as for example when she suggests that holding's "kinaesthetic knowing" is exemplified by "the age-old wisdom of Middle Eastern belly dance ritual."<sup>43</sup> In sum, "Moving into a new millennium, modernist science and politics will have to respond to the *dance* and holler of this conceptual challenge."<sup>44</sup>

#### *Holding Green Commons*

Against those who argue that peasants, farmers, workers, or non-waged women are only part of Marxism's past, Vandana Shiva begins the Introduction to the second (2010) edition of *Staying Alive* by marshaling numerous striking statistics in support of the opposite conclusion. "Agriculture, the growing of food," Shiva begins, "is both the most important source of livelihood for the majority of the world's people, especially women, and the sector related to the most fundamental of economic rights – the right to food and nutrition."<sup>45</sup> In this light, the "worldwide destruction of the feminine knowledge of agriculture evolved over four to five thousand years by a handful of white male scientists in less than two decades" is a global catastrophe of the highest order. Reinforcing the gendered dimension of this issue, Shiva claims that agriculture "has been evolved by women," and that most "food producers, farmers, in the world are women, and most girls are future farmers." Finally on this point, women "also

<sup>37</sup>. Ibid, 219.

<sup>38</sup>. Ibid, 237.

<sup>39</sup>. Ibid, 249-250, 262.

<sup>40</sup>. Shiva, *Staying Alive*, 66.

<sup>41</sup>. Salleh, *Ecofeminism as Politics*, 278.

<sup>42</sup>. Ibid, 281.

<sup>43</sup>. Ibid, 203.

<sup>44</sup>. Ibid, 207, emphasis added.

<sup>45</sup>. Shiva, *Staying Alive*, xiii.

produce more than half the world's food and provide more than 80 percent of the food needs in food-insecure households and regions." Thus, women's agriculture is also an issue that is crucially, to use a term that Shiva repeatedly affirms, "transgender," in this case in the sense that it sustains all human beings regardless of their gender.

The keyword that defines women's farming, Shiva argues, is diversity. "From field to kitchen, from seed to food; women's strength is diversity; women's capacities are eroded when this diversity is eroded."<sup>46</sup> For example, "in Nigerian home gardens women plant 18 to 57 species," while in "sub-Saharan Africa they cultivate as many as 120 different plants alongside cash crops." While in "West Bengal, 124 'weed' species collected from rice fields have economic importance for farmers." More directly, Shiva continues, "what are weeds for Monsanto" — the world's largest and most vicious agrochemical multi-national corporation — "are food, fodder, and medicine for Third World women."<sup>47</sup> The cost of this corporate exploitation is stark. "One billion people on the planet are hungry; another 2 billion are suffering from food-related diseases such as obesity, diabetes, and hypertension," Shiva relates, and more "than 150,000 farmers in India have committed suicide as costs of inputs" such as artificial seeds, fertilizers, and pesticides, "have increased and the price of their produce has fallen, trapping them in endless cycles of debt."<sup>48</sup> For women, this situation is even more dire. "The Green Revolution region of Punjab," India, "was the place where female feticide first began; it was also the first to turn amniocentesis into a tool for facilitating" female feticide.<sup>49</sup> For example, "Between 1978 and 1983," a span of only five years, "78,000 female fetuses were aborted after sex-determining tests." More generally, and as evidence for her multinational corporation-focused interpretation, Shiva notes that "regions with high economic growth" in India "exhibit higher rates of female feticide."<sup>50</sup>

Going further in the text (and thus back in time) to Shiva's original (1999) Introduction, it begins with an emphasis on forests, especially tropical forests, where up "to 50 percent of all living things — at least 5 million species — are estimated to live."<sup>51</sup> More specifically, "A typical four square-mile patch of rainforest contains up to 1,500 species of flowering plants, 750 species of trees, 125 of mammals, 400 of birds, 100 of reptiles, 60 of amphibians and 150 of butterflies." Moreover, and of central importance to Shiva's argument, forests are also "the matrix of rivers and water sources, and their destruction in tropical regions amounts to the desiccation and desertification of land"; consequently, "12 million hectares of land deteriorate into deserts" every year (with 1 hectare being equal to approximately 2.5 acres). "Globally," Shiva concludes, "some 456 million people today are starving or malnourished because of the desertification of croplands."

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46. Ibid, xiv.

47. Ibid, xvi.

48. Ibid, xxiii.

49. Ibid, xxvii.

50. Ibid, xxviii.

51. Ibid, xxx.

This is the crisis that gave birth to Shiva's mostly-anonymous, spirit-empowered guardians of the forest and rivers, the members of India's Chipko land rights movement. "Women, as victims of the violence of patriarchal forms of development, have risen against it to protect nature and preserve their survival and sustenance," Shiva relates, and in India in particular, "women have been at the forefront of ecological struggles to conserve forests, land, and water."<sup>52</sup> That is, these predominately rural Indian peasant women "have challenged the western concept of nature as an object of exploitation and have protected her as Prakriti, the living force that supports life."

