

Reta's Project of Re-Embedding Norah in Her 'Natural' Body and in Nonhuman Nature in Carol Shields's *Unless*

Esra MELİKOĞLU

İstanbul University, Türkiye

Abstract: In Carol Shields's novel *Unless*, the protagonist, Reta Winters, a writer who has her roots in the seventies' feminist and environmental movements, realizes ecofeminism's entrapment in a cycle of partial failure and her own share of the responsibility for it. She is, in the new millennium, devastated: Presumably unwashed and with nits in her hair, her daughter Norah sits on a street corner in protest against patriarchy's construction of both women and nonhuman nature as dirty, mindless bodies, or matter, which serves to justify a policy of domination, sanitation, and exploitation. It will be argued that Reta must ponder her own role as a woman writer in perpetuating this construct and write a counternarrative in which Norah represents an ecofeminist future: Norah emerges as a prototype of a new generation of ecofeminists who shall reclaim their 'natural' bodies and reconnect with nonhuman nature, their environmental care ethics replacing a policy of domination. Yet Reta's counternarrative remains abortive as suggestive of the writer's and her society's wavering commitment to ecofeminism.

Keywords:

Carol Shields,
Unless,
Body,
Ecofeminism

Article History:

Received:
14 Nov. 2024

Accepted:
13 Feb. 2025

Early View:
21 Feb. 2025

Carol Shields'in *İyilik*'inde, Reta'nın Norah'ı Yeniden 'Doğal' Bedenine ve Doğaya Yerleştirme Projesi

Öz: Carol Shields'in *İyilik* adlı romanında, kökleri yetmişli yılların feminist ve çevreci hareketlerine uzanan kadın yazar Reta Winters, ekofeminizmin kısmi başarısızlık döngüsüne hapsediğini ve bu durumdan kendisinin de sorumlu olduğunu farkına varır. Yeni yüzyılda alt üst olur: yıkanmayı bıraktığını ve saçında bit olduğunu düşündüğü kızı Norah bir sokak köşesinde oturup ataerkinin hem kadınları hem de doğayı pis ve akılsız bedenler veya madde olarak tanımlamayı her ikisine de hükmetmesini ve sömürmesini haklı kılmasını protesto eder. Bu makalede, Reta'nın bir kadın yazar olarak hem bu söylemin yeniden üretilmesindeki rolünü irdelemek hem de Norah'nın ekofeminist geleceği temsil ettiği bir karşı anlatı yazmak zorunda olduğu savunulacaktır. Bu anlatıda Norah, 'doğal' bedenlerini geri alacak ve doğayla bağ kuracak yeni kuşak ekofeministin prototipi olarak sunulur. Benimsedikleri ilgi etiği de doğaya hükmetme politikasının yerini alacaktır. Ancak Reta anlatısını tamamlamaz. Bu da kendisinin ve toplumun ekofeminizme karşı kararsız tutumunu gösterir.

Anahtar Sözcükler:

Carol Shields,
İyilik,
Beden,
Ekofeminizm

Makale Geçmişi:

Geliş Tarihi:
14 Kasım 2024

Kabul Tarihi:
13 Şubat 2025

Erken Görünüm:
21 Şubat 2025

How to Cite: Melikoğlu, Esra. "Reta's Project of Re-Embedding Norah in Her 'Natural' Body and in Nonhuman Nature in Carol Shields's *Unless*." *IDEAS: Journal of English Literary Studies*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2025, pp. 12–24. doi:10.62352/ideas.1585550.



