

EMBODIMENT AND LIBERATION: A COMPARATIVE EXPLORATION OF
ECOLOGICAL THEOLOGIES

A THESIS

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Religion

The Colorado College

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

Bachelor of Arts

By

Lia Bentley

March/ 2014

Introduction

A flickering of shadows draws my attention as we walk in rhythm to songs of the procession. My host mother guides me through the Via Crucis ceremony, watching amusedly as I attempt to understand her community's urban accents. The San Antonio Abad neighborhood of San Salvador welcomes me with references to liberation theology as connected with the social justice movements of their region. As the ceremony guides us through this urban landscape, memories of the Salvadoran Civil War that ensued throughout the 1980s are increasingly resonant, for my hosts openly grieve the damage of the conflict. The continued loss of natural resources and violence marked by social inequalities are clear and devastating effects of the war. Local martyrs are commonly spoken of amongst the families. A memorial calendar reveals the faces of beloveds lost, the thousands of youth, men and women whose images bear the weight of this painful history. Despite immense reverence held for the liberation movement, my hosts explain the continuous struggles of gang violence, gender inequality, and environmental deterioration.

These testimonies of community resilience, despite immense challenges sustained by the systemic violence of poverty, have motivated my interest in theologies that address social and environmental care as mutually related concerns. Though their praxes are distinctive, theologians of ecological liberation contribute to a discourse that expands understandings of social justice. Ecological challenges are intertwined with conflicts of social inequality. Despite this connection, environmentalist and social justice efforts have generally been identified as separate causes. Though there are movements working to bridge the uninformed divide between humans and nature, there is much conciliation

work to be explored. Ecological theology is one contribution to transforming this dualistic paradigm. While the concern for overarching philosophical discourse is valuable, it is incomplete without acknowledgment of how this divide is manifested in the contextualized experiences of people and places.

Context, as a metaphor for our specific and embodied experiences, must be accounted for when discussing shared planetary issues. Liberation theology is a field of discourse that has actively explored the relevance of contextual experience. While traveling through Central America as a student of Latin American liberation theologies, I was moved by this emphasis on place. However, it became clear that certain perspectives within the discourse of “liberation” were missing. In consideration of the immense environmental challenges my Central American friends and host families articulated, it seemed problematic that most liberation theologies had not included ecological wellbeing as a factor of social justice. Though I was initially unaware of environmental perspectives that emerged from liberationist discourse, my research on ecofeminism, ecumenical pluralism, postcolonialism, and panentheism has offered meaningful insights on the practical potential of theology in light of today’s environmental circumstance.

The global concerns of climate change, environmental destruction, and social inequalities have driven theological response to the need for a new cultural paradigm. Ivone Gebara articulates an ecofeminist, panentheist perspective that is informed by liberation hermeneutics and her identity as a Latin American woman. Paul F. Knitter offers a pluralist theology focused on dialogical strategies for global, salvation-centered responsibility to the earth. When analyzed along with postcolonial critiques of R.S. Sugirtharajah and Kwok Pui-lan, the limitations of these liberationist perspectives are

clarified. However, Sallie McFague's panentheist model of God underscores the value of ecofeminist philosophy and activist initiatives. Gebara's theology embodies ethical practice through alternative institutions, such as the ecofeminist organization Colectivo Con-Spirando,¹ that are committed to environmental and social care.

Through this analysis, it is clear that although practical strategies for dialogical action are needed, the theological basis of panentheism more adequately nurtures an environmental ethic than the pluralist approach. While Knitter's theology focuses on the urgency of cross-cultural communication, Gebara highlights the intrinsic worth of every life form as a motivation for contextual, grassroots social change. Both theologies benefit from the critiques of liberation hermeneutics offered by postcolonial scholars. These theoretical fields should be held in tandem with each other when analyzing questions of theology, ethics, and praxis. When considered together, they offer opportunities for collaboration in exploration of solutions to shared environmental concerns.

A shift in cultural values must occur if we are to address environmental challenges, and this can be guided in part through new understandings of God. These theologies are significant contributors to the shift that has already begun from within individuals and communities that have opened to the painful urgency of our ecological context. Consequently, it is vital to approach alternative theological perspectives critically, for theological praxis has concrete effects on the experiences of the marginalized bodies, human and nonhuman, that they write of.

¹ Hurtado, Josefina and Ute Siebert. "Con-Spirando: Women 'Breathing Together.'" *Ecumenical Review* 53.1 (2001): 90-93.

Ivone Gebara: An ecofeminist perspective

Ivone Gebara's *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation* (1999) proposes an ecofeminist theology of liberation that deconstructs the interlocking oppressions of gender inequality, environmental destruction, and economic exploitation. As a theologian and Catholic sister influenced by the initial movement of Latin American liberation theologies, Gebara writes with a fundamental concern for the economically disadvantaged. Though the first generation of liberation theologians worked to "liberate" the poor, the movement failed to address the racial, gendered and environmental experience of those communities. Gebara recognizes how patriarchal institutions such as the Catholic Church have failed to contribute to efforts for social and ecological justice. By grounding her interpretation of faith in the contextual experience of daily life in Brazil, Gebara constructs an alternative and subversive theological framework.

Personal experience informs this theology. Context grounds her ideas in the present realities of those marginalized by patriarchal systems of economic and religious authority. "I often insist on the word 'experience' and speak of experience within the confines of our bodies and our histories in order to underline the fundamental importance of the physical moment in which we live. To speak of experience is to speak of concrete realities that have to do with our bodies."² These "concrete realities" hold the weight of religious significance that institutionalized perceptions of a transcendent deity fail to offer. Holistic ecofeminist theology, unlike the first movement of Latin American

²Gebara, Ivone. *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 182.

Liberation Theologies, critically analyzes how gender and environment play into the experiences of impoverished women in Latin America.

Traditional Catholic theology has affirmed a transcendent deity that situates humans within a hierarchical order of supremacy over other forms of life. According to Gebara, this kind of cultural paradigm has devastating consequences for the global community's well being, as do violent relationships between men and women that are implicated by patriarchal hierarchies. The Roman Catholic institution has punished insubordinations and instilled fear in those who work to promote feminist agendas of gender equality in Latin America. These barriers to social progress are upheld by official theologies of divine transcendence. "The need to affirm a higher power—a power presented as being in discontinuity with all the powers of the cosmos, the earth, human beings, animals, plants, and even life itself—appears to be of fundamental importance in maintaining the hierarchical organization of the society in which we live."³

Institutionalized theologies that fail to recognize the mutual interconnectedness of life have not supported the need for new cultural discourses on social and ecological justice.

Latin American feminists have critiqued the Catholic Church, as well as first generation liberation theologians, for their failure to regard gender inequalities as a source of socioeconomic injustice. The capitalist system that has subordinated local economies and ecosystems of the global south to northern political influence perpetuates unjust relations between men and women in the labor market. Neoliberal models of economic development have deepened the gender divisions of labor and diminished the quality of life for the demographic majority. Latin American feminist theologians such as

³ Gebara, *Longing for Running Water*, 114.

