



From Anthropocentrism to Ecocentrism: Making the Shift

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PANEL PERSPECTIVES

Advancing the Deep Ecology/Ecofeminism Debate: A Dialogue between Fred Bender and Wendy Lynne Lee

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In the Fall of 2004, deep ecology theorist Fred Bender and ecofeminist Wendy Lynne Lee began an electronic dialogue concerning the direction and practical relevance of environmental philosophy to the real possibility that a sustainable – or even survivable – future may be nearly beyond the grasp even of those, like ourselves, committed to meaningful theory and effective activism. What we soon discovered, however, was that although we enjoy substantial agreement about the issues – global climate change, pollution, deforestation, habitat loss, human overpopulation, species extinction – and concerning at least some of the causes – the influence of Judaeo-Christian religion, capitalism, mechanistic science – our views diverge widely with respect to (1) what approach is philosophically most coherent, (2) what approach stands the best chance of being translatable to action, and (3) what actions (and whose authority) are morally defensible.

Background Paper

Fred Bender

The term *deep ecology* was first defined in 1972 by Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess to articulate the “deep, long-range” ecological standpoint, as found in the work of such scientists as Rachel Carson, Paul Ehrlich, and Aldo Leopold.¹ Naess contrasted the deep ecological approach to comparatively shallow, short-range anthropocentric concerns that environmental pollution, for example, was having adverse impact on human health and well-being. Naess

proposed we replace “man-in-environment” dualism in favor of what he termed a “relational or total-field image” of the human being as part of, interdependent with, the rest of nature. In Bender’s terminology, deep ecology’s standpoint is *nondualist*, i.e., one that rejects the common epistemologically dualistic (and typically anthropocentric) framing the world as if composed of ontological particulars existing outside and independently of human subjectivity (and as resources for human use). In contrast, as Naess later observed, “it is a maxim of ecology that ‘everything hangs together’ [for which reason] human actions have innumerable unintended consequences, and many of them turn out to be detrimental to us, at least in the long run.”² Taking seriously ecology’s insight into nature’s interdependence, deep ecology can be characterized as a non-dualist philosophical standpoint in which humans and those entities that seem from a dualistic standpoint to be nonhuman are regarded instead as Spinozistic *modes of being*, a.k.a. *phenomenal manifestations of nature*, though of course each mode differs from other modes relationally (each phenomenal object distinguished from others by the causal relations under which it came into being, which sustain it, and by which it effects other phenomenal objects). The ecological sciences show that there are not “bare” particulars, things existing independently of each other (humans included); but rather entities exist only interdependently, as *particulars-in-relation*.³ It follows that boundaries between things human and non-human are artifacts

of language or conceptual thinking. For example, the seemingly external atmosphere is actually “my breath” and trees actually are “my lungs.” The Earth’s hydrological cycle comprises some 80 percent of who I am by weight. The potential consequences of such a nondualist re-visioning of what it means to be a human being are far-reaching and hopeful.

In his 1972 speech, Naess offered further specifications of the deep ecological standpoint, that are not important here, since they were soon to be modified. In 1984, with the help of American philosopher George Sessions, Naess revised his earlier formulation, producing the so-called platform of the deep ecology movement and an inference device known as the apron diagram, which helps explain and delimit the platform’s scope.⁵ On subsequent occasions Naess or Sessions have indicated that the Platform and the Apron Diagram now define deep ecology as a philosophy. Bender believes much misunderstanding of deep ecology, by ecofeminists and others, is due to confusion of deep ecology as Naess and Sessions now define it with other aspects of Naess’s philosophical work. Let us therefore refer to the platform and apron diagram as constituting *classic* deep ecology philosophy. The platform and apron diagram were created to reconcile deep ecology’s statement of principles with Naess and Sessions’s desire not to limit its appeal by requiring prior agreement among potential supporters on ultimate (philosophical, religious or political) questions. The apron diagram is so named because it is broad at the shoulders, welcoming supporters who otherwise hold vastly diverse level-1 positions (Christian, Buddhist, humanist, politically leftist, conservative, from the First- or Third-world, etc.). It narrows at the waist (level-2), signifying agreement on the Platform itself, which articulates the consensus of deep ecology’s supporters on eight key issues abstracted from ecological science and observation. It widens again at levels three and four, where the platform is interpreted in (level-3), and applied to (level-4), a variety of circumstances – application in action, after all, being the whole point.