Writers are expected to propel change in their societies. In Carol Shields's (1935–2003) *Unless* (2002), the writer-protagonist, Reta Winters, is faced with her share of the guilt for incomplete cultural transformation in Canada: Ecofeminism is trapped in a cycle of partial failure. Reta who is, in the 1970s, part of both the feminist and “save-the-earth” movement (185) is, in the new millennium, shocked out of her complacent existence. Her daughter Norah sits on a street corner to signal the ongoing interconnected oppression of women and “harm to the earth” (202). Presumably unwashed and with nits in her hair, Norah protests against the inferiorizing construction in her masculinist settler culture of both others – women and nonhuman nature – as invasive, dirty, mindless bodies, or matter, which serves to legitimize a politics of domination, sanitation, and exploitation. It will be argued that Reta contemplates her own role as a woman/writer in perpetuating the old construct and attempts to write a counternarrative in which ‘dirty’ Norah is revalorized as the embodiment of an ecofeminist future: The human female reclaims her ‘natural’ body from the patriarchal regime of power and hygiene, and reconnects with nonhuman nature, her ecological care ethics replacing harmful human intervention. Yet, a wavering ecofeminist Reta’s project remains incomplete.

Ecofeminism examines “the interconnections between . . . the unjustified domination of women and ‘other human Others,’ on the one hand, and the unjustified domination of non-human nature, on the other hand” (Warren xiv). After the turn to feminist issues, “[m]any Canadian writers have [also] begun to react to the sense of threat not from, but to, the physical environment” (Hartmann 90–91). While Shields and her protagonist’s engagement with the oppression of women in patriarchal society has received critical attention, their interest in the interconnected domination and depletion of the natural world has been overlooked. Yet Shields presents us with a woman/writer who has her roots in both the feminist and environmental movements which rose in the seventies and represent the origins of ecofeminism. Before attempting to reinvigorate ecofeminist revision in her society, Reta restages ecofeminism’s rise and failure to ‘arrive.’

In 1974, in *Le Féminisme ou la Mort* (*Feminism or Death*), feminist thinker and activist Françoise d’Eaubonne introduced the term “*l’eco-féminisme*” (“ecofeminism”) to the francophone Western world to examine the interconnected domination and exploitation of women’s reproductive bodies and nonhuman nature in masculinist society (65). She argues that feminists must reclaim their bodies and also embrace the environmental cause for both others to be liberated and for the degraded Earth and humanity to be saved from destruction (67). Since then, many feminists have moved on to ecofeminism and taken part in the project of deconstructing Western dualisms that allow patriarchy to produce inferiorizing constructions of women and nonhuman nature which, in turn, serve to legitimize their exploitation. Ecofeminist philosopher Val Plumwood has examined the masculine/feminine, mind/body, and

civilization/nonhuman nature oppositions, onto which, anthropologist Elizabeth Whitacker observes, is also mapped the clean/unclean opposition (19). While masculinist Western culture, then, aligns itself with a civilization rooted in reason, it associates women – mainly because of their reproductive functions – and nonhuman nature with each other and aligns both with the body which is, in turn, inferiorized as “pure materiality” (Plumwood 17, 11, 18). This ‘gross’ body appears to threaten to invade and defile civilization. The female body which is “leak[ing]” blood when menstruating invokes the transgression of “boundaries” and incites fear of “contaminat[ion]” (Shildrick and Price 7). In Reta’s society, fear of an ‘invasive’ nonhuman nature is partly a legacy of the colonial past. The Canadian settlers feared the Indigenous natural world as “a huge, unthinking, menacing, and formidable physical setting” that seemed to threaten the garrison (Frye 225). Women and nonhuman nature’s construction as dirty and contagious others, then, serves to justify the patriarchal policy of domination, sanitation, and exploitation. Women are exiled from the world of ideas to the domestic sphere in which their bodies are regulated and their childbearing and childrearing functions are exploited. Nonhuman nature is similarly degraded through resource extraction, deforestation, and suburbanization. As Maria Mies states, women who perform “unpaid caring and nurturing work” and “[nature] [are] treated in the same exploitative way” (ix, x).