Maria Pilar Aquino focus their work on the lived experiences of men and women in impoverished communities, and the struggle against social structures that sanction destructive behaviors. It is through these reflections that new cultural relations are formulated. Feminist theological critique aims "...to perceive the multidimensional character of hierarchical power relations: and to become aware of the influence of gender in all conceptual elaboration, including the theological."⁴ Gebara's theological work emerges from this particular discourse of liberation and gender studies. As articulated by Aquino, the lived experience of religious people, particularly women, directly informs how feminist theologians reflect on the intersecting relationships of social order and environmental destruction.⁵

Latin American feminist literature on ecological theology is connected to the legacy of North American scholars such as Rosemary Radford Ruether. Gebara and Ruether both explore how male domination of women and nature are interconnected in cultural ideology and social structure. According to their ecofeminisms, a healed relation to the earth demands a radical social reordering that brings about just interrelationships.⁶ In this sense, their projects reflect a similar charting of cultural connections between women's subordination and male domination. Cultural-symbolic influences on women and nature's inferiority are affirmed in support of economic and legal systems of domination. Christian institutions have been a source of cultural rhetoric that has

⁴ Aquino, María Pilar. "Latin American Feminist Theology." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 14.1 (1998): 89.

⁵ Pilar, "Latin American Feminist Theology," 91.

⁶ Ruether, Rosemary Radford. "Ecofeminism: First and Third World Women." *Ecotheology: Journal of Religion, Nature & the Environment* 5.2 (1997): 40.

marginalized women and nature as connected constructs. Ruether demands a reconfiguration of religious symbols that perpetuate oppressive gender and environmental relationships, and does so through a critique of Christian scriptures that privilege the destructive dichotomies of mind/body, man/woman, God/earth. She explains the need for a shift in cultural consciousness, “Ecological healing demands a psycho-cultural/spiritual conversion from this anthropocentric stance of separation and domination. We have to recover the experience of communion in nature and rebuild a new culture based on the affirmation of being one interconnected community of life.”⁷ Though this sentiment is generally aligned with Gebara’s theology, the distinctions between Ruether’s and Gebara’s regional contexts should not be overlooked. Their experiences as women in vastly different socioeconomic circumstances have a great influence on the claims of their work.

Unlike many of her North American predecessors in the ecofeminist community, Gebara does not focus her energies solely on the reconfiguration of religious symbols imbued with dualistic philosophical meaning. Though the shift from dualistic constructs of God is an aspect of her call for a new theological vision, Gebara’s context offers a particular inclination toward praxis and the experience of those marginalized by the global economic system. She creates an “urban ecofeminism” that is distinct from North American feminist revision of the Western tradition’s anthropocentric hierarchies. Gebara’s work offers a perspective immediately impacted by the realities of poverty and related ecological devastation.

⁷ Ruether, *Ecotheology: Journal of Religion, Nature & the Environment*, 33.

Through ecofeminism, I have begun to see more clearly how much our bodies—my body, and the bodies of my neighbors—are affected, not just by unemployment and economic hardship, but also by the harmful effects the system of industrial exploitation imposes on them. . . I have come to see how much all this fits in with the inherent logic of the patriarchal system—especially in its current form, which can be called ‘economic globalization,’ and is a global order, or rather a global disorder.⁸

The global disorder referred to is deeply connected with the plight of her community and environment. Physical experience, as bodily knowledge, is as relevant to her work as any other intellectual exploration. The daily realities of contaminated water, unemployment, food scarcity and violent crime are of primary concern and motivation for her ecofeminist scholarship. Gebara’s contextual background offers the largely unheard perspective of people facing ecological damage created by exploitative economic systems developed by the global north. As ecofeminism is a discourse that examines global issues of feminism and environmentalism, this voice should not be disregarded. The tension between intellectual and practical philosophy is articulated as a point of distinction between North American and Latin American feminists.⁹ This is due to the differing socioeconomic contexts from which these scholars write; the circumstances of widespread poverty and concerns of daily survival inform the intentions of Latin American feminist discourse.

In consideration of this circumstantial differentiation, the ethics of ecofeminist epistemology is a key concern. How do our constructions of understanding inform the way we act within the world? Can ecofeminist epistemology translate into ethical praxis? As Gebara’s theology situates humans within the cosmos, not above and beyond the limitations of our earthly context, these questions can be traced throughout much of her

⁸ Gebara, *Longing for Running Water*, vi.

⁹ Althaus-Reid, Marcella and Lisa Isherwood. *Controversies in Feminist Theology*. (London: SCM, 2007),133.

text. *Longing for Running Water* describes the patriarchal basis of the epistemological theories that have guided Western society's development. Gebara outlines the "hierarchical, anthropocentric, and androcentric" bias of patriarchal epistemology as a worldview that is problematic in today's context of widespread social-ecological conflict.¹⁰ Though knowledge is always contextual, the influence of patriarchal epistemologies in relation to the earth has so widely dominated our relationships that it is difficult to recognize its limitations as an epistemological construct. In her discussion of the Aristotelian-Thomistic epistemology most widespread in the Catholic Church, Gebara explains the theological dilemma of immutable truth: "Concretely, then, this perspective maintains that the whole range of things we know naturally can be changed, but not truths of faith, the order of things revealed by God. There is a sort of basic unchanging structure that is understood to be above and beyond the contingencies of space and time."¹¹ The image of God as an external force maintains a disconnection from human experiences negatively impacted by this anthropocentric and androcentric theology.

This analysis of the problems surrounding patriarchal epistemology is extended through a critique of the Latin American Liberation Theology movement. Though the Vatican II council was radical in its willingness to deal with so-called Third World issues-- which opened wider dialogue about economic inequality-- the epistemology of the theologies that emerged from this event was not different from traditional Christological dogma.¹² While the movement integrated the experiences of impoverished Latin Americans into these epistemological constructs, the basic framework through

¹⁰ Gebara, *Longing for Running Water*, 25.

¹¹ Gebara, *Longing for Running Water*, 43.

¹² Gebara, *Longing for Running Water*, 45.

which theology was created did not deconstruct the doctrine. Distinctions between human experience and the sacred continued to be highlighted through the Aristotelean-Thomistic perspective of first generation Liberation Theologies. While Gebara's framework emerges from the liberation discourse that privileges the experiences of the "oppressed," she maintains a critical stance against the epistemological tradition of the movement.

The fundamentally anthropocentric and androcentric character of liberation theology appears unquestionable. It speaks of God in human history, a God who in the end remains the Creator and Lord. It thereby reaffirms the entire Thomistic tradition on God and on the incarnation... It reaffirms the goodness and justice of God's being without raising questions about the repercussions, throughout human history, of traditional or historically conditioned images of God.¹³

This critique is significant to the alternative epistemological framework she articulates. Though the liberation theologies of her region attempted to inspire political and economic changes for a more just society, much of the initiative proved unsuccessful due to the system of thought on which their theologies were constructed.¹⁴ Radical change in social relationships will fail to evolve without a shift in understanding, and this is where the ecofeminist perspective endeavors to propose an alternative model of being in the world.