Read from top to bottom, the apron diagram represents a four-tiered deductive system. Ultimate level-1 premises are assumed, despite their diversity, to be logically compatible with the platform’s eight points. Often, however, new interpretations of older philosophies, ideologies, or theologies are required, by which

such ultimate standpoints are adapted toward compatibility with ecological science. These interpretations are called *ecosophies*. Thus, deep ecology allows a broad diversity at level one while encouraging the development of multiple ecosophies. It seeks agreement on common principles and goals at level two, then broadens out to encompass diverse strategies and tactics at levels three and four. The point is to promote wide agreement on principles of action to halt global warming, habitat destruction, species extinction, etc. without requiring adherence to any specific set of level-1 philosophical, religious, or political principles. Deep ecology is thus a global movement capable of uniting people of diverse cultures, backgrounds, and commitments, to address the ecological crisis or *ecocide* currently unfolding. Moreover, variations at level-1 are not merely to be tolerated, but encouraged. Though classic deep ecology is neither spiritual nor secular, Christian nor Marxist, etc., there can be spiritual and secular deep ecologies, Christian and Marxist deep ecologies, Buddhist and Muslim deep ecologies, and so on. The richer the variety of ecosophies, the greater the portion of the human family capable of understanding and supporting the platform, and the more effective the potentially emerging responses to global warming, massive extinction, and other pressing ecological issues.

The platform’s first point states that “the well-being and flourishing of human and nonhuman life on Earth have value in themselves (synonyms: intrinsic value, inherent worth) . . . independent of the usefulness of the non-human world for human purposes.”⁶ The second point states: “richness and diversity of life forms contribute to the realization of these values and are values in themselves.”⁷ Third, “humans have no right to reduce this richness and diversity except to satisfy vital needs.”⁸ Fourth, “the flourishing of . . . nonhuman life requires a smaller human population.”⁹ Fifth, “present human interference with the non-human world is excessive, and the situation is rapidly worsening.”¹⁰ Sixth, “we must change basic policies affecting economic, technological, and ideological structures. The resulting state of affairs will be deeply different from the present.”¹¹ Seventh, “the ideological change will be mainly that of appreciating the quality of life, rather than an increasingly higher material standard of living.”¹² Eighth, “those who subscribe to the points have an obligation directly or indirectly to

try to carry out the necessary changes.”¹³ This formulation, together with the apron diagram, may be said to define classic deep ecology, which, we both maintain, is not without its difficulties. Bender has analyzed it in *Culture of Extinction* and found it wanting in several ways, some of which he will discuss later in this joint paper with Professor Lee. For now, though, it is important to recognize the difficulty of the task Naess and Sessions faced. They wanted to state something intrinsically new and difficult for many to grasp (the nondualist logic of ecological science and some of its implications) in fairly simple terms accessible to lay-persons of many cultures and backgrounds, only a tiny fraction of whom would be professional philosophers. Their non-technical (and imprecise) language will not meet the approval of many philosophers, the present authors included, who would prefer a higher standard of rigor. But the platform deliberately was written in non-technical language, with a hugely diverse audience in mind, to inform and attract a large number of future supporters. In this respect they have been hugely successful. Many who encounter the platform for the first time express wonder that “that’s what I’ve always believed, but never found the words to articulate.”

In addition to the schematic classic formulation, it bears noting that many theorists besides Naess and sessions have contributed to fleshing out the evolutionary, cultural, philosophical, scientific and spiritual dimensions of deep ecology, work that continues today. For example, deep ecology supporters include followers of Spinoza and Gandhi such as Naess; thinkers influenced by Heidegger such as Dolores LaChapelle and Michael Zimmerman; people influenced by Taoism, Zen Buddhism or Native American spirituality such as LaChapelle and Gary Snyder; anthropologists such as Paul Shepard; supporters of the ecoforestry movement, such as Alan Drengson; and deep ecology’s internal critics on the left, including the late Richard Sylvan (deep-green theory) and David Orton (left-biocentrism). For external critics of deep ecology, however, this raises a problem. Such philosophical, spiritual and other considerations rightfully belong to the apron diagram’s level one (and to ecosophy), and are therefore strictly not part of the classic definition of deep ecology per se. Yet, some of these perspectives, most prominently Naess’s own *Ecosophy-T*, have drawn the attention of supporters and critics alike. Whatever one might think of it, however, *Ecosophy-T* is strictly not part of