In the new millennium, Reta, who is both a marginalized writer and housewife, must realize how pervasive the fear of the ‘dirty’ female body and nonhuman nature still is in her fiction – as emblemized in her sanitized home and garden – which is shaped by and, in turn, shapes her masculinist settler society. She must produce a counternarrative about the need for women to liberate their bodies and save the Earth. While she subscribes to affinity ecofeminism, which believes in the affinity between women and nature, the aim in *Unless* is that of radical feminism: the dismantling of the oppressive patriarchal system. Unwashed Norah plays a central role in Reta’s counternarrative. Norah tries not only to liberate her ‘natural’ body – which is a cultural construct – but also to reconnect with nonhuman nature. Her quasi-maternal, nits-hosting body emerges as a site in which an environmental care ethics is put in place. “Postmodern[ism]” has, in fact, increasingly revalorized the female body as a site of “resistance” and “difference” (Bordo 254–255). As Margrit Shildrick and Janet Price observe, “the maternal body has come to figure the claim that women have a unique ethical sense that lays stress on caring, relationality and responsibility” (4). Plumwood, like other ecofeminists, envisions a world in which the relations between men and women and with the natural world are rooted in a motherly “ethics of connectedness and caring,” instead of a politics of domination (20). Carolyn Merchant’s “ethic of earthcare” is rooted in the similar “concept of a partnership between people and nature,” which is acknowledged as “live, active” as well (xix, xvii). Yet, *Unless* signals ecofeminism’s failure to ‘arrive.’ Reta’s counternarrative derails: While Norah’s revolutionary body is subjected to patriarchy’s regime of power and hygiene, Reta slips right back into the deep-seated fear of the ‘dirty’ other.

In the new millennium, Reta's nineteen-year-old daughter, Norah, turns into a 'dirty' stranger who disturbs Reta in her sanitized home. In protest against patriarchy's domination and exploitation of both women and nonhuman nature, Norah drops out of university and becomes a homeless person begging for "GOODNESS" (18), on a street corner, in downtown Toronto. Yet for Reta, Norah, who apparently refuses to wash, is an object of revulsion. When thinking of her, she thinks of "[d]irt. Uncombed hair" and also asks herself: "Did she have nits in her hair" (22, 25)? After Norah's sisters, Natalie and Chris (Christine), visit her on the corner, Natalie, furthermore, reports to her mother that Norah "stank" (160). In their attempt to regulate Norah's body, they provide their sister with tampons and a toothbrush. Reta and her younger daughters are, then, complicit in patriarchy's construction of the unregulated female body as an object of revulsion. As observed above, such denigration serves to justify women's relegation to the domestic sphere in which their bodies are regulated and their reproductive function is exploited in order to perpetuate the patriarchal nuclear family and society.

Yet, earlier in the novel, Reta also realizes that "Norah embodies goodness" (12), that is, an embodied, 'dirty' protest against patriarchy's control of women and nonhuman nature. We are reminded of the role that defiance of hygiene has played in political protests. In 1976, in the Armagh prison, in Northern Ireland, male and female Republican prisoners protested against "[t]he denial of 'political status'": The women "refused to wash or take bodily care of themselves and these political acts comprised the dirty protest" (Ash 126). Norah's 'dirty' protest is preceded by a period of anguish: Reta eventually learns from Dr. Hamilton that Norah has resented Gustave Flaubert's (1821–1880) removal of the eponymous protagonist of *Madame Bovary* (1856) – a 'mindless' female body – from "the moral center," and from Norah's boyfriend, Ben Abbot, that Norah has worried about "harm to the earth" (217, 202). What Reta discovers only toward the end of the novel is that her daughter also has a life-changing experience. One morning, in April, as she returns from her shopping to her nearby apartment, Norah witnesses a ghastly scene: On a street corner, an anonymous "Muslim woman . . . poured gasoline over her veil and gown . . . and set herself alight" (314). Her encounter with the Muslim woman might be read as at once relevant to Norah's feminist and environmental, or ecofeminist, concerns. While self-immolation in public space puts the denigration and exploitation of the female body back on the national agenda, gasoline is part of the ecological debate over the domination, pollution, and depletion of nonhuman nature. The encounter, then, on the one hand, reinforces the interconnectedness of the domination of the female body and nonhuman nature, and, on the other, also shows, through the Muslim woman's release of gasoline into the air, women's implication in the pollution of the planet Earth.