In this model, knowledge is analogous to experience. Gebara's ecofeminist epistemology calls us to ground our understandings of the cosmos through context. The recovery of human experience as a mode of understanding God is central to this framework, for it looks to stories of everyday experience rather than the constructions of knowledge sustained by dominating institutions such as the Catholic Church. Knowledge is grounded within the limitations of our context as individuals within a wider biological

¹³ Gebara, *Longing for Running Water*, 46.

¹⁴ Sugirtharajah, R. S., *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 122.

community. Gebara underscores how anthropocentric epistemologies of the Christian tradition do not acknowledge the interdependent relationship of all living organisms.

The radical interdependence she proposes refers to the basic fact that any experience is the result of interacting events, relationships and histories. We are entirely interdependent with the ecological community, though this is rarely considered in the anthropocentric framework through which most of us were conditioned. Ecofeminist theology highlights relatedness as an opening to deeper understanding of our place in this historical moment.

To be aware that our tragic existential situation of tribulation, violence, and destruction, as well as of joy, tenderness, and hope, is lived out in an intimate relationship with the whole of our Cosmic Body opens us gradually to a new understanding of our human condition. In this epistemology, what we call the human is probed in its astonishing association with and dependency on what we call the nonhuman... We need to seek a new understanding of our personal existence within the larger self that is the Sacred Body of the cosmos.¹⁵

Connections between the human and “nonhuman” suggest a cosmology of sacred relatedness *and* diversity. The multiplicities of experience and knowledge are not disregarded, for the value of such diversity in relation to a unified and sacred identity is embraced. Her philosophy of interdependence “... suggests a certain kind of religious sociopolitical action that will be somewhat different from the actions that flow from other models.”¹⁶ The transformative potential of her insights may be identified through alternative spiritual institutions for social change and environmental care.

Knowledge must be informed by the immediate context, and then applied through action and connection to a greater whole: “Contextual epistemology presupposes that an

¹⁵ Gebara, *Longing for Running Water*, 53.

¹⁶ Gebara, *Longing for Running Water*, 133.

appreciation of the immediate context in which our knowing evolves needs to be fully developed before we open it out to wider horizons and articulations.”¹⁷ Thus, blueprint models for social change are not possible, though the practice and ethics that emerge from the universal characteristics of this theology may prompt a better sense of cosmological relatedness. There is a paradoxical tension; specific contextual initiatives for social justice are possible when we develop an epistemology of universal relatedness. Diversity of experiences, particularly religious experiences, is embraced as varying expressions of one sacred network. Our perceptions of the world are grounded in the particular multiplicities of daily experience without depending on “rigid limits of knowing”¹⁸ to inform our understandings of the world and ourselves.

Contextual epistemology embraces the mystery of sacred ecological relatedness while calling for attentiveness to concrete experience. It is through this awareness of the microcosmic and macrocosmic relationships that she expresses confidence in the potential for social change. God, as a matrix of relatedness, is expressed through all the living organisms of our planet. Concepts of immanence and transcendence are held in tandem together as unifying aspects of this perspective.

We no longer think of God first and creation later, because this sort of gap between atemporality in God and temporality in creation does not make sense to us. We no longer speak of the presence or absence of God, but, basically, of *presence*. . . Relatedness is not a discourse about the person or the being of God, but about what we perceive of the mysterious Body of the universe to which we belong.¹⁹

¹⁷ Gebara, *Longing for Running Water*, 61.

¹⁸ Gebara, *Longing for Running Water*, 65.

¹⁹ Gebara, *Longing for Running Water*, 105.

This perception of God's presence highlights the inter-subjective relationship between the intellect and body.²⁰ The privileging of the spiritual over physical, God over human, and man over woman, does not adequately meet the complex reality of today's social and scientific context. Relatedness is a personal experience, an expression of divine immanence held within a network beyond individual human consciousness. The epistemology through which she articulates her theology reflects a panentheist model of God as embodied through our world.

The body of earth as metaphor for God carries planetary and contextual significance. Gebara references Sallie McFague's work, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology*, to express her Latin American ecofeminism. McFague's theology posits that every organism has intrinsic worth as an expression of a unitary, sacred body. Physical experience is intimately tied with the spiritual, which proposes an ethic of ecological and social responsibility. Our bodies are what carry our capacity to relate to each other, the world, and God. Though the official theologies of the Catholic Church maintain dualisms that separate the sacred from the physical, both McFague and Gebara argue otherwise. God is expressed through embodiment, yet not totally or unconditionally. The open-endedness of this theological stance seems unappealing to those who strive for a more anthropocentric image of God. However, this model necessitates the relationship between the immanent value of physical bodies, as well as the transcendent energy of God that sustains these networks.

²⁰ Gebara, *Longing for Running Water*, 183. This understanding of God's presence is reflective of Gebara's Catholic background. She recognizes Christ as a symbol of divine immanence, and calls for a new, "biocentric" approach to salvation that is inspired by the practical wisdom of Jesus.

I like to say, then, that to speak of pan-en-theism is to consider the potentialities of the universe, the potentialities of life, and the potentialities of human life as always open-ended. Thus we escape from the closed circle of immanence and transcendence of ‘being in itself,’ to become part of the reality we call the process of life, in which transcendence and immanence are mere expressions that point to the dynamics that draw us forth.²¹

Divine immanence and transcendence are confluent. Human and nonhuman life is a complex expression of the same, unified body. The ethics of this philosophy must be considered at the contextual level. What are the political implications suggested but not fully articulated? How does context fit into a global concern for environmental deterioration? We cannot assume that every agent of social change will accept the same sociopolitical strategies, but the panentheist view holds that each being has a right to be recognized for its intrinsic worth. As biological and cultural diversity sustains a sacred whole, practical approaches to social change must account for the complexities of specific circumstance. Paul F. Knitter envisions strategies for ecological stewardship that foster collaboration between differing religious institutions.

Paul F. Knitter: Religious pluralism and ecological responsibility

Knitter proposes a “correlational” dialogue of religions through an autobiographical introduction in *One Earth Many Religions: Multifaith Dialogue & Global Responsibility* (1995). He articulates his experiences of dialogue with those from other religious backgrounds to present a message of social-ecological justice. The pluralist theology he proposes links global responsibility for ecological justice to strategies for interfaith dialogue. “And just as a human suffering and ecological suffering have common causes, they will have common solutions. To speak of justice and

²¹ Gebara, *Longing for Running Water*, 124.

liberation, therefore, one must intend eco-human justice and liberation.”²² Dialogue serves as a practical implication of the liberation hermeneutics he employs. His work with Salvadoran base Christian communities during El Salvador’s civil conflict fostered interest in liberation theology and its connection to ecumenism. This contextual legacy of Protestant ecumenism is recognized and highlighted as an influential factor of his vision. He acknowledges his context as a North American male scholar, and the limitations of understanding that this identity presents.

Though he recognizes contextual limitations, Knitter articulates a meta-narrative of pluralist dialogue. He identifies ecocide as a common cause of suffering around the globe, one that is urgent enough to present the opportunity for restorative dialogical practices across cultural barriers. “Persons from all religious traditions *can* (I am not saying that at the moment they *do*) see, feel, and respond to the crises facing our Earth; such recognition *can* lead to the conclusion that the religions must respond to these crises.”²³ Though this vision can be dangerous in its attempt to impose culturally specific understandings of justice and responsibility on other communities, he explicitly acknowledges the critiques of his pluralist approach.