Lest she be misunderstood as a gender essentialist, however, Shiva invokes the term "transgender." These heroes "are creating," Shiva writes, "a feminist ideology that transcends gender, and a political practice that is humanly inclusive," as well as "challenging the dominant concept of power as violence with the alternative concept of nonviolence as power."<sup>53</sup> Returning to the Hindu deity Prakriti, Shiva describes this entity as "a living and creative process, the feminine principle from which all life arises," and then claims that women's "ecology movements," though they consist in "the preservation and recovery of the feminine principle," nevertheless "arise from a non-gender-based ideology of liberation, different from both the gender-based ideology of patriarchy which underlies the process of ecological destruction and women's subjugation, and the gender-based responses which have, until recently, been characteristic of the west."<sup>54</sup> In short, what began with women will continue, transgendered, with everyone.

In Chapter 2, "Science, Nature and Gender" Shiva introduces her concept of "masculinism." Note this specific linguistic formulation here – as distinct from, say, "men" or "male" – which signals Shiva's nuanced and antiracist recognition that stereotypically masculine destructive behaviors are also coded in terms of race, class, and other variables. Moreover, Shiva further deconstructs the sociocultural nature of this "masculinist tendency" by tracing it to a specific historical conjuncture. "The Royal Society," she writes, "inspired by [Francis] Bacon's philosophy, was clearly seen by its organizers as a masculine project," as evidenced, for example, by Henry Oldenburg, then-Secretary of the Royal Society, who in 1664 wrote that "the intention of the society was to 'raise a *masculine philosophy*'."<sup>55</sup> This tendency continues to dominate what Shiva later calls "western masculine science" – despite though she herself earned a bachelor's degree in Physics, as well as a Ph.D. in Philosophy (of physics) from the University of Western Ontario.<sup>56</sup> Shiva contrasts this western tendency with the following quote from the "Indian Chief Smohalla":

You ask me to plough the ground: shall I take a knife and tear my mother's bosom? You ask me to cut grass and make hay and sell it and be rich like white men; but how dare I cut off my mother's hair? (Easlea 73).

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<sup>52</sup>. Ibid, xxxii.

<sup>53</sup>. Ibid, xxxii.

<sup>54</sup>. Ibid, xxxiii.

<sup>55</sup>. Ibid, 19, quoting from Brian Easlea, *Science and Sexual Oppression: Patriarchy's Confrontation with Woman and Nature* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1981), 64.

<sup>56</sup>. Salleh, *Ecofeminism as Politics*, 208.

This metaphor of vegetation as the hair of the earth, and as such sacred, is one that recurs at the symbolic heart of Shiva's text, to which I return below.

Shiva's contrasting phenomenon to "masculinism" is the "feminine principle," which she fleshes out in the case of India in Chapter 3, "Women in Nature." There, she asserts that women "in India are an intimate part of nature, both in imagination and in practice."<sup>57</sup> The reason, Shiva continues, is that, from "the point of view of [Hindu] Indian cosmology, in both the exoteric and esoteric traditions, the world is produced and renewed by the dialectical play of creation and destruction, cohesion and disintegration," which is represented by a female Hindu deity named "Shakti." More precisely, the "tension between these opposites from which motion and movement arises is depicted as the first appearance of dynamic energy (Shakti)." Building on this framework, Shiva explains that the "manifestation of this power, this energy [Shakti], is called nature (Prakriti)," from which Shiva infers that nature, "both animate and inanimate, is thus an expression of Shakti, the feminine and creative principle of the cosmos; in conjunction with the masculine principle (Purusha), Prakriti creates the world." In a footnote, Shiva acknowledges that Prakriti "is a popular category" rather than an academic philosophical one, but she nevertheless insists that even "those philosophical streams of [Hindu] Indian thought which were patriarchal and did not give supreme place to divinity as a woman, a mother, were permeated by the prehistoric cults and the living 'little' traditions of nature as the primordial mother goddess." Thus, Shiva shines another light on her predominantly poor, rural Chipko heroes.

A word of caution is in order here, however, since (as the only other academic philosophy article dedicated to Shiva observes), Shiva tends to conflate "Indian" and "Hindu," even though she does not use the word "Hindu" even once in the book.<sup>58</sup> This conflation, along with her frequent invocation of Gandhi (and her nickname as "the Gandhi of grain"), raises questions about a possible vulnerability, in Shiva's thought, to this ideological source of profound injustice and violence against (especially) Muslim Indians and Pakistanis, especially under the present-day dominance in India of the Hindu supremacy movement (Hindutva), as pursued by the fascist, Islamophobic regime of Prime Minister Narendra Modi.<sup>59</sup>

Connecting these femme and trans Hindu divinities to her own namesake, Shiva adds that "Without Shakti [energy], Shiva, the symbol for the force of creation and destruction, is as powerless as a corpse."<sup>60</sup> Further, "Prakriti is [also] worshipped as Aditi, the primordial vastness, the inexhaustible, the source of abundance," as "Adi Shakti, the primordial power," and as "the Mother of Nature who is nature itself born of the creative play of her thought."<sup>61</sup> Emphasizing this playful attribute, Shiva adds, "Prakriti is also called Lalitha, the Player

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<sup>57</sup>. Ibid, 39.