The Muslim woman and Norah are both subjected to patriarchal control. As argued above, control and exploitation are legitimized through the inferiorization of women's bodies as mindless, dirty matter. It might be said that her veil and gown identify the Muslim woman as the 'offensive' and hence regulated, or half-obliterated, female body in both Eastern and Western patriarchal cultures. Setting herself alight, the Muslim woman

possibly makes visible and protests against such oppression. Norah becomes the object of patriarchy's disciplinary control as well. When "her threshing arms [are] . . . beating at the flames," which are consuming the Muslim woman, "[t]wo firemen . . . strapped her into a restraining device and drove her to Emergency" (315). Norah's body is put in a straitjacket of sorts and subjected to a male-dominated medical institution. Shildrick and Price speak of the historical role medical discourse has played in "construct[ing] the female body—as deficiency, as uncontrolled, as inherently diseased" (145) and, Alison Bashford remarks, as "dirty" and "contaminating" (38). After women are contained and 'sanitized' by patriarchy and its institutions, they are exploited as childbearing and childrearing bodies in the invisible domestic sphere. In fact, while Norah's boyfriend, Ben, a student of philosophy, is situated in the world of ideas, the dish rack Norah buys immediately before her encounter with the Muslim woman signals the university student Norah's reduction to a serving body and exile to the private realm. Yet Norah returns to the corner to protest against women and nonhuman nature's inferiorization and exploitation.

Nonhuman nature is also under attack. As discussed above, its construction as another mindless and unclean body serves to legitimize its exploitation as well. The Muslim woman sets herself on fire on a day in April: Since 1970, 22 April has been celebrated as Earth Day to raise awareness about the need for environmental protection. While themselves objects of oppression, both the Muslim woman and Norah are implicated in the destruction of the natural world. Post-modern fiction explores not only diverse others' traumas in an oppressive system but also their (partial) complicity with it. The Muslim woman's means of self-destruction, gasoline, is made from fossil fuels, which powered the Industrial Revolution. Fossil fuels – crude oil and other petroleum liquids that are extracted from the buried remains of prehistoric nonhuman animals and plants – are an object of ecological debate. By the late eighties, that is, about two decades before the publication of *Unless*, international public debate about nonrenewable fossil fuels had already begun. They were linked to air pollution and eventually to climate change. The Muslim woman, by burning gasoline, contributes to air pollution. Despite her environmental concern, Norah is identified as another threat to the ecological system. Her plastic shopping bag and the plastic dish rack inside it, both made from fossil fuels as well, catch fire as a reminder of the plastic waste that is produced in an affluent urban society and contaminates the natural environment. There is also "a plastic bag of food" Reta takes to Norah; little Norah's "plastic clock;" "the plastic-ribbed face of the radio in the kitchen," in Reta's childhood home (26, 126, 149), and still other plastic objects. The pollution and destruction of the Earth is also a threat to humanity and other life forms. They are part of a wider ecosystem which must be protected for its own sake and for their sakes. Yet Norah sits on the corner, where the Muslim woman has set herself on fire, to signal incomplete ecofeminist revision and the ongoing threat that is directed to women and ultimately to the planet Earth.

In response to her daughter's protest, Reta reconsiders ecofeminism's rise and failure to 'arrive' and her own role in them. While shaped by both the feminist and

environmental movement, she is, in the present of the novel, implicated in her dual role as a writer and housewife obsessed with hygiene in perpetuating in her culture the fear and exploitation of the 'dirty' female body and natural environment. In the seventies, Reta was a student of Dr. Danielle Westerman who is a feminist theorist and writer "Simone de Beauvoir's spiritual daughter" (Cusk 48). Reta eventually translates Westerman's works and begins to write her own fiction. Yet the seventies were a period when women struggled to liberate not only their minds but also their bodies from patriarchal domination. Shouting the slogan "my body, my choice," "feminists fought for women to gain control over their own bodies" by demanding the right to abortion (Gilmore 11) and contraception. A sexually liberated young student, in love with a medical student, Tom Winters, Reta is on the pill, and when, in 1981, "Norah was born," Reta chooses "a home birth naturally," which is attended by "a midwife" (3). By then, feminists had voiced their critique of male medical control in hospital birth, advocating natural childbirth at home. As middle-aged Reta and her women friends, at the Orange Blossom Tea Room, "talk about their bodies," Reta continues to exhibit a body consciousness (Howells 120). The seventies also witnessed environmental protests against patriarchy's harmful intervention in the natural environment. It was, Reta recalls, also "a save-the-earth era" (185). An environmental activist organization, Greenpeace was founded in 1971, in Vancouver. The slogan "save the Earth" invoked the idea of the destruction of the Earth to make humans rise to action in order to protect and embrace the planet as their home. As Reta muses, "the seventies said . . . home, make a new home, . . . dress yourself in warm earth colours, get back to the earth" (186). Yet Reta and her generation's home-making is also problematic: It eventually results in their withdrawal from public debate over feminist and environmental issues. Inside the home, they slip back into the deep-seated fear of the 'unclean' female body and the natural world beyond the doorstep. The project of cultural revision remains incomplete.