Postmodern critiques of pluralism recognize imperialist attitudes affirmed through assumption of common values held among varied religious institutions. According to this critical discourse, pluralists tend to too quickly presuppose a common ground that establishes idealistic unity. Common guidelines for dialogue are drawn for these groups without accounting for the complexities of context. Meta-narratives proposed by pluralist

²² Knitter, Paul F. *One Earth Many Religions: Multifaith Dialogue and Global Responsibility*. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995), 10.

²³ Knitter, *One Earth Many Religions*, 79.

theories are problematic in their attempt to impose culturally specific understandings of justice and responsibility on differing communities. “In failing to realize that the Universal can be grasped only through the particular, pluralists end up imposing their own particularity on others.”²⁴ Knitter acknowledges this issue, for the concern of imperialist attitudes among religious pluralists is pressing. “Liberation” and “justice” are not universal terms. The means by which social and ecological justice is manifested must be addressed through the specific circumstances of context. Power dynamics among differing geographical, cultural and economic contexts must be recognized before assumptions of common responsibility and successful dialogue can be posited. “Developed” nations such as the United States are inordinately more responsible for the ecological deterioration and climate change we are facing. Furthermore, communities that encounter the heaviest environmental burdens are those living with the least resources for survival. The imbalance of power in this global circumstance of increasing social inequality and environmental damage must be taken into consideration by Knitter’s pluralist agenda.

Despite Knitter’s chapter dedicated to the critiques of his pluralist discourse, he maintains a commitment to the ecumenical liberationist perspective. Praxis is demanded by the global circumstance of ecological peril: “To insist on the dominance of diversity and on the impossibility of finding any common ground on which we can make common ethical decisions can all too easily lead to a moral lethargy or quietism.”²⁵ His correlative theology of global responsibility is predicated on a reactionary approach to our current ecological problems. The theology relies upon notions of survivorship and the trust that if

²⁴ Knitter, *One Earth Many Religions*, 44.

²⁵ Knitter, *One Earth Many Religions*, 55.

our ecological circumstance is destructive enough, communities will respond in a unified, productive way. The positive aspects of this assumption offer strategies for a transformative theology; he articulates the ways in which our ecological circumstance may be addressed by highlighting common experiences of suffering. This articulation is only possibly through dialogue that privileges the voices of the “oppressed” as an attempt to balance the power dynamics between faith communities of different socioeconomic backgrounds.

Global issues of poverty, ecological destruction, and violence are identified as common concerns for this correlational dialogue. Common suffering serves as conceptual grounding for the political transformation and cross-cultural dialogue he envisions:

“...there is a common context that contains a common complex of problems. This context calls for a common agenda for all the religions of the world as they try to come together to understand and make sense of each other.”²⁶ In this vision, the context of world suffering demands shared action and a general agreement on the ethical goals of such transformation. Consensus on praxis is achieved through dialogue, and religious communities have a major role to play in this vision for international cooperation. Knitter articulates three ethical insights that must be recognized by those engaging in dialogue; human beings have a global responsibility to promote the well-being of a threatened planet, this responsibility must be carried out through communal action, and communal projects are only possible through consensus.²⁷ Religious institutions confirm and create the ethical standards of faith communities, which play a vital role in this strategy for theological praxis.

²⁶ Knitter, *One Earth Many Religions*, 57.

²⁷ Knitter, *One Earth Many Religions*, 70.

The relationship between theological reflection and praxis is a primary concern. In an effort to avoid cooptation by harmful ideological influence, Knitter insists on the “hermeneutical privilege of the oppressed.” By highlighting the experiences of victims as those who bear the burden of ecological suffering, the threat of ideological domination is diminished. Social inclusion is intended to equalize power dynamics between communities of vastly different socioeconomic backgrounds and institutional power. Suffering becomes a negative common ground through which multiple communities meet each other, with emphasis on the voices of the unheard and “oppressed.” I mark this term in quotations because of its debatable qualitative assumption; power dynamics between groups of people are always in flux, and categories such as the “oppressed” that are consistently employed by the language of liberation theology are contentious. However, within the context of his project, privileging victims of an unsustainable global economic system has the potential to transform power relations between communities.

Knitter’s hermeneutical approach demands inclusiveness within dialogical settings previously insensitive to the insights of those identified as victims of the contemporary social-ecological crisis. His insistence on the authenticity of dialogue is dependent on the active inclusion of marginalized peoples. Oppressed communities are designated as those who offer the most authentic experiences of suffering related to the central issues of poverty, ecological devastation, and violence. Though Knitter intends to implicate a transformation of relationships between communities of the global north and south, his categorization of the oppressed remains contestable. Even if these dialogical efforts occurred with honest openness toward the stories of impoverished victims, the practical implications of these conversations would be contradictory depending on who

dominated the conversation. Environmental issues are political issues, and context directly informs the ethics of political praxis. Though this tension is not reason to disregard the value of interfaith communication, “suffering,” as fixated upon by Knitter, is an unstable criterion for cross-cultural dialogue. The instability of Knitter’s common suffering model is made clear through the more detailed strategies of political praxis he proposes.

Knitter outlines a suggested procedure for interfaith dialogue focused on eco-human justice. He acknowledges the potential critiques of this unrealized vision for “doing dialogue,” but maintains his stance on the necessity of addressing human suffering as a starting point for cross-cultural conversations. The liberationist “hermeneutical circle” of experience, theological reflection and praxis that influenced most liberation theologians of Latin America, informs Knitter’s model of “Compassion-Conversion-Collaboration-Comprehension.”²⁸ Praxis and liberation theology are inextricable in this methodological approach to social change; theology is informed by the experience of eco-human suffering, which in turn generates ethical responses of globally responsible action as interfaith dialogue.

The initial movement toward communities of other contexts is an experience of compassion for the earth and its inhabitants. Those who do feel compassion often find it arising out of their own religious convictions and experiences. This personal experience calls them to engage with community in dialogue for action. While compassion makes the initial ethical demands of the hermeneutical cycle, conversion is a shared experience resultant of dialogue. People of differing faith communities congregate to speak

²⁸ Knitter, *One Earth Many Religions*, 140.

authentically of their compassionate experiences, which creates transformational bonds across cultural barriers. Collaboration occurs through careful listening and solidarity with the “oppressed,” prompting actions for ecological sustainability and social equality. As the final step to this new network of global responsibility, “comprehension” offers space for sustained theological reflection within a diverse community of religious people.

Is Knitter’s construct of eco-human justice a sufficient method of theological praxis? In many ways, Knitter exercises a privilege of assumption about how victims would inform political engagement in an international forum. Though the “compassion-conversion-collaboration-comprehension” method intentionally formulates a “base human community”²⁹ similar to the base Christian communities of Latin American liberation theologies, Knitter does not recognize the contemporary status of these movements. Though base Christian communities in Latin America generated solidarity among poor communities resisting violent political oppression, they have lost much of their political traction.³⁰ Today, the radicalism of base Christian communities has largely been coopted by governmental influence or rejected by the Catholic institution.