classic deep ecology theory. This failure to distinguish is one reason much of the critical literature on deep ecology misses the mark. Clearly anyone’s ecosophy, or ontology, or spirituality are not the “thing itself”; only the platform and apron diagram (which defines the platform’s scope and limits) comprise deep ecology proper. Though Naess encourages others to develop alternative sets of platform principles, there is as yet no accepted mechanism with which to amend or replace the classic set. *The Culture of Extinction*, for example, proposes a new set of ten, drawing partly on aspects of Naess’s original 1972 formulation that the classic platform neglects.¹⁴ In the absence of any adjudication mechanism for revising the classic platform, external critics would do well to focus on the apron diagram and the platform, and further articulations by Naess and/or Sessions, of which there are many. In so far as one is sympathetic to the deep ecology project, but critical of the logic symbolized by the apron diagram, or critical of some or all of the points of the classic platform, one might be described as an internal critic or – dare we say – heterodox deep ecology supporter. Bender counts himself among this group – one consequence of which is that he differs considerably from Sessions concerning ecofeminism.

Background Paper **Wendy Lynne Lee**

However impossible a task it is to capture the full scope of contemporary ecological feminism, it is safe to say that among its primary objectives is the desire to balance a deep concern for social and economic justice, particularly with respect to the welfare of women, children, and indigenous peoples, with the equally important aim of confronting the environmental crises that endanger all such pursuits. As ecofeminists like Vandana Shiva argue, the effects of pollution, deforestation, desertification, species extinction, and global climate change disproportionately burden those least empowered to confront these crises. Ecofeminists have, moreover, been on the forefront of theorizing some of the conflicts, which accrue to the promotion of economic independence for women and the potential for further environmental destruction as a possible consequence. Although approaches differ among ecofeminists in many of the same ways they differ among feminists generally, what virtually all agree

on is that the key to achieving both emancipation from oppression and environmental sustainability is the development of a theory, which emphasizes sustainable economic practices and democratic decision-making – no easy thing to accomplish.

Having said this, however, it's not surprising that eco-feminists would find themselves at odds with the anti-anthropocentrism of, for example, the deep ecology movement. In its simplest terms, the value that eco-feminists assign to the rights of women to pursue their own destinies as free and equal human beings conflicts with the anti-anthropocentrism's claim that, because the human-centered pursuit of interest has led to our present state of environmental deterioration, only its disavowal can ground an effective environmental ethic. The anti-anthropocentrism is quite right that human excesses (not only, as ecological feminists point out, in the form of chauvinism but racism, sexism, and heterosexualism) are responsible for the crises we now face. Nonetheless, as some ecofeminists put the point, it is no part of valor to demand the denial of women's human-centeredness at just that moment in history when many women, especially in developing nations, are for the first time being recognized as fully human beings. Putting it this way, of course, situates the conflict in the language of classic liberalism, that is, as a matter of competing rights and priorities, thus framing the differences between the two approaches in a fashion itself open to challenge.

At least superficially the conflict would seem to be about priorities: Given that women are as capable as men of becoming, say, petroleum corporation executives (even if still lacking opportunity) ought we to prioritize the realization of a woman's right to pursue self-chosen interests at the (potential) expense of the environment? Or ought we instead to adopt an anti-anthropocentric (ecocentric) perspective that subordinates human-centered interests to those attributable to nonhuman nature – at the potential expense of the exercise of human rights? Whose rights "trump"? My contention is that while framing the differences between liberally oriented ecofeminists and anti-anthropocentrists in terms of competing rights and priorities may shed some light on the central issues, the dichotomizing picture it offers is ultimately a deeply distorted one. A common criticism of any liberal feminist approach, for example, is that to conceive women as rights-bearers in the same fashion we conceive men requires us to ignore the radically different role

women play in sexual reproduction, a role that essentially defines the conditions for the exercise of women's human rights *per se*. After all, the critic argues, control over the disposition of one's own body is a necessary condition for the exercise of all other human rights, a fact that, as anti-anthropocentrists like Robert Sessions point out, has important implications for human population growth and its consequent potential for resource exhaustion.