Inside the house, Reta is largely reduced to the role of the inferiorized body that is divorced from the world of ideas. A wife and mother of three, she is, she feels, an almost unrecognizable "watercolour blob" (28), or a body performing undervalued nurturing labor in the invisible domestic sphere. While there is also her life as a writer, it is marginalized as suggested by her study room, which is an "old box room in the attic" (50). In her dual role as a writer and housewife, she is obsessed with hygiene. An old farmhouse conversion, Reta's home is also a metaphor for her fiction in which continues to circulate the (colonial) construct of the dirty female body and nonhuman nature which serves to justify their subordination and exploitation. She is obsessively "dusting, waxing, and polishing" (60). "Mention a new cleaning product," she says, "and I yearn to hold it in my hand" (63). She is, after all, (unofficially) married to a doctor, Tom, who still blames his mother for his childhood phobia of "dirty soap dishes" (232). Reta is, then, dutifully cleaning the house to keep it germ-free and to keep at bay the natural environment outside, which supposedly threatens to invade and pollute human civilization. Yet to claim the role of guardian of hygiene, she must first sanitize her own body. She visits a beauty

salon where, in a sterile “white cell” (28), the ‘dirty’ female body is sanitized. Furthermore, while she has talked with each of her daughters about birth control, for them to take control of their own bodies, she has also infected, at least, Chris with her deep-seated loathing of the female body. Because of the old association between “the womb” and “unclean[liness]” and “irrationality” (Walters, 47, 48), “uterus” or “womb” seems to Chris an embarrassing, ‘dirty’ word. She thus adopts the writer Tom Wolfe’s (1900–1938) masculine euphemism for it: “Loins” (153). Clearly, it is also significant that Reta often uses the ‘masculine’ diminutive of her daughter’s name. Ashamed of their own bodies, the old and young generations of women become complicit in the patriarchy’s policy of controlling, sanitizing, and exploiting the female body.

While Reta’s former commitment to the save-the-Earth movement reasserts itself in her casually expressed present awareness that she and her family “take the occasional nick off the planet,” by using too much paper (135), which causes deforestation, she is also gripped by fear of the natural world. Such fear supposedly justifies a policy of domination and exploitation. Her reflection, as she obsessively dusts the home, on “Buddhist monks” who regularly “clean things, . . . a wall or an old fence, whatever presents threat” (60–61) alludes to her fear of nonhuman nature as the legacy of the colonial past: We are reminded of the garrison’s fear of the natural environment as a force that threatens to invade and contaminate human civilization. When driving on the highway to the city of Toronto, Reta thinks of “[i]ts outskirts” as “ragged, though its numbered exits pretend at a kind of order” (25). Despite the apparent conversion of the so-called wilderness to civilization, as emblemized by the car, highway, and numbered exits, she feels lost and threatened “in the great glistening continent of North America” (236). Reta seeks shelter in her home. Her musing, inside it, on how, with the passing of childhood, humans are no longer fascinated by “the undersides of leaves and petals, . . . its beetles, its worms, its ant colonies” (61) suggests a vague regret over this estrangement from the natural world. Yet, there is discernable an uneasiness at the thought of miniscule ‘vermin-like’ life as well. One inconsistency appears to remain, though: There are nonhuman animals, a golden retriever called Pet and trilobite fossils, in the house. However, it is Norah’s wish for a canine companion that allows Pet to live with the Winters family. Yet in her obsession to sanitize her home, Reta also does battle with “the dog hairs” (60). The trilobite fossils, on the other hand, are objects of Tom’s scientific interest. The fact that “Tom keeps his precious trilobite collection in a locked glass case” (51) suggests scientific man’s separation of the human from the animal, the rational from the mindless, and the clean from the unclean. Reta proves complicit in this attempt to separate, dominate, and denigrate the natural world, as represented here by nonhuman animal others, which allows humans to exploit it.