While Knitter’s rhetoric sustains an honest sense of political urgency for eco-human justice, the suggested methods of action place inordinate trust in religious institutions agreeing upon unstable categories of ethical political action. His response to the issue of ideological influence relies upon the “hermeneutical privilege of the oppressed,” yet he fails to fully articulate the importance of these voices as ends in themselves. Rather, he urges the utilization of oppressed individuals so as to address critiques of pluralist strategies:

²⁹ Knitter, *One Earth Many Religions*, 144.

³⁰ Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation*, 115.

John O'Brien can therefore conclude his careful examination of the role the option for the poor should play in theological method by asserting that the hermeneutical privilege of the poor must be given a 'relative normative status.' And the reason for this is not that the poor and suffering can claim any kind of a moral superiority or a normative grasp of reality; rather, their privilege is a 'therapeutic' one—necessary to diagnose and remedy our ideological distortions.³¹

This statement perpetuates the attitudes he attempts to resist by highlighting the voices of victims in his outline for interreligious dialogue. Why include the "oppressed" as a homogenous category if they are to be viewed as redemptive resources that resolve the questions of those who have the privilege of distance from poverty? This aspect of his project does not sufficiently address the issue of trust in religious institutions' enlightened capacity for ethical response to environmental issues. The theology is reliant upon the capacity for humans to speak, think and act from an ethical religious inclination, yet he is unable to recognize whole groups of people as valuable expressions of the ecological diversity he advocates for, rather than means to a restorative end for economically advantaged communities. Though the language of both Knitter and Gebara are reflective in their reference to the "oppressed" as the primary concern of liberation theology, Gebara's philosophical approach to understanding the experience of those living in impoverished environmental contexts is more sensitive to the complex politics embedded within the relationships between communities of the global north and south.

Holistic ecofeminist theology asserts the intrinsic worth of every living organism, which posits a more nuanced approach to social inclusion. Rather than expecting those who experience poverty to resolve the dissonance of advantaged groups navigating ethical questions, Gebara invites us to listen carefully to those stories before assuming the

³¹Knitter, *One Earth Many Religions*, 95.

implications. This is likely why she does not articulate a clear strategy for political praxis—in light of her panentheistic approach, blue-print methods of community healing are not attuned to the complex realities of contextual histories. What, then, of public policy? The influence of alternative, intentional grassroots communities could maintain networks of support as federal institutions fail to respond to pressing global environmental challenges. This vision of alternative institutional models demands our commitment to the agency we hold, as contextualized individuals within a greater network of related lives, to create practices for healthier communities in the present moment. Though Knitter’s dialogical project makes contestable propositions that contribute to problematic assumptions about the “oppressed,” Gebara perpetuates this language, as well. Postcolonial theorists offer critiques of both theologies that modulate their universal claims.

Postcolonial responses to liberation theologies

It is impossible to draw clear analogous lines between the subjugation of woman to man as colonized to colonizer. Within ecofeminist and liberation discourse, it is vital to recognize the inconstancy of power dynamics between people and places. Postcolonial scholars such as Laura Donaldson articulate the discrepancy between feminist movements of colonized communities and the rest of the world. Despite claims to be antiracist and anticolonialist, many North American feminists perpetuate colonialist oppressions. The structures of thought and research methods through which North American scholars conduct their work often hinder their progressive political goals.³²

³² Laura E. Donaldson and Kwok Pui-lan. *Postcolonialism, Feminism, and Religious Discourse*. (New York: Routledge, 2002), 44.

Colonial influence in scholarship bolsters sanctioned ignorance as the way in which not-knowing about the “other” is legitimated by the Euro-American academy. Though Gebara is Brazilian and Knitter North American, the work of both scholars is deepened through this postcolonial critique.

Gebara does not emerge from the same North American feminist circle that Donaldson critiques, yet her ideas on ecofeminist theology are directly influenced by a legacy of North American scholars. Legacy should be recognized, for it highlights the historical filters through which we understand our contexts. In the case of Knitter and his vision of the privileged “oppressed,” the narrative of global power over victimized peoples is inadequate and simplified. We must take into account the perspectives and experiences of resistance to colonial domination that have been expressed by “oppressed” communities. There is always a story of resistance unheard, and Donaldson underscores this point; “‘Epistemic violence’ describes one of colonialism’s most insidious yet predictable effects: violating the most fundamental way that a person or people know themselves.”³³ To an extent, both Gebara and Knitter perpetuate this kind of epistemic violence. In the case of Gebara, the associative comparison of relationships between men and women as human to earth, or colonizer to colonized, is disputable. Though supported through the panentheist theological position, the language encompassing her references to women as a single homogenized category is problematic. Knitter makes similar associative assumptions by privileging victims as a method of resisting institutional powers within interreligious dialogues, without accounting for the contradictory reality of human experience.

³³Donaldson and Pui-lan, *Postcolonialism, Feminism, and Religious Discourse*, 51.

The implications of colonial history can be identified through the social and ecological challenges that have already been articulated. Kwok Pui-Lan, in *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*,³⁴ articulates the relationship between current systems of development and the environment. The expansion of free trade markets throughout the global south is a contemporary extension of colonization; colonization in the Americas has had major environmental impacts that should not be overlooked when discussing liberation theology, ecumenism, and ecofeminism. When referring to the “oppressed” we must move away from essentialisms: “Although we should not blame the victims of our global economy who have to struggle to obtain even basic necessities, we also should not close our eyes to poor women’s capacity to destroy nature.”³⁵ The romanticized perception of poor women’s inherent capacity to heal the environment is a detrimental assumption. Again, feminist theology, especially as articulated by white feminists, is not intrinsically anti-imperialist.³⁶ Though addressed to feminists, this critique can be applied to Knitter’s tendencies as a pluralist calling for global responsibility through anthropocentric dialogical practices. Gebara’s theology benefits from this postcolonial perspective, for her thoughts on universal relatedness should be balanced with critical awareness of oppressions as related to colonial histories. This awareness of diversity as urged by Pui-Lan is aligned with much of Sallie McFague’s work on the body as a metaphor for sacred relationships of diverse living organisms.

³⁴ Kwok, Pui-lan. *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005.

³⁵ Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 227.

³⁶ Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 130.

As Knitter and Gebara are liberationists, R.S. Sugirtharajah's commentary on the relationship between liberation and postcolonial discourses is cogent. Sugirtharajah recognizes the multiplicities of experiences within the category of the oppressed, and critiques this hermeneutical language of liberation theology.

Unlike liberation hermeneutics, postcolonialism does not perceive the other as a homogeneous category, but acknowledges multiple identities based upon class, sex, ethnicity, and gender. In their preferential option, there is a tendency in liberation hermeneutics to romanticize the poor.³⁷

Sugirtharajah identifies postcolonialism and liberation theology as companions in the same struggle, but highlights liberation as an effort that is not latent in the scriptural texts themselves. Rather, it comes from the praxis and collective action of people. He identifies scriptural emphasis and hermeneutical privileging of the oppressed as hallmark features of liberation theology that should be revised. Postcolonial scholars are wary of these tendencies due to their distance from the actual experiences of the poor: "In its overzealousness to represent the poor, liberation hermeneutics has ended up as a liberation theology of the poor rather than a theology of liberation by the poor. The goal is now not social change but pastoral concern."³⁸ Gebara arrives at similar conclusions through her emphasis on contextual experience. Her recognition of environmental injustice and gender inequalities originates from her personal critiques of the official, institutionalized approaches to liberation theology.