<sup>58</sup>. Shlomit Tamari, "How Merleau-Ponty Can Provide a Philosophical Foundation for Vandana Shiva's Views on Biodiversity," in *Comparative and Continental Philosophy* 2(2): 2010, 275-289.

<sup>59</sup>. For more, see Lauren Frayer, "Gandhi Is Deeply Revered, But His Attitudes On Race And Sex Are Under Scrutiny," *National Public Radio*, 2 Oct 2019: <https://www.npr.org/2019/10/02/766083651/gandhi-is-deeply-revered-but-his-attitudes-on-race-and-sex-are-under-scrutiny>.

<sup>60</sup>. Shiva, *Staying Alive*, 40.

<sup>61</sup>. Ibid, 40. For the latter claim, Shiva cites W. C. Beane, *Myth, Cult and Symbols in Sakta Hinduism: A Study of the Indian Mother Goddess* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1977).

because *lila* or play, as free spontaneous activity, is her nature.”<sup>62</sup> More generally, “The will-to-become many (Bahu-Syam-Prajayera) is her creative impulse and through this impulse, she creates the diversity of living forms in nature.” Thus, the “creative force and the created world are not separate and distinct,” and the latter is “diverse, dynamic, and interrelated.” In short, “The nature of Nature as Prakriti is activity *and* diversity,” and she “lives in stone or tree, pool, fruit, or animal, and is identified with them.”

As for the worshippers of these divinities, Hindu peasant women, Shiva names them here for the first time in the book as “silviculturists,” and as “the traditional natural scientists” who are inspired by “Terra Mater, the earth in the form of the Great Mother.”<sup>63</sup> For this reason, Shiva argues, the “ecological crisis is, at its root, the death of the feminine principle, symbolically as well as in contexts such as rural India.”<sup>64</sup> Shiva admits that, to articulate this woman/nature connection here “is not to say anything revolutionary,” but she notes that the “new insight provided by rural women in the Third World is that women and nature are associated *not in passivity but in creativity and in the maintenance of life.*”<sup>65</sup> In other words, whereas most scholarly “work on women and environment in the Third World has focused on women as special victims of environmental degradation,” these “women who participate in and lead ecology movement in countries like India are not speaking merely as victims.” In addition, theirs “are the voices of liberation and transformation which provide new categories of thought and new exploratory directions.” In short, Shiva’s “is a post-victimology study.”

Returning to the concept of transgender, Shiva contrasts her account with what she argues is a vicious anti-womanism in Simone de Beauvoir (who valorizes stereotypical masculine phenomena) and a logically corresponding (and similarly flawed) pro-womanism in Herbert Marcuse (who “sees liberation as a feminisation of the world”).<sup>66</sup> Because both Beauvoir and Marcuse, in her view, “share the assumptions of feminine and masculine as natural, biologically defined traits.” There “is, however, a third concept and process of liberation that is *trans-gender*,” because “masculine and feminine as gendered concepts based on exclusiveness are ideologically defined categories, as is the association of violence and activity with the former, and nonviolence and passivity with the latter.”<sup>67</sup> For this reason, Shiva’s “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.”

In support of this trans-gender interpretation of the “feminine principle,” Shiva quotes the great Bengali Indian poet, philosopher and political activist Rabindranath Tagore, affirming this principle as “creative nonviolence, or ‘creative power in peaceful form,’ as Tagore stated in his prayer to the tree.”<sup>68</sup> Because of its transgendered nature, Shiva’s call for the “recovery of the feminine principle,” thus “stands for,” among other things, “the liberation of men who, in

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62. Shiva, *Staying Alive*, 40.

63. Ibid, 42.

64. Ibid, 43.

65. Ibid, 48, emphasis original.

66. Ibid, 52.

67. Ibid, 52, emphasis added.

dominating nature and women, have sacrificed their own human-ness." In short, liberation must "begin from the colonised and end with the colonizer." For proof that men are indeed savable, Shiva closes this chapter with an invocation of Gandhi, "the modern world's leading practitioner and preacher of nonviolence," who "was, after all a man."<sup>69</sup> It should be noted, however, that Shiva's framing here neglects to mention Gandhi's own explanation of his education in nonviolence, namely that he learned it his wife, Kasturba Gandhi, in her courageous refusal to be controlled by him at the beginning of their marriage.<sup>70</sup> Moreover, Gandhi was also strongly influenced toward nonviolence by the poet-activist Percy Bysshe Shelley, who was himself, in turn, famously influenced by his own wife, the brilliant novelist Mary Shelley – who was herself, originally, inspired by her mother, the founding feminist Mary Wollstonecraft.<sup>71</sup> In sum, if the feminine principle is transgender, it is dangerous to reify it in idealized figures of famous and powerful men, especially without acknowledging their nonmale influences.