Reta also struggles to contain and sanitize nonhuman nature by converting it into a garden, which, as noted above, also serves as another metaphor for her fiction. Her love of gardening might be traced back not only to her mother but also to the early female settlers, among them, English-born settlers and writers Susanna Moodie (1803–1885)

and her sister Catherine Parr Traill (1802–1899). Shelley Boyd in fact includes Shields among the literary descendants of Moodie and Traill whom Boyd credits for the “arrival of the garden topos and trope in English Canadian literary history and criticism” (*Garden Plots* 19). Rather than follow Boyd’s feminist approach, Janet Floyd argues that the female settlers’ “tending the garden expressed the continual effort in keeping ‘nature’ at bay” (82). In *Unless*, Reta’s gardening represents the same effort to contain a seemingly encroaching, unclean natural environment. After “[t]he last weeding’s done,” Reta and Tom lay down the mulch, apparently bark, in the garden she derives satisfaction from “[t]he clean look of it” and the thought of having “done the earth a good deed” (167, 168). Like weeding, mulching – the practice of spreading organic material such as bark or inorganic material such as black plastic over the soil – can be used to control unwanted wild plants (Campbell 8, 5, 6). In *Unless*, weeding and mulching, then, like resource extraction, as alluded to by Tom’s abovementioned fossils, which yield fuel, contribute to environmental degradation. The rapid suburbanization Reta observes also threatens to deplete the woods behind her home, which has apparently survived colonial deforestation, as suggestive of the ultimate destruction of the natural world. Shields thus uses Reta to articulate her own ecological concern.

In response to Norah’s protest against patriarchy’s denigration and exploitation of women and nonhuman nature, Reta must transform into an ecofeminist writer who propels change in her society. As Tim Heath observes, “Shields enters the realm of ethics with her inquiry into goodness” (161). Shields’s protagonist also attempts to reclaim her marginalized role as a writer in ethical debate and produce a counternarrative which urges women to liberate themselves and save the Earth. After her visit to the Promise Hostel, which offers Norah and other homeless people shelter – but also sanitizes them as suggested by the fact that “[d]ish detergent, or something stronger, spiked the air” (193) – Reta asks herself: “but where did the goodness begin, the germ of goodness” (191)? Given her fear of dirt and contagion, her choice of the word “germ” here is highly significant. She uses “germ” in the sense of “origin”—the origin of goodness. Her search for this origin leads her back to Norah and her unwashed, nits-hosting body which, in the counternarrative, does not spread contagion, but a goodness that might revolutionize the world. Apparently also reflecting here on her own role as a writer, Shields upholds the writer as a moral agent who must propel change in his or her society.

An unwashed, homeless person, Norah sits on a street corner urging her mother and her society to join her search for goodness. As Caroline Rosenthal observes, “[h]er temporary homelessness and state of wildness allow her to leave the premises of civilized and normative space and enter a transitory realm for establishing her own identity” (182). On the corner, Norah not only protests against the inferiorization and exploitation of women’s bodies and the natural world but also comes into being by reclaiming her body and entering into a caring relation with nonhuman nature. While Boyd does not explore Norah’s environmental concern, she discusses her, because of her gardening gloves, as one of Shields’s female guerilla gardeners who cultivate terrain that does not belong to