While Knitter attempts to adjust his ecumenical approach with sensitivity to the authentic experiences of various communities, his articulation of theological praxis fails to move past the "pastoral concern" for the poor that Sugirtharajah recognizes. The issue

³⁷ Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation*, 120.

³⁸ Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation*, 115.

of context arises repeatedly throughout these various theological perspectives. To what extent must we account for contextual diversity when faced with urgent challenges that seem to demand systemic solutions? How can we consider the complexities of individual experience when discussing shared planetary concerns? Questions of faith as related to context and social-ecological justice are thoroughly explored by Sallie McFague, a Christian Panentheist theologian. Though her project is only one model inherently limited by her own contextual experience as a white female North American, her ecological theology responds to these pressing questions.

Sallie McFague: A panentheist theology of embodiment

Ultimately, our individual contexts are dependent upon the health of the ecology of our planet. The word “ecology” derives from the Greek word *oikos*, meaning “home.” The health of our home is a baseline necessity, not simply for our own survival, but for those who recognize and revere God’s continuous creative processes, it is a spiritual responsibility. By approaching theology from an ecological standpoint, Sallie McFague explores how we, as a species that *belongs* to this planet, may better care for our places and people. She begins with bodies as the primary criterion for her panentheist theology. Despite the distinction between spirit and body that is embedded within most official theologies of the Christian tradition, our human bodies are inextricably connected with the force McFague refers to as “God’s cosmic body.” The body model takes on both microcosmic and macrocosmic perspectives. It is a metaphor that presents a new cosmology and anthropology of justice focused on the wellbeing of all bodies as related to a single sacred universe.

We do not use nature or other people as a means to an end—our union with God—but see each and every creature, every body, as intrinsically valuable in

itself, in its specialness, its distinctiveness, its difference from ourselves. This acknowledgment of difference and intrinsic worth is not only the basis of an ecological ethic as we have seen, but is also the source of nature spirituality.³⁹

The universe as God's body places us within our context; it inspires us to see ourselves in "the scheme of things," to recognize the gifts and responsibilities of conscious creatures on this planet, as well as the limitations of our finite natural resources. Shared challenges of environmental degradation and widespread poverty are to be addressed through the specific contexts that exist within a larger network of shared experiences. McFague reveres the body in this model because it involves both a planetary ecological perspective and concern for the basic needs of human beings. Ecology and social justice are reconciled as are theological immanence and transcendence.

Though unifying, this theological standpoint emphasizes the value of diversity. The richness of diversity indicates the health of God's creative process, which should not be inhibited by our irresponsible actions. The bodies of others-- whether humans, animals, rocks or rivers-- are recognized as manifestations of God's complex creative process that has occurred throughout evolutionary history. Biodiversity is a result of this creative process, and is a defining expression of divine embodiment. This concept connects postmodern science with theology. Diversity is an inherent and necessary component of healthy ecosystems, which is supported by the panentheist perspective. Though the value of diversity can be relegated to scientific ecological discourse, it applies to the social concerns that are intimately connected with our global challenges. McFague emphasizes cultural diversity along with the importance of context; a single

³⁹ McFague, Sallie. *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 211.

solution to the environmental “crisis” is not articulated, for this would disregard the complexities of particular communities as they relate to place.

Thus, justice issues *within* the human species have a direct effect on environmental issues between our species and other species. Simply put, we need to do some house-cleaning as a first step. Until we rectify gross injustices among human beings, in other words, begin our ecological work at home, we will have little chance of success abroad, that is, in relation to other species and the planet as a whole.⁴⁰

Bodies matter, especially for any theology of justice or liberation. Though Sallie McFague does not identify as a liberation theologian, her work has influenced scholars like Ivone Gebara, who has recognized their shared concern for the environment. By acknowledging embodiment as the mutually shared principle of organisms on this planet, we recognize the world as a reflection that connects us back to our specific context within an encompassing network of relationships.

The emphasis on creative fecundity as expressed by cultural and bio-diversity is a result of McFague’s epistemological approach. She points to “attention epistemology” and feminist epistemology as modes of knowledge that foster her environmental ethic. These perspectives call us to actively *see, feel and hear* the world around us. Fully granting attention to the existence of others is a refusal to take one’s own interests as the point of reality. Attention to the world is not passive, it is a moral action.

Attention epistemology is listening, paying attention to another, the other, in itself, for itself. It is the opposite of means-ends thinking, thinking of anything, everything, as useful, necessary, pleasurable *to oneself*, that is, assuming that everything that is not the self has only utilitarian value. An attention epistemology assumes the *intrinsic* value of anything, everything, that is not the self.⁴¹

⁴⁰ McFague, *The Body of God*, 117.

⁴¹ McFague, *The Body of God*, 50.

This is a knowing that embodies differences. It is through committed attention to particularity that we begin to understand the broader dynamics of our ecological connections. This sensitivity to difference is similarly reflected by feminist epistemology, which points out that all thought is embodied— even Western concepts of rational objectivity. Within certain feminisms, essentialist epistemology has failed to recognize the embodied differences among women. However, she articulates the way in which more recent movements such as ecofeminism insist on attention to detail as acknowledgement of differences between species. Similarly, McFague develops a way of thinking that underscores the differences among bodies while recognizing the special ways they are united. Though we are all interconnected, “...embodiment is radically particular.”⁴²

This awareness of the world, in all its beautiful and painful immediacy, generates a theological perspective that does not fixate upon ontological arguments. Rather, her project turns to the ways in which understanding the immanence of God may motivate us to behave differently. She does so without disregarding the transcendent qualities of a panentheistic God, but maintains the importance of sacred material immanence as a motivating factor for her environmental ethic: “...while we, as members of the body, are radically dependent on the life-giving breath from the spirit, God, as spirit, is not so dependent upon the universe.”⁴³ The crux of her theological project is a vision of ethical praxis. Though God is not completely or necessarily identified with the world as in pantheistic theology, the sacred sustains the world through our bodies, through our

⁴²McFague, *The Body of God*, 54.

⁴³McFague, *The Body of God*, 149.

actions. Religious experience becomes ethical action. Environmental care is sustained by awareness of ecological relatedness, which can be understood as a kind of spiritual grounding for transformative practice.

McFague's intentions are practical; recognition of sacred relatedness through difference prompts a revision of Christian concepts of sin and salvation. If God is embodied, then whatever degrades bodies of any kind is a violation of God. Honoring the diversity of bodies is a practice of ethical commitment to the world as it is in the present moment. Creation and salvation become synonymous. When we are able to truly see the present challenges of our ecosystem and society, salvation is grounded as an active commitment that occurs within creation, not through a life after death: "The focus of this essay is on *thinking differently* so that we might behave differently. The focus is a limited one that does not pretend to solve the intricate, complex dilemmas and issues that we face in every dimension of our personal, communal, and political lives."⁴⁴ The intrinsic worth of each living body is a key criterion for this vision of transformative praxis. It motivates recognition of our agency within context, despite the apocalyptic tone we so often assign to our contemporary circumstance. It calls us to see the ways in which attention and active care for our immediate relations, human and nonhuman, may benefit the larger story.