Chapter 4, "Women in the Forest," digs deeper into Shiva's historicized account of the connections between women and nature, beginning with her claim that "Forests have always been central to Indian civilization," for example by being "worshipped as Aranyani, the Goddess of the Forest, the primary source of life and fertility."<sup>72</sup> Moreover, since "human evolution was measured in terms of man's capacity to merge with [nature's] rhythms and patterns intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually," and since the forest "nurtured an ecological civilization in the most fundamental sense of harmony with nature," therefore the forest "as the highest expression of the earth's fertility and productivity is symbolized as yet another form as the Earth Mother, as Vana Durga or the Tree Goddess."<sup>73</sup> Finally on this religious point, in "folk and tribal cultures especially, trees and forests are also worshipped as *Vana Devatas* or forest deities." These are among the "spirits" I invoke in the concluding section.

This traditional adoration of forests in India is not exclusively naturalistic or religious, however, as Shiva proceeds to explain, but also cultural (and even what westerners would call "secular"), because "the forest as a community has been viewed as a model for societal and civilizational evolution" in India.<sup>74</sup> More precisely, "the *aranya samskriti* (roughly translatable as 'the culture of the forest' or 'forest culture') was not a condition of primitiveness, but one of conscious choice." In support of this point, Shiva returns to the poet-philosopher-activist Tagore, this time quoting his assertion that "the distinctiveness of Indian culture consists of its having defined life in the forest as the highest form of cultural evolution."

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<sup>68</sup>. Ibid, 53.

<sup>69</sup>. Ibid, 54.

<sup>70</sup>. See, for example, Rajmohan, Gandhi, *Gandhi: The Man, the People, and the Empire* (Los Angeles and Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

<sup>71</sup>. See, for example, Seth T. Reno, "The Violence of Form in Shelley's 'Mask of Anarchy'," *Keats-Shelley Journal* 62(2013): 80-98.

<sup>72</sup>. Shiva, *Staying Alive*, 55.

<sup>73</sup>. Ibid, 56.

<sup>74</sup>. Ibid, 55.

In support of Tagore's point, and helpfully clarifying it for the Global Northerners among Shiva's audience, she quotes British environmentalist Norman Myers' observation that, "In contrast to the folklore of temperate zones, which often regards forests as dark places of danger, traditional perceptions of forests in the humid tropics convey a sense of intimate harmony."<sup>75</sup> For example, Shiva relates that "the *mohwa* (*Bassia latifolia*)," which is "a large deciduous tree, usually with a short bole, spreading branches and a large rounded crown," is recognized as "one of the most important forest trees of India."<sup>76</sup> For starters, this *mohwa* tree "is never felled owing to the value of its flowers and fruits," such that, even "when forest land is cleared for cultivation, the *mohwa* trees are carefully preserved." And this preservation is eminently justifiable on practical grounds alone. For example, in "1897 and 1900, serious famine years in Central India, the profuse blossoming of *mohwa* flowers was a famine insurance for the tribals." Thus, in Shiva's analysis, "to the forest dwellers of Central India, the *mohwa* is the tree of life" for much more than merely religious reasons.

#### *Spirit-Lanterned Guardians*

Such practicality is also at the heart of rural Indian peasant women's life-or-death commitment to fight for these forests. "Forest struggles," Shiva relates, "have been taking place throughout the country for over two centuries to resist the colonisation of the people's forests in India."<sup>77</sup> The length of the fight suggests the violence of its opposition. "These nonviolent protests," Shiva writes, "were systematically crushed by the British." For one example, "in Central India, Gond tribals were gunned down for participating in the protest." For another, "in 1930 dozens of unarmed villagers were killed and hundreds injured in Talari village in Tehri Garhwal, when they gathered to protest against the Forest Laws of the local rulers." Despite their "enormous loss of life, the satyagrahis were successful in reviving some of the traditional rights of the village communities to various forest products." The term "satyagrahis" is a plural noun that refers to practitioners of what Gandhi termed "soul force" (*satyagraha*), particularly apt here since several of their most prominent female leaders were personal disciplines of Mahatma Gandhi (as Shiva later details).

Most importantly for Shiva's book, "In the mountain regions of the Himalaya, the women of Garhwal started to protect their forests from commercial exploitation even at the cost of their lives, by starting the famous Chipko movement, embracing the living trees as their protectors."<sup>78</sup> Though most Global Northerners have probably never heard the word "Chipko," they are almost definitely familiar with the phrase "tree hugger," the derogatory term for eco-activists inspired by this movement. "Three hundred years ago," Shiva retells, "more than 300 members of the Bishnoi community in Rajasthan, led by a woman named Amrita Devi, sacrificed their lives to save their sacred *khejri* trees by clinging to them." Though the Chipko movement itself "has popularly been referred to as a women's movement," Shiva acknowledges, "it is only some male Chipko activists who have been projected into visibility." For Shiva, this point is not just political. "I have personally been inspired," Shiva writes, "by my interaction with" the Chipko women, and "I feel that it is unjust that the real pillars of the

75. Ibid, 57. Norman Myers, *The Primary Source* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1984), 13.

76. Shiva, *Staying Alive*, 57.

77. Ibid, 65.

78. Ibid, 66.



movement are still largely unknown." It is largely for this same reason that I reflect here Shiva's illuminating reflection of some of the Chipko forest defenders' stories.