them (“Shields’s Guerilla Gardeners” 177–196). Although there are apparently showers at the Promise Hostel, Norah refuses to wash the dirt off her body and wash the nits, which here represent nonhuman nature, out of her hair. A former student of modern languages, her bodily protest is apparently preceded and joined by a critical rethinking of Western philosophical discourse – as represented by her boyfriend, Ben, who is, as noted above, a student of philosophy – which defines the female body and nonhuman nature as contaminating, inferior others. Reta recalls that anguished Norah, on her last visit home, for the weekend, admitted that Ben was part of the problem (127). Reta herself feels uneasy at the thought that Ben “was intimate with every portion of [Norah’s] body” (125). Ben’s intimacy with or mapping of Norah’s body might be read as the philosopher’s attempt to control, contain, and colonize it. Yet Norah eludes his control of her (mind and) body by moving out of their shared apartment. Presumably dirty and with nits in her hair, she stages a protest on the street corner where the Muslim woman sets herself on fire.

On her daughter’s last visit, Reta understands that there is also another reason for Norah’s anguish: her fear of harm to the Earth. Its denigration as another dirty, mindless body, or matter, serves to legitimize its pollution, exploitation, and destruction. When Norah says “I love the world more” than “anyone,” Reta asks: “You mean . . . like mountains and oceans and trees” (128)? Norah not only affirms but also adds: “Think of the tides. They never forget to come and go. The earth tipping in space. Hardly anyone understands them” (129). This Earth Norah speaks about cannot be owned or reduced to an object under the scientific gaze or subjected to exploitation. She conceives of the Earth as an impenetrable mystical force that is alive, active, and self-directing. She thus returns to it what masculinist culture denies it: agency and dignity. As noted above, Merchant, in relation to an ethic of Earth care, speaks of the need for humans to recognize nonhuman nature as live and active. Karen J. Warren, too, emphasizes the importance of “see[ing] nonhuman animals and nature as subjects, as active participants in our world, as not mere things (mere resources, properties, or commodities), as deserving of our care” (76). Norah’s reverence for the Earth and its rhythms as miraculous and mystical suggests her commitment to ecofeminism as also a spiritual movement. Carol P. Christ remarks that “the crisis that threatens the destruction of the Earth is . . . at root spiritual. We have lost the sense that this Earth is our true home” (58). She concludes that what is needed is “a recovery of more ancient and traditional views that revere the profound connection of all beings in the web of life” (58). Ecofeminists have appropriated the ancient Indigenous belief in humans’ “kinship” with sacred ‘Mother Earth’ and all things on it (Warren 86). Norah is, then, the relational self that sees itself as part of this web.

Norah not only articulates her reverence for an abstractly conceived mystical earth but also enters into concrete caring relationships with Earth others, a dog and head lice. Reta thinks of taking along, on a visit to Norah, a photo of their canine companion, Pet, to persuade her daughter to come back home. Humans and dogs’ co-evolution, which started more than ten thousand years ago, perfectly illustrates the idea of humans’ kinship with other life forms on Earth. In her role as a maternal body, or host, Norah also enters into a

caring relationship with head lice. As noted above, the maternal body has come to play a central role in relation to the assumption that women are more in touch with care ethics. Norah's relationship with head lice, which are (wingless) insects, is foreshadowed by the "hard, fixed, chitinous" expression that Reta sees in Norah's eyes, on her last visit home (127). "Chitin" refers to "a hard substance in," for example, "the outer shell of insects" ("Chitin"). While the female head lice lay eggs (nits) in the host's hair, lice do not "carry bacterial or viral diseases" (*Mayo Clinic*). Yet, they are widely associated with "germs" which may cause illness (*Mayo Clinic*). Reta is horrified by the idea of nits in her daughter's hair and thankful that her younger daughters are part of a swim team "[b]ecause the sight of those sleek wet skins . . . and the scent of chlorine clinging to their hair combine to ward off infection" (158). Yet, as noted above, Reta deep down not only believes that Norah embodies goodness but, after her visit to the charitable Promise Hostel, also begins to associate goodness with germs: "[B]ut where did the goodness begin, the germ of goodness" (191)? Norah's refusal to wash or comb the nits out of her hair suggests her view of herself as embedded in relations with the Earth and nonhuman life forms which must all be accepted as alive and allowed to reproduce. In Reta's counternarrative, Norah and her nits, then, do not spread contagion, but a goodness that might radically change the world: Motherly care ethics is upheld as a solution and alternative to patriarchy's domination and exploitation of women and nonhuman nature.