In this theology, the recognition of macrocosmic and microcosmic relatedness honors a diversity of truths. There is no universal method of social or ecological care, it must be navigated from within the embodied locations and experiences of communities. This requires careful attention to the wounds consequent of specific histories. Though

⁴⁴McFague, *The Body of God*, 202.

faith communities can help to inspire this contextual practice of awareness, many have perpetuated epistemologies that enable political complacency. The critique of institutionalized Catholic theology is taken up strongly by Gebara.

McFague, due to her context as a North American Protestant, is more open to the church as a potential avenue for social change. Her ecclesial vision includes grassroots initiatives of the church as a community focused on the wellbeing of our planet's life-forms, while maintaining sensitivity to their radical interdependence and individuality. "The institutional church as manifest in concrete, local churches can become a critical social body helping to bring about the new reality."⁴⁵ The church is articulated as the "inbreaking"⁴⁶ of the panentheist vision, a source of potential solidarity and creativity as people are exposed to these alternative theological ideas and seeking ways to co-create transformative relationships. From the North American Christian context McFague writes through, this is a plausible hope. However, it cannot be expected that the same kind of movement would occur from within Gebara's Latin American context. Though both identify as panentheists, and maintain sensitivity to the critiques of postcolonial scholars, as well as interest in the ecological responsibilities articulated by Knitter, Gebara references a distinctive institutional alternative to the Catholic Church. The operational modes of these theologies are significant indicators of their potential for transformational influence.

Alternative institutional possibilities

Ivone Gebara's ecofeminist theology is situated outside the boundaries of the Roman Catholic Church. Though she has maintained her relationship to the institution as

⁴⁵McFague, *The Body of God*, 206.

⁴⁶McFague, *The Body of God*, 206.

a sister of the Canonesses of St. Augustine, she remains so out of a commitment to the people whom she serves. The poor women of her context are religious, and because the Catholic faith is an aspect her own heritage, Gebara does not completely reject the tradition for her political convictions. Rather, she sustains tradition with new perspectives; though her theological practice and writing are situated outside of the institution, she identifies with the tradition so as to maintain connection to her community. Latin American feminist theologians have worked outside ecclesial boundaries, for the Church has been more concerned with the preservation of its patriarchal political theology than social justice.⁴⁷ Thus, ecofeminists like Gebara place themselves in the Christian tradition through alternative means, by connecting with other groups who envision a new environmental ethic. Though disregarded by the official church, ecofeminist theology is manifested through alternative institutions; collectives of people working together to redefine their perceptions of the sacred, to develop a theological praxis that contributes to local and international activist movements.

Throughout *Longing for Running Water*, Gebara references Colectivo Conspirando, an ecofeminist organization founded in 1992 that is based in Santiago, Chile. The organization works to create the ecofeminist vision through contextual activism, dialogue, and celebration. Due to the political marginalization of feminist theologians from Catholic institutions, Gebara does not desire ecofeminist theology to be appropriated by the Catholic Church. This isolation from the official institution is exemplified by Gebara's personal experience of excommunication due to her

⁴⁷ Gebara, Ivone, Elisangela Marcolin, and Paul Jones. "Feminist Theology in Latin America: A Theology without Recognition." *Feminist Theology* 16.3 (2008): 330.

outspokenness on women's rights to abortion.⁴⁸ The threat of political subordination by the Church is a reality of her circumstance, which motivates resistance to traditional ecclesial models.

Organizations such as Con-Spirando provide space for education on ecofeminist and liberationist theological perspectives that address issues of violence. This community, as an alternative to the Roman Catholic Church, explores ecofeminist theology so as to enable political-cultural action. Gebara cites the fourth issue of the collective's ecofeminist journal, *Con-spirando*, published in 1993;

In this initial issue we invite you to participate in convoking a network of Latin American women who seek to develop their own spirituality and theology in order to better reflect our experiences of the sacred. The very name of this journal-- *Con-spirando*-- is an attempt to picture some of these experiences: the image of 'breathing together,' which in itself evokes images of the planet as a great lung of life.⁴⁹

Con-Spirando is independent from the official Catholic institution, but invites people who wish to deepen and broaden their theological perspectives. Though it is not an exclusively Christian group, the seminars offered by Con-Spirando have inspired fresh theological discussions among people from all walks of life. In the "Jardines Compartidos" (Shared Garden Seminar) of 1997, an event organized by Con-Spirando in collaboration with the Women's Alliance for Theology, Ethics and Ritual (WATER) of Washington, D.C., this exchange was shared across cultural differences of women from North and South America. The theme of this program was "Beyond Violence: Solidarity and

⁴⁸ Gebara, Ivone. "The Abortion Debate in Brazil: A Report from an Ecofeminist Philosopher Under Siege." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 11.2 (1995): 129-135.

⁴⁹ Gebara, *Longing for Running Water*, 15.

Ecofeminism.”⁵⁰ Systemic and interpersonal violence against women, children, marginalized racial groups, and the environment as related to power dynamics perpetuated by institutionalized hierarchies was the focus of the program.

It is through this event and other activities that nurture ecofeminist discourse such as their quarterly journal, *Con-Spirando: Revista latinoamericana de ecofeminismo, espiritualidad y teología*, workshops, lectures, and radio shows that Colectivo Con-Spirando has created an alternative institutional model for manifesting the ecofeminist and panentheist vision of community.⁵¹ While described as a resource for spiritual discussion, the organization works in alliance with a network of other progressive Latin American organizations in their community, including,

FORO—a network for health and sexual and reproductive rights, Chile—which tries to intervene in policies, laws and directives affecting the lives of women, men, young people and children in order to improve their quality of life; RENACE (national ecology network); and AMEN (national association of ecumenical women). By these means we want to reach out and ‘breath together’ with people of other ‘spaces’ and lines of engagement.⁵²

This interdisciplinary approach to social change reflects aspects of Knitter’s project of interfaith dialogue. Though not strictly religious, the Con-Spirando collective is one example of the ways in which ecofeminist perspectives may foster alternative institutional models in the Latin American context. Judith Ress, a co-founder of the collective, describes the ways in which Gebara has inspired diverse collaboration for

⁵⁰ Ress, Judith. "Reports from Conferences Introduction to the Shared Garden Seminar, Washington 1997." *Ecotheology: Journal of Religion, Nature & the Environment* 5.4 (1998): 79.

⁵¹ Colectivo Con-spirando 20th Anniversary. “Activities.” Accessed February 25, 2014. <http://edicionesconspirando.wix.com/20years>.