Shiva divides Chipko into two developmental phases. "In the early stages, when the exploitation of forest resources was carried out by non-local forest contractors," she writes, "the women's special concern with forestry for survival, which provided the base for Chipko, was temporarily merged with a largely male concern for raw material supply for sawmills and resin factories set up by local cooperatives," which were, in turn, "set up by Gandhian organizations."<sup>79</sup> Not long after this, however, in Chipko's second phase, "a new separation took place between local male interests for commercial activity based on forest products, and local women's interests for sustenance activity based on forest protection."

In one example of their direct actions, "Chipko activist Dhoom Singh Negi supported the women's struggle by beginning a fast in the forest itself," and the "women tied sacred threads to the trees as a token of their vow to protection."<sup>80</sup> More generally, "*the women continued to struggle against the exploitation of the forests,*" because it "did not matter to them whether the forest was destroyed by outsiders or their own men."<sup>81</sup> Shiva then relates the "most dramatic turn in this new confrontation," namely when "Bachni Devi of Adwani led a resistance against her own husband who had obtained a local contract to fell the forest."<sup>82</sup> When the "forest officials arrived to browbeat and intimidate the women and Chipko activists," Shiva writes, they "found the women holding up lighted lanterns in broad daylight." And when the officials "asked them their intention," the "women replied: 'We have come to teach you forestry'." Then, when the official asked: "Do you know what forests bear?", and immediately answered his own question by saying "resin and timber," then the Chipko women "immediately sang back in chorus:

What do the forests bear?  
Soil, water and pure air.  
Soil, water and pure air,  
Sustain the earth and all she bears.<sup>83</sup>

Shiva then fleshes out these rural women's silvicultural knowledge, observing that "The backyard of each rural home was a nursery, and each peasant woman the silviculturist," even though western "experts decided that indigenous knowledge was worthless and 'unscientific', and proceeded to destroy the diversity of indigenous species by replacing them with row after row of" a monoculture of eucalyptus trees.<sup>84</sup> The catastrophic consequence of this ignorant western masculinist decision, however, is that the eucalyptus tree "has destroyed the water cycle in the arid regions due to its high water demand and its failure to produce humus, which

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<sup>79</sup>. Ibid, 69.

<sup>80</sup>. Ibid, 74.

<sup>81</sup>. Ibid, 74-5, emphasis original.

<sup>82</sup>. Ibid, 75.

<sup>83</sup>. Ibid, 75.

<sup>84</sup>. Ibid, 76.

is nature's mechanism for conserving water."<sup>85</sup> In response to this profound ignorance, on "August 10, 1983, the women and small peasants of Barha and Hosahalli villages in Tumkur district (Karnataka) marched en masse to the forest nursery and pulled out millions of eucalyptus seedlings, planting tamarind and mango seeds in their place" (two of the diverse species which "traditionally provided food and fodder, fertilizer and pesticide, fuel and small timber").<sup>86</sup> For this "gesture of protest," Shiva relates, these brave rural Indian silvicultural workers "were arrested" by Indian governmental authorities.<sup>87</sup>

In support of this analysis, Shiva cites the work of N. S. Jodha, who "has shown how women's work and the livelihoods of poorer sections of rural society are intimately linked to trees and grasslands in the commons, which support the farm animals and thus take pressure off cropland, while increasing organic inputs to crop through animal waste."<sup>88</sup> For the colonizing mindset, however, these vital commons are disparaged as "wastelands," on the grounds that the commons did "did not pay any revenue because it was uncultivated."<sup>89</sup> For this reason, "Rich forests were also considered waste in the early colonial period," and thus the consequent "extensive clearfelling of forests for agricultural land use was," according to Shiva, "a typically colonial view of turning waste into wealth."<sup>90</sup>

Shiva then shifts from Chipko history to India's present-day crisis of the destruction and privatization of "the commons" (a term that refers to non-privately owned land that is open for the use of any member of the community, whether rich or poor). "The usurpation of the commons which began with the British," Shiva claims, "will reach its final limit with the wetland development program" being carried currently by India itself.<sup>91</sup> To support this claim, Shiva quotes twentieth-century Indian legal philosopher Chhatrapati Singh of the Indian Law Institute, who writes that, "till the end of the last century and in all historical periods before that, at least 80 percent of India's natural resources were common property, with only 20 percent being privately utilized."<sup>92</sup> Such "free commons," Shiva adds, have been the survival base for rural India and the domain of productivity of women."<sup>93</sup>

Against this historical background, "A second robbery of the commons is now under way," Shiva explains, "through 'wastelands development', which is a euphemism for the privatisation of the commons."<sup>94</sup> In courageously fighting this injustice, however, the Chipko women have frequently been victorious. Consider, for example, Kangad, "a hamlet of 200 families," where in

<sup>85</sup>. Ibid, 78.

<sup>86</sup>. Ibid, 80, 76.

<sup>87</sup>. Ibid, 80.

<sup>88</sup>. Ibid, 81.

