

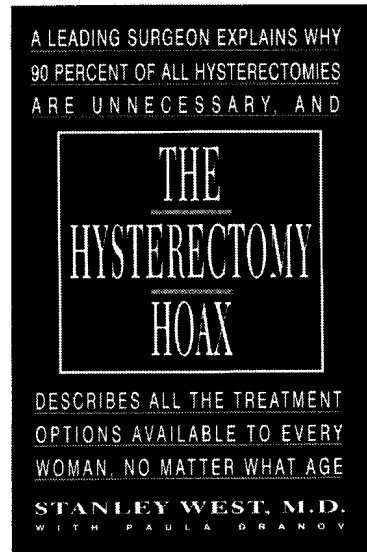
advice he gives to other doctors and only discuss his own area of expertise. He may be an expert in reproductive endocrinology and give fair descriptions of women's physiology, but his interpretation of women's development and sexuality is both patronizing and sexist. Particularly disturbing is his unsubstantiated pet theory of "phantom orgasms" in women after hysterectomies, in which he directly links women's sexual pleasure to the presence of a uterus. At this point, I longed for the balanced anti-sexist treatment of women's health issues so familiar in publications that are sparked by the women's health movement.

The main agenda of *The Hysterectomy Hoax* is to question the use of hysterectomies, particularly for treatment of uterine fibroid conditions. After describing all the variations of uterine fibroids a woman may suffer from, West describes myomectomy surgery in detail. Since this is a procedure which leaves the uterus intact, West claims that in most cases myomectomy is the best alternative to hysterectomy. As a persuasive gynecologist, however, Stanley West never loses sight of promoting his specific expertise in myomectomy as a surgical procedure of choice, supposedly far more effective than hysterectomy for removal of uterine fibroids.

West does note that myomectomy is seldom the operation of choice for gynecologists. He partially accounts for this situation by identifying complications which can occur in myomectomy surgery, particularly due to inadequate technical expertise for conducting this relatively risky procedure. Interestingly, he also suggests that the main deterrent for gynecologists is the increased time in surgery for a myomectomy, for less financial reimbursement than a hysterectomy. Worth noting, however, is that while myomectomy may be available in the US, it is not necessarily an alternative to hysterectomy which is routinely available to women in Canada.

Further discussion of other

gynecological conditions—such as endometriosis and ovarian cysts, which are frequently treated by unnecessary hysterectomies—broadens the clinical information beyond the emphasis of fibroid conditions and myomectomy treatment. As a useful resource for women as patients, many of the chapters which describe specific health conditions and alternative treatments also include a list of



questions to ask doctors. The inclusion of a substantial glossary of terms with clear descriptions also helps to demystify the technical jargon of the book and the doctor's office. Unfortunately, a discussion of women's usual subordination in the conventional doctor-patient relationship is only briefly included as a final chapter.

While *The Hysterectomy Hoax* gives some clear technical information of gynecological conditions and treatments, the medical authority of Dr. West is always evident, as is his tendency towards sexist interpretations of women's bodies and their lives. Also, the persistent promotion of myomectomy surgery often obscures other valuable information about women's health issues. Nonetheless, *The Hysterectomy Hoax* does provide ample ammunition for women to challenge the notion that a hysterectomy is an inevitable solution to many gynecological problems. Undoubtedly, the demystification of this com-

mon misunderstanding about women's health is long overdue.

EARTH MUSE: FEMINISM, NATURE AND ART

Carol Bigwood. Philadelphia:
Temple University Press, 1993.

By Karen Birkemeyer

To say the least, this is a humbly written book that embraces some very big ideas. A potent articulation of art and non-fiction, Carol Bigwood's *Earth Muse* deconstructs and reconstructs the question of "woman," the "feminine" and "nature" utilizing the insights of existential phenomenology. *Earth Muse*, therefore, is important and ground-breaking (no pun intended): there are not many scholars who combine feminist theory with this field of philosophy, recasting it with a perspective it currently lacks. *Earth Muse* not only yields such a connection, but applies it to the current debate surrounding the joint oppression and sometimes joint celebration of women and nature. Thus, Bigwood provides a voice for phenomenology (thereby bringing it to a wider audience), further transforms feminism in the process, and loosely lays out a framework which deessentializes and thus enlivens the highly contentious claims of ecofeminists.