It's not particularly difficult to see, given – as I have merely hinted at here – its apparent limitations, why the anti-anthropocentrism would reject the liberal model of rights – feminist or otherwise. Both in theory and in practice, such a model cannot adequately capture the role played by human embodiment (especially qua reproduction) and environmental interdependence, and, thus – from a non-liberal eco-feminist point of view – it cannot offer to women even what it promises to men (themselves conceived as disembodied agents of interest). Herein, then, consists a point of agreement between anti-anthropocentrists and at least those ecofeminists who reject the liberal model, namely, that theorizing embodiment and environmental interdependence is crucial to articulating not only an adequate view of human being, but any environmental theory capable of grounding a sustainable practice. The next questions, then, are "What are the ecofeminist alternatives?" and "Assuming one or more of these to be plausible, is it reconcilable with any version of anti-anthropocentrism?" In response to the first question, I'll suggest what I regard as two highly plausible ecofeminist arguments, the second of which builds on insight from the first and offers what I think to be the best argument for environmental theory. In response to the second, however, I believe the answer is "no," and – though only briefly – I will try to indicate why.

The two ecofeminist alternatives I have in mind are Marxist ecofeminism and what I will call a critically self-reflective ecofeminism. Among the central tenets of a Marxist approach is the notion that human action and creation is a projection of our intimate and ineradicably interdependent relationship to and with nonhuman nature. "Species being," Marx argues, defines us both as materially dependent creatures *and* as having as our central interest the individuation or "creation" of ourselves as distinct from both others and from our material conditions.

The seeds of human exploitation lay in the very nature of this relationship in that whoever (or whatever) controls the conditions of our material welfare also controls our opportunities for self-creating labor or *praxis*. A successful revolution must then be tethered to the emancipation of that human-centered interest that, up to this point, has been divested of its creative potential by a system of exchange that defines human being solely in terms of economic class status as opposed to *praxis*.

Such an interest, argues the Marxist ecofeminist, is, however, not rightly construed as against or competing with those of others (such a construal, in fact, presupposes precisely the conditions a revolution is intended to end), but rather in concert with a deeper understanding of the material conditions which make both exploitation and emancipation (human and non-human) possible. Contrary to liberal eco-feminism, nonhuman nature for the Marxist eco-feminist is conceived not merely as a resource for the realization of interests, but as the material condition out of and within which human identity is itself made possible. Defined in terms of species being, human-centeredness is conceived as existentially and epistemically indigenous to the human condition, that is, as embodied, and thus cannot be coherently conceived solely in terms of rights themselves conceived, as I have suggested, as attaching to disembodied (or exclusively male) agents. Like the liberal view, the Marxist ecofeminist view is anthropocentric. However, it neither implies the chauvinism typically associated with the liberal notion of self-interest nor does it readily brook any concept of nature as mere resource for human use.

A critically self-reflective ecofeminism shares in common with its Marxist sister a concept of human being that both defines centeredness as indigenous to human being and denies that anthropocentrism means or implies chauvinism. However, whereas Marxist ecofeminists argue that the primary dangers to the environment are the result of Capitalist economic practices and class-driven competition (conceiving women as an oppressed class), a self-reflective ecofeminism aims to introduce other significant variables like institutionalized sexism, racism, and heterosexism in order to explain aspects of oppression not adequately captured by a Marxist model. Adopting the self-reflective perspective, then, I suggest that while human-centeredness is indigenous to our membership in *Homo sapiens*, this fact alone is insufficient to

explain the specifically gendered, raced, and sexualized course human history has taken. A theory whose aim is to address the specific ways in which human action has adversely affected the environment and nonhuman life, must, I think, seriously consider how, say, the politics of reproduction disproportionately affects women, or how race plays a role in the determination of where to build waste incinerators, or how indigenous peoples are systematically disadvantaged with respect to corporate decisions to log forests, dump medical waste, or use waterways as disposal sites for industrial byproducts.