⁵² Hurtado, Josefina and Ute Siebert. "Con-Spirando: Women Breathing Together." *Ecumenical Review* 53.1 (2001): 92.

conferences such as the Shared Garden Seminar.⁵³ As a frequent lecturer and participant of the workshops Con-spirando has offered over the last twenty-one years, Gebara's spiritual and political message has impacted activists, theologians, artists, scholars and youth. This collective is one expression of the ways in which grassroots spiritual initiatives can positively impact local communities. While other visions of a grassroots ecclesial framework, as McFague proposes from her North American context, could serve specific communities in their efforts to better care for each other, Con-spirando is a lively example of Gebara's Latin American vision for alternative theological movements.

The model of this organization cannot be applied to every context, but it serves as motivation to continue reimagining the ways in which environmental health may be restored through alternative community models. Embodied experience motivates Colectivo Con-spirando's search for activist theologies and spirituality. Though systemic change through public policy is an important avenue for environmental protection, McFague's and Gebara's theologies call for an approach to social justice that is distinct from the patriarchal institutions through which our public policies are created.

Openness to the possibility of these alternative institutions being successful motivators for social change demands active imagination. Despite the immense structural barriers to the justice each scholar hopes for, they persist in their own processes of creation. By imagining the ways in which a vision of social and ecological health may be achieved, they investigate the threads of possibility for a new story of sustainable relationships.

⁵³ Hurtado and Siebert, "Con-Spirando," 77.

Conclusion

Creation is a significant theme that underscores common concern for the wellbeing of life, in all its forms. Gebara, Knitter, McFague, Pui-Lan, and Sugirtharajah compose a community of scholars that offer an alternative cultural discourse for humanity. Though these theologies are all inherently limited by the contexts through which they emerge, there is wisdom to be discovered in their commitment to a positive and sustainable future. Gebara and McFague are particularly sensitive to this dynamic, for they highlight the intrinsic value of the parts that compose a sacred whole.

Knitter's theology, though commendable for its ardent focus on practical strategies, does not adequately address the complexity of contextual experience as related to a global movement for ecological justice. Sugirtharajah and Pui-lan point out the necessity of historical awareness when envisioning a liberationist model of praxis. The specific, embodied experiences and histories of people should be listened to as intrinsically valuable components to any social movement. This idea applies to places, as well. We must see our context in its immediacy, despite the despair felt when the damage is recognized. This awareness calls for a willingness to feel the pain of experiences held outside our independent selves. Commitment to the world through embodied attentiveness and action, as suggested by McFague and Gebara, requires feeling. Compassion is at the heart of these theologies.

The uncertainty of this time is discouraging. Trauma experienced by our local and global environment seems impossibly difficult to transform. However, it is through recognition of this embodied pain that I begin to realize the *reality* of these wounds. This simple recognition of the immediate challenges in my specific context moves me to

continue exploring the ways in which I may act with integrity to form healthier relations to people and the land. The panentheist theology proposed by McFague, and elaborated through Gebara's ecofeminist perspective, accounts for the value of differentiation *and* integration. By claiming that each form, each body, of this planet represents specific parts of the network that is God, the stakes for humanity's ecological responsibility are raised. While my research on alternative institutional pathways aligned with this vision was limited to Colectivo Con-Spirando, it serves as an example of the possibility for theological, ecological activism.

In light of this, and with recognition that my study compares only several of many ecological theologians, Gebara's ecofeminist panentheist theology more adequately generates an environmental ethic that accounts for today's political complexities than Knitter's pluralist approach. This is largely due to their differing relationships to established faith institutions. While Knitter assumes that faith communities, as they are, will respond with enlightened reason to the environmental challenges at hand, Gebara understands the limitations of traditional institutional models as a result of personal experiences with the Catholic Church. Though she does not reject the possibility for change within established religious institutions, she writes with sensitivity to the history of women's subjugation within those official structures. When aligned with McFague's views on the body of God as expressed through grassroots ecclesial communities, a call for contextual sensitivity through political action in favor of *life* is clearly reflected through both perspectives. This discourse articulates the practical and philosophical ways in which people may live into the call for a life-sustaining planetary culture as expressed through contextual initiatives.

Bibliography

- Aquino, María Pilar. "Latin American Feminist Theology." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 14.1 (1998): 89-107.
- Althaus-Reid, Marcella and Lisa Isherwood. *Controversies in Feminist Theology*. Controversies in Contextual Theology Series. London: SCM, 2007.
- Colectivo Con-spirando 20th Anniversary. "Activities." Accessed February 25, 2014. <http://edicionesconspirando.wix.com/20years#!activities/c1w7l>.
- Diamond, Irene and Gloria Feman Orenstein. *Reweaving the World: The Emergence of Ecofeminism*. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1990.
- Donaldson, Laura E. and Kwok Pui-lan. *Postcolonialism, Feminism, and Religious Discourse*. New York: Routledge, 2002.
- Gebara, Ivone. "The Abortion Debate in Brazil: A Report from an Ecofeminist Philosopher Under Siege." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 11.2 (1995): 129-135.
- . "Brazilian Women's Movements and Feminist Theologies." *Ecotheology* 4 (1998): 83-85.
- . "A Cry for Life from Latin America," in K.C. Abram and Bernadette Mbuy-beya, *Spirituality of the Third World: A Cry for Life*, 109-118. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1994.
- . "A Feminist Theology of Liberation: A Latin American Perspective with a View Toward the Future." *Toward a New Heaven and New Earth*, 249-268. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2003.
- . *Longing for Running Water :Ecofeminism and Liberation*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999.
- . "Women Doing Theology in Latin America." In Virginia Fabella and Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *With Passion and Compassion*, 125-134. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1988.
- Gebara, Ivone, Elisangela Marcolin, and Paul Jones. "Feminist Theology in Latin America: A Theology without Recognition." *Feminist Theology* 16.3 (2008): 324-331.
- Hurtado, Josefina and Ute Siebert. "Con-Spirando: Women 'Breathing Together.'" *Ecumenical Review* 53.1 (2001): 90-93.

- Knitter, Paul F. *One Earth Many Religions: Multifaith Dialogue and Global Responsibility*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995.
- Kwok, Pui-lan. *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005.
- MacEoin, Gary. "Gebara Challenges Old Concepts." *National Catholic Reporter* 36.39 (2000): 20.
- McFague, Sallie. *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993.
- Premnath, Devadasan Nithya and R. S. Sugirtharajah. *Border Crossings: Cross-Cultural Hermeneutics*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2007.
- Ress, Judith. "Reports from Conferences Introduction to the Shared Garden Seminar, Washington 1997." *Ecotheology: Journal of Religion, Nature & the Environment* 5.4 (1998): 77.
- Ress, Mary Judith. *Ecofeminism in Latin America: Women from the Margins*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2006.
- . "'Remembering Who we are': Reflections on Latin American Ecofeminist Theology." *Feminist Theology: The Journal of the Britain & Ireland School of Feminist Theology* 16.3 (2008): 383-396.
- Ruether, Rosemary Radford. "Ecofeminism: First and Third World Women." *Ecotheology: Journal of Religion, Nature & the Environment* 5.2 (1997): 72.
- . *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology: With a New Introduction*. 10th anniversary ed. Boston: Beacon Press, 1993.
- . *Women Healing Earth: Third World Women on Ecology, Feminism, and Religion*. Ecology and Justice. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1996.
- Sugirtharajah, R. S. *Postcolonial criticism and biblical interpretation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.