Yet Reta's vision of an ecofeminist future is abruptly disrupted. Norah is not only implicated in the destruction of the Earth but also falls victim to the policy of domination and sanitation with her mother's sanction. While her shopping for furniture at a Salvation Army outlet and transformation of a car blanket into a plaid shawl suggest Norah's commitment to mindful consumption for the planet's welfare, the plastic dish rack she buys and the plastic bag, in which she puts it, as noted above, allude to her implication in the production of toxic plastic waste, which pollutes the natural environment. She is thus, like Reta, representative of the many self-contradictory women (and men) in contemporary society who are desperate to save the Earth but slip back into harmful patterns of behavior. Furthermore, while there is nevertheless a rebellious spirit in Norah, it is broken. When contracting pneumonia, she is taken to a hospital where "[s]omeone had brushed out her hair so that it fell cleanly on the pillowcase" (301). Norah is thus 'weeded': The 'offensive' nits are removed and Norah is transformed back into pristine Norah, or, in Reta's words, "darling Norah" (301). Apparently unable to overcome her fear of the female body and nonhuman nature, Reta sanctions the system's sanitation of Norah's body and severs her kinship with nonhuman animals. Norah is eventually reabsorbed into her parents' home and thus apparently 'weeded' of her rebellious agency, altogether.

Unless ends late in March; Earth Day, which is celebrated on 22 April, is approaching. Yet, the disruption to Norah's kinship with the Earth and Reta's mulched garden suggest incomplete ecofeminist revision in a world that resists change. There is thus, in the novel, neither a blooming spring nor a healing narrative resolution. In *Unless*,

mulching, which, as noted above, is used, among others, to remove wild plants, serves as a metaphor for the destruction of the natural world. Reta's garden in which "[b]y spring [the mulch] will have worked its way into the soil, all the splintery bits reduced to dust" (167) is indeed emblematic of an impending apocalyptic environmental catastrophe.

While Shields through her protagonist, Reta, explores women/writers' wavering commitment to ecofeminism, she, nevertheless, presents it as a transformative movement that must be reinvigorated by both discursive, or theoretical, revision and social activism. Ecofeminists urge women to liberate their bodies (and minds) and nonhuman nature from patriarchal domination and exploitation and embrace an ethics of care. As noted above, while Shields subscribes to affinity ecofeminism, which believes in the affinity between women and nonhuman nature, the ultimate aim in *Unless* is that of radical ecofeminism: the dismantling of the patriarchal power structures. Reta is presented as the writer who is faced with the discursive task of revalorizing Norah's presumably nits-hosting, maternal body as a site of defiance, difference, and care. Norah also emerges, in her mother's counternarrative, as an activist of sorts who, sitting on a street corner, urges her society to commit to goodness. Yet, Shields shows how Reta desires cultural change only to slip back into the deep-seated fear of the 'dirty' and 'invasive' female body and natural world which serves to legitimize a masculinist politics of oppression. Similarly, Norah, although concerned over harm to the planet Earth, is implicated in its pollution. The title of the novel warns that unless women fully commit to ecofeminism and use its tenets as a driving force in the literary, social, or political world, they will continue to be oppressed, and our and other life forms' planetary home will be destroyed. While "the word 'unless' offers hope" and "the possibility of an escape from a dismal fate" (Stovel 228), it, then, also stipulates a condition: commitment to and reinvigoration of the ecofeminist movement.

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Disclosure Statements

- ✘ The author of this article confirms that this research does not require a research ethics committee approval.
- ✘ The author of this article confirms that her work complies with the principles of research and publication ethics.
- ✘ No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.
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- ✘ Contribution rate: 1st author=100%.