<sup>89</sup>. Ibid, 82.

<sup>90</sup>. Ibid, 83.

<sup>91</sup>. Ibid, 81.

<sup>92</sup>. Ibid, 81, quoting Chhatrapati Singh, *Common Property and Common Poverty* (Delhi: Oxford Publishing House, 1985), 2.

<sup>93</sup>. Shiva, *Staying Alive*, 81.

1977, "After four months of resistance, the women succeeded in saving their forest."<sup>95</sup> Shiva then relates what happened next, as follows:

The women's organization, the Mahila Mangal Dal, then decided to regenerate the degraded forests. On the basis of cattle owned by each family, contributions were raised to support a village forest guard who was paid Rs. 300 per month. For three years the arrangement worked and then failed because the watchman became inefficient and corrupt: he would allow some people to extract fodder and fuelwood. Once the women learnt this, they unanimously decided to abolish the post of forest guard and guard the forests themselves. Now the Mahila Mangal Dal has allocated duties to a group of village women. About ten or twelve women are on duty every day, allocated in such a manner that the work is distributed among all the families.<sup>96</sup>

In the words of one of these Kangad women, "On these days we leave our own work and protect the forest because our oak trees are like our children'."<sup>97</sup> The result, Shiva proudly reports, is that "Oak trees are now generating naturally in Kangad." In conclusion, "The strength of nature and the strength of women is the basis of the recovery of the forest in Kangad," which is "merely a renewal of the conservation ethic and conservation work of hill women," a fact that is "symbolised by their putting aside some leaves for Patna Devi (the goddess of the leaves) each time they go to collect fodder."

Another of Shiva's extended examples of these women's silvicultural wisdom concerns their view that "the most effective way to control pests is the nonviolent method based on the feminine principle, by building pest resistance in the plant, rather than by attacking pests."<sup>98</sup> More precisely, a "feminine, nonviolent perspective on agriculture would thus need to take organic manuring, largely carried out by women, as work in pest management and plant protection while contributing to soil fertility and soil moisture conservation at the same time." Fleshing out this practice in sacred terms, Shiva notes that "the Kayapó Indian women of the Amazon basin have a ritual in which they paint their faces with ground ant parts in the maize festival," whose "principle theme" is "the celebration of the little red ant as the guardian of the fields and a friend of the women," though colonizers saw them as "pests" to be killed.

The most disastrous such challenge today, according to Shiva, is the counterproductive project of damming throughout India. The latter, she observes, "is a riparian civilization" (meaning lands along the edges of rivers, streams, and lakes), for which reason the "temples of ancient India have often been dedicated to rivers and their sources."<sup>99</sup> And "one of the best descriptions of the vital ecoprocesses of the water cycle is the story of the mighty river Ganga, rolling down the Himalayan slopes with no one to hold the Earth together in the face of her might."

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<sup>94</sup>. Ibid, 84.

<sup>95</sup>. Ibid, 90.

<sup>96</sup>. Ibid, 90.

<sup>97</sup>. Ibid, 90.

<sup>98</sup>. Ibid, 154.

<sup>99</sup>. Ibid, 176.

According to this story, the creator-god Brahma, in response to this rivers' overweening power, declaims the following lines of poetry:

Win Shiva, that his aid be lent  
To hold her in her mid-descent  
For earth alone will never bear  
These torrents traveled from the upper air.<sup>100</sup>

In (Vandana) Shiva's words, this "metaphor is a description of the hydrological problem associated with the descent of mighty rivers like the Ganga, which are fed by seasonal and powerful monsoonic rains."<sup>101</sup> As Reiger explains in his interpretation of the poem, "In Shiva's hair we have a very well known physical device which breaks the force of the water coming down...the vegetation of the mountains."<sup>102</sup> Shiva's solution is, therefore, not a masculinist dam as ordered by "engineering logic," but instead the feminine trees as generated by "nature's logic." Crucially, from Shiva's perspective, far from being a reduction or diminution, this could not be more divinely affirming.

And on this note of divinity, since Shiva's namesake is also the god of dance (*Nataraja*, or "Lord of the Dance"), this metaphor connects Shiva's critique of "masculinism" directly to dance. Moreover, Shiva is also the god of disempowered beings, including women, darker-skinned people, the poor, and the natural world (and is multiple analogous to Dionysus, the Greek god of dance and these same disempowered beings, as I have explored elsewhere). From this, I infer one last interpretation of the poem as applied to (Vandana) Shiva herself: (1) the raging river is nature's mounting revenge against western masculinist exploitation and devastation, (2) the mountains is the hierarchically unjust western crafted from this exploitation, and (3) the hair of (deity) Shiva is the eco-activism of (Vandana) Shiva, "holding" and channeling nature's apocalyptic power in a constructively compassionate way, namely by welcoming men and colonizers, in a trans-gender way, to become part of the solution.