Each of these stories is about justice for human beings *and* environmental integrity, human *and* nonhuman suffering. What a critically self-reflective ecofeminism aims to show is that it is precisely *because* our human-centeredness is defined in terms of the capacities and limitations of our physical being/dependence and our uniquely human cognitive wherewithal that we are *in a position* to take responsibility for our actions. We are, for example, uniquely situated to comprehend the consequences of our actions – individually and collectively – as the product of chauvinistic, sexist, or racist interests; and only we are in a position to alter the translation of centeredness into chauvinism, etc. Centeredness does not then detract from our capacity to take this responsibility, but rather enhances it because it serves to remind us that it is itself the product of an evolutionary history that – under other conditions – could have been “written” differently (or not at all). That we can create no other than a human *praxis* is not therefore something to be disavowed (and cannot be coherently), but is rather better conceived as that point of departure from which we can theorize the interdependence that makes *praxis* possible, an interdependence that compels us to reflect, I suggest, not merely on our present conception of the environment as a resource, but on the *future* of the environment as a world for our successors.

A critically self-reflective ecofeminism is, then, at odds with anti-anthropocentrism. Indeed, from this point of view the anti-anthropocentrist claim that we must disavow our human-centeredness appears incoherent, especially in light of the more sophisticated understanding of species being provided by the sciences, particularly evolutionary biology,

paleontology, and neuropsychology. This is not to say, however, that an impasse with respect to the status of anthropocentrism implies that dialogue between the two positions need come to a standstill; far from it. For could the anti-anthropocentrism come to see that it's not anthropocentrism *per se* which endangers the future of the planet, but the institutionalized exploits committed in its name, then the most important dialogue between feminists and environmentalists can move forward – as it must if there is to be progress. The ecofeminism to which I am committed still, of course, claims more, namely, that embracing anthropocentrism of the critically self-reflective variety I advocate offers a position from which to take responsibility, an axis around which to situate critique of the role institutionalized oppression plays in environmental destruction (and vice versa). And it is this aspect of my view that the anti-anthropocentrism cannot accommodate. Nevertheless, having offered at least an alternative to the liberal concept of rights and priorities opens, I think, a door. For insofar as the anti-anthropocentrism and the critically self-reflective (or Marxist) feminist agree to the defining importance of the embodied interdependence of human and nonhuman being, the possibility of effective dialogue about how to meet human need *and* prevent environmental collapse epitomizes a wholly shared hope for a future.

Joint Background Paper Frederic L. Bender and Wendy Lynne Lee

The discussion began with a review of the debates between advocates of deep ecology and ecofeminists, a conversation we find to have been characterized by misunderstandings and misrepresentations on both sides. Though we have discovered no common position that we can claim supersedes the conflict between these two camps, we believe we have furthered the debate between them. Our separate analyses and reciprocal critiques have drawn out the differences between ecofeminists and deep ecology supporters as they revolve around five major points of contention:

1. The relative importance and historical primacy of anthropocentrism and androcentrism, though neither of us endorses androcentrism or any version of anthropocentrism characteristic of what Bender has previously deconstructed as “the culture of extinction” and Lee has described in her own work as “human chauvinism.”

2. The debate over the intrinsic value claims found in the Deep Ecology Platform written by Arne Naess and George Sessions in 1984. Interestingly, both of us reject the use of the language of intrinsic value, though for different reasons. Lee, because it is (allegedly) incoherent, and/or incompatible with the best of contemporary science; Bender, because it represents an attempt to articulate deep ecology principles in the language of ontological dualism; principles that – as he argues in *The Culture of Extinction* – are more properly nondualist.