Chapter One, "Is 'Woman' Dead?" investigates the concept of "feminine presencing" as a means of subverting the phallogentrism of Western Being. For the most part, the focus of this section is on understanding the post-structuralist advocacy of gender proliferation as useful and cautionary in displacing the compulsory heterosexuality of western metaphysics.

ics. Bigwood's concern is that the eternal deferring of subjectivity (as proposed by Derrida) is nihilistic (it has no ground) and by-passes the possibility of a female subject, thereby negating the existence of "women" once and for all.

As an alternative vision and project, *Earth Muse* explores the potential for a "groundless ground" in which identity is neither rooted in biology nor abstract conceptualization. This prospect is articulated in the second chapter, entitled "Renaturalizing Gender (with the Help of Merleau-Ponty)." In it, Bigwood rethinks the modern body so that the notions of "a subject" and "gender" can be rooted in it in a manner which is noncausal and nondeterministic, or, to put it another way, so that our understanding of sexual difference can be comprehended non-metaphysically, or apart from the constraining discourses of phallogentrism. Thus, Bigwood understands the category "woman" to be both historically constructed and "connaturally" located in nature and the living world.

The next section is not a chapter, but the first in a series of "art writings" Bigwood introduces in order to provide other-access to many of the ideas she is attempting to explore. This particular essay focuses on Brancusi's sculpture *The Seal* which she feels embodies a mode of being not characterized by the metaphysical despair of mind-body opposition that otherwise permeates much of Western culture. Instead, the seal's aspects are viewed as connective, and although grounded, *The Seal* is ever-turning, and always changing in its balance. According to Bigwood, *The Seal*, then, does not wilfully strive to overcome her earthly body and weight, but is constantly shifting in order to both reach out to the world, and yet recline into it.

That *The Seal's* being puts into relief our own ontological posturing is the subject of "The Will to Power and the Feminine." This chapter explores the notion that, since the time of Aristotle, Being (the character of relations between beings in a given

epoch), throughout its various transmogrifications, has reflected those characteristics traditionally associated with masculinity (for example, assertiveness, forwardness, aggressiveness). Bigwood here also covers how within metaphysics, the concept of nature has been conceived historically in relation to the feminine as being dark, mysterious, and concealed.

The next section, another art writing, helps readers to re-think the concepts of nature and culture through the ancient Greek notions of *phusis* and *techne*, to which they are connected. In so doing, Bigwood examines three stages in the evolution of a single sculpture in order to convey the negative decline of the feminine in metaphysics from a "reclining strength" to a "destructive withdrawal." All these concepts are central to the rest of the book which, for the most part, deals with the re-emergence of the feminine, of concealment itself, and of all that has been subordinated as being stereotypically feminine. As Bigwood reiterates time and again, however, the goal is not to simply "return to" or "retrieve" a "female essence" (as if that were even possible or desirable) that will supplant the masculine will to power; she is, rather, suggesting that activities such as nurturing, cultivating, caring and sheltering are ways of organizing that may help *techne* (art or culture) work with *phusis*. It is this gesture of the feminine as a "way of bringing forth" marked by "holding sway" (as opposed to a fixed entity or quality) that sets Bigwood's work apart from other ecofeminists.

How *techne* came to not only override but actually replace *phusis* as the dominant means of revealing beings in Western society is the basis for Chapter Seven, which examines the Being of water in an hydroelectric plant. This work (abstracted from her doctoral thesis) examines the phallogentric challenging out of water that is gathered principally by human technology and *techne*, as compared with water that is allowed to gather itself (ie. maintain its relation

to the earth and sky). The book ends with a discussion of the importance of reconceptualizing home as a kind of post-psycho-ontological space with fluid boundaries.

If this review highlights *Earth Muse's* playful struggle with dualisms and polar opposites, it is because Bigwood consciously works within a traditional metaphysical framework with the hopes of not just moving *beyond* it (that would be phallogentric), but of swaying "backwards" and hence "through" it. This is a difficult task, for both author and reader, for to varying degrees each of us has been taught to examine the concepts she uses in a very particular (masculine?) way. (As a reviewer, I have struggled immensely in my attempt to illustrate her ideas.) One of the values of this book is that it invites us to see familiar notions within a new light: both conceptually (in terms of content) and methodically (in terms of style), Bigwood works with the reader to not just abstractly think these ideas, but to feel them.

WARRIOR MARKS: FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION AND THE SEXUAL BLINDING OF WOMEN

Alice Walker and Pratibha Parmar,
New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1993.

by Caroline Roman

Pulitzer prize author Alice Walker and award-winning filmmaker Pratibha Parmar have made a valiant attempt at educating women and men about the ramifications of female circumcision and clitoridectomy in *Warrior Marks: Female Genital Mutilation and the Sexual Blinding of*