Returning to the literal referent of the metaphor, namely the catchments (that is, anything that catches water, in this case the mountains' trees and other vegetation), Shiva relates how one Chipko song "talks of the natural broadleaved forests of oak-rhododendron on mountain tops, inviting the rain and yielding water from their roots."<sup>103</sup> This illustrates the ecological fact that "Natural forests in catchments have been viewed as the best mechanism for water control and flood control in Indian thought," and "have therefore always been treated as sacred" in India. More specifically, in "the indigenous system, water storage, and distribution were based on nature's logic, and worked in harmony with nature's cycles," as for example in the famous "major tank system of Mysore," India.<sup>104</sup> These tanks, Shiva elaborates, were "constructed over centuries" and have "also endured over centuries," in part due to a holiday called "Bhim

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid, 176.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid, 176.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid, 176, quoting from H. C. Reiger, "Whose Himalaya? A Study in Geopier," in T. Singh, (ed.), *Studies in Himalayan Ecology and Development Strategies*, New Delhi: The English Book Store, 1980), 2.

<sup>103</sup> Shiva, *Staying Alive*, 176.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid, 178.

Ekadashi day," wherein "villagers imitated their epic hero, Bhim, by collective desilting of filed channels." Shiva stresses that, even though this event was "observed as a religious festival," nevertheless "it had the effect of prevent water-logging." Even the humiliated British colonizers eventually had to admit the superiority of these Indian methods, including "famous British engineers" such as Major Arthur Cotton, who, as Shiva relates, "learnt water management from indigenous techniques." In one example of this humbling education, in 1799 the East India Company, after having been unable to "check the rising river bed" of the Kaveri delta for twenty-five long years, "was able to solve the problem using indigenous techniques" at Major Cotton's urging.<sup>105</sup>

It is for this reason that the Chipko women fight so valiantly to preserve their forests and rivers in India. In their honor, I now close this first section with one more of their inspiring stories, namely a protest of the government's broken promise to close a local mine that was destroying the local forest. Shiva retells the story as follows:

The quarry contractor in the meantime tried to take the law into his hands and on March 20, 1987, brought about 200 hired musclemen to attack the villagers. They assaulted the peaceful protestors with stones and iron rods. But the children, women, and men have not withdrawn from the blockade. They are their own leaders, their own decision makers, their own source of strength. The myth that movements are created and sustained by charismatic male leaders from outside is shattered by the ten months of nonviolent struggle in Nahi-Kala in which ordinary women like Itwari Devi and Chamundeyi have provided local leadership through extraordinary strength.<sup>106</sup>

As the Chipko poet Ghanshyam "Shailani" expresses in one of her songs:

Sister, it is a fight to protect  
Our mountains and forests  
They give us life  
Embrace the life of the living trees and streams  
Clasp them to your hearts.<sup>107</sup>

On a similarly triumphant note, Shiva writes, "A decade after the women of Henwal Ghati came with lanterns during the day to show forestry experts 'the light' – that forests produce soil and water and not just timber and revenue – they have been joined by others in challenging the enlightenment symbol of 'light' as the exclusive monopoly of the western expert."<sup>108</sup> To help inspire others to join this cause, I now turn to a concluding figuration of these dancing practitioners of Shiva's ethics of "holding green commons," as "spirit-lanterned guardians," including the figurative heroes Green Lantern, Robin Hood, and Peter Pan, and the real life queer eco-activist guardians "Tortugita" Terán and interdisciplinary movement artist Jill Sigman.

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<sup>105</sup>. Ibid, 179.

<sup>106</sup>. Ibid, 199.

<sup>107</sup>. Ibid, 200.

<sup>108</sup>. Ibid, 208.

*Conclusion: Global Northern Spirits*

To recap, having previously articulated a new sustainable aesthetics from Val Plumwood of “dancing ecofeminist logic,” I find Plumwood’s dancing ecofeminist logic operative in fellow ecofeminist philosopher Vandana Shiva’s Chipko silviculturists’ ethics of “holding green commons.” And by way of conclusion, I now attempt to buttress this ethics by spotlighting these heroes as “spirit-lanterned guardians,” wherein each rural peasant guardian is like a dancer, holding in a dancing embrace not only fellow human dancers, but also hugging the trees of the forest, and holding together the riparian forests and rivers.

In a recent project, I have assembled a set of spiritual practices that are accessible today for the neo-colonized 99% of the global population, by synthesizing and reconstructing three democratic, lower-SES, Indigenous religions, all of which share a militant defiance of their respective tyrannical plutocracies. This assemblage of practices, which I call “Spirit/Dance,” and which draws on ancient Dionysian practice, Haitian Vodou, and Indigenous South American shamanism, involves a figurative “channeling” (or self-induced inspiration by) the “spirits” of dead ancestors, historical figures, legendary heroes, mythical beings, and fictional characters, into the three ultimate objectives of “mindfulness” (for psyches/souls), “liberation” (for mindful bodies), and “social justice” (for liberated communities). In essence, Spirit/Dance consists of improvisational artistic performances aimed at therapeutic transfiguration, meaning a healing experience for both performers and beneficiaries, including an imaginative recontextualization of shared communities that empower perceptions of them as more flexible, open, and alive to fulfilling possibilities.

More precisely, each mage’s practice is externally limited only by any voluntary associations they choose to create or join with others. These associations would be based on working with a particular spirit, and each mage would choose a small group of spirits whom they most wish to channel in their work, which I call “primary spirits.” For example, a mage might create a social media group based on the philosopher Zhuangzi, or join an in-person fan fiction group based on Star Trek’s Captain Jean-Luc Picard, or the titular hero of the Last Airbender. Note here that, in contrast to today’s major world religions, where a top-down structure determines most practitioners’ basic beliefs and practices (usually beginning with one or more highest deities, worship of whom is compulsory), Spirit/Dance prefers a bottom-up structure, in that each mage begins by asking themselves questions along the following lines: “What figures do I love the most, hold most sacred, most wish to emulate, or most wish could be more widely appreciated and instantiated in our communities today?” Put differently, Spirit/Dance valorizes or formalizes existing psychological and sociological systems of adoration, obsession, fandom, etc. To repeat, this does not rule out significant overlaps among mages. On the contrary, it seems likely that a relatively small cluster of primary spirits could organically emerge and rise to prominence.

For example, three of my own personal Spirit/Dance primary spirits resonate strongly with these “spirit-lanterned guardian” practitioners of Shiva’s transgender ecofeminist ethic. First is the comic book superhero “Green Lantern,” member of a multispecies, multigendered corps of guardians, originally inspired by Nietzsche’s truth-seeking madman with a lantern (inspired by the Cynic radical sociopolitical philosopher Diogenes), and rendered by creator Martin Nodell in a Dionysian theatrical costume. Second is the legendary outlaw Robin Hood (or Robin of the Hood, where “Hood” means “forest”), leader of a merry band of misfits, an expert in guerrilla

warfare fighting against wealthy tyranny, and embodying the corresponding virtue of foxiness (as dramatized, in the Disney animated film, by his depiction as an androgynous fox). And third is youthful rebel Peter Pan (from Scottish playwright J. M. Barrie), who is (1) an ally to the oppressed Indigenous, (2) marked by an affinity for the fey (one of whom, the fairy “Tinkerbell,” acts as a literal and figurative lantern), (3) normally cast with androgynous ciswoman (thus suggestive of transgender), (4) also (like Green Lantern and Robin Hood) the leader of an heterogenous band of forest defenders who reject vicious conformism, (5) strongly associated with the eco-color green, and (6) connected to Dionysus (in his case via the Roman equivalent “Pan”).

These three Global Northern “spirit-lanterned guardians” could easily have been inspirations, during childhood, for two real-life contemporary queer eco-activists. First is the 26-year-old, Indigenous, transgender (nonbinary) “forest defender” named Manuel “Tortuguita” (“little turtle”) Esteban Paez Terán, who was martyred defending the Weelaunee (South River) Forest, in the majority-Black southern part of Atlanta, from “a proposed \$90 million, 85-acre police training facility that their fellow activists call “Cop City.”<sup>109</sup> Second is the philosopher and interdisciplinary movement artist and jill sigman/thinkdance, who first taught me the concept of “holding spaces,” which she practices in part through constructing small huts of salvaged local materials, wherein she brews teas from local plants (denigrated by western society as “weeds”), to serve as stimulants to conversations about ecofeminist justice.<sup>110</sup> With a Ph.D. in Philosophy from Princeton University, specializing in the scientifically-oriented analytic (or “Anglo-American”) tradition of academic philosophy, Sigman also the extensive STEM background of Shiva (whose work she cites).

I offer these five figures as additional exemplary practitioners of this dancing ecofeminist ethics. Three are figurative, two are literal. Three bear supernatural powers analogous to Hindu divinities. One is named after an illuminating lantern colored ecological green, two more are icons almost always depicted in green, and all three defend their beloved forest homes (from Sherwood to Weelaunee to all the earthly forests in Green Lantern’s sector 2814, which includes the entire Earth). One was an Indigenous Latinx immigrant from Venezuela in the Global South, who also stood with the Muscogee Creek Native American Indigenous nation of the Global North, before being tragically slain for their heroic forest defense. And one uses her dual platforms as academic philosopher and dancer, as well as her horticultural expertise in the socially-maligned so called “weeds” of the concrete jungle of New York City, to shine a Dionsysus/Shiva-like light on the struggle for ecofeminist justice. All are accessible for Global Northern would-be allies, and I challenge us to dancingly comport ourselves in solidarity with them.

109. Quoting Shoshana K. Goldberg, “Remembering Tortuguita, Indigenous queer and non-binary environmental activist and forest defender,” *Human Right Campaign*, 21 Mar 2023: <https://www.hrc.org/news/remembering-tortuguita-indigenous-queer-and-non-binary-environmental-activist-and-forest-defender>.

110. See, for example, Chelsea Adewunmi & Jill Sigman, “Unearthing Movement, Urban Ritual and Environmental Urgency: A Performance Album from Jill Sigman’s *Weed Heart*,” *Choreographic Practices* 9, no. 1 (2018): 59–74. And for a two-minute video introduction to *Weed Heart*, see: <https://vimeo.com/180822780>.