3. Concerning the relation of deep ecology and ecofeminism to practical issues – most importantly mobilization to prevent ecocide – the classic deep ecology critique is (3a) that ecofeminism places justice issues foremost, thereby at best allowing for the framing of responses to ecocide in ways that subordinate them to justice issues. Though exaggerated, this claim can be rephrased as doubt that ecofeminists are sufficiently serious about addressing “eco” issues, which are demonstrably already wreaking havoc with planetary ecosystems. From Lee’s perspective, (3b) deep ecology – Bender’s nondualist deep ecology in particular – offers no lines of development suitable for broadly based political or other forms of praxis. The fault, she argues, lies in the rarity and/or extreme subtlety of nondualism, which – if it’s coherent at all – would carry virtually no practicable weight among non-philosophers. Moreover, (3c) Lee asserts that statements by certain of deep ecology’s advocates make it seem as if deep ecology is consistent with measures to limit women’s reproductive freedom for the sake of saving Earth from human overpopulation, implying a potential authoritarianism if not an invitation to ecological dictatorship. Bender (3d) counters that deep ecology is a progressive, not an authoritarian movement; that no well-known deep ecology supporter has ever endorsed dictatorship of any kind; and that calls for the reduction of human population “by humane means” are more accurately calls for the reduction of human ecological impact, of which human numbers are but one determinant among many.

4. Lee argues that talk about “saving” Earth from the ravages of what Bender calls “the culture of extinction” is philosophically incoherent. Her claim is that, while heroic sounding, such notions are really just an example of human hubris; that while

human beings certainly can contribute to greater ecological stability, the notion that a planet with as complex and inadequately understood ecosystems as Earth's can be saved through human action is more propaganda for ourselves than useful to the planet. Bender disagrees with this assessment, arguing that science currently understands the seriousness of the situation and many of its mechanisms; and that at a minimum we must sharply and quickly reduce adverse anthropogenic ecological impact. Beyond that, the situation would seem to require crash-programs to restore ecosystemic integrity, or to adapt to irreversible ecological changes already underway. All this entails far-reaching changes in our industrial way of life; indeed, its transformation to a post-industrial, ecologically sustainable society.

5. Moreover, we find ourselves in ongoing disagreement as to the best way forward. Though we each endorse praxes directed toward significant reduction in anthropogenic ecological impact in the very near future, and that these praxes be broadly speaking "emancipatory" or "progressive," each of us is only now working on manuscripts in which we develop political theories to address how this might best be accomplished. Lee is attempting to advance a "self-critical anthropocentrism," while Bender is working on behalf of a nondualist deep ecology compatible with the late Richard Sylvan's Deep Green Theory and David Orton's Left Biocentrism. Lee argues in several recently published essays that anthropocentrism, though deeply implicated in the culture of extinction, is not inherently responsible for human action inimical toward ecosystems. She argues (5a) that human-centeredness is perceptually, epistemically, somatically, and cognitively indigenous to *Homo sapiens*, and (5b) that it is both possible and urgently important to craft an anthropocentrism divorced from its chauvinistic and patriarchal past, and – equipped with the relevant scientific knowledge – capable of examining human action in light of a clearer understanding of ecological interdependence. Bender is in the process of arguing (5c) that nondualism is no less indigenous to the human condition than anthropocentrism; (5d) that ecofriendly praxes grounded in Lee's self-critical anthropocentrism will likely be trumped by noncritical anthropocentric concerns such as capitalist economic globalization, thereby undermining its ecological and emancipatory potential; and (5f) that future praxis, if it is to attack the causes of ecocide at their roots, must be based on

the repudiation of anthropocentrism of all kinds. Lee counters that time spent advocating for nondualism is time potentially wasted in the effort to construct a more sustainable environmental praxis; for Bender, only a more permanent transformation of human consciousness can prevent ecocide.

We conclude by acknowledging the value of one another's criticisms. Worthy opponents alike, each has served to help the other make her/his position stronger.

Resources – Wendy Lynne Lee

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Resources – Fred Bender

1. Arne Naess, "The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement. A Summary," *Inquiry* 16 (1973), 95-100.

2. Naess, "Ecosophy and Gestalt Ontology," in *Deep Ecology for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. George Sessions (Boston: Shambhala, 1995), p. 240.

3. Frederic L. Bender, *The Culture of Extinction: Toward a Philosophy of Deep Ecology* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2003), pp. 398-399.

4. Lorna Howarth, "Emerging and Converging," *Resurgence*, No. 240 (January-February 2007), p. 6.

5. For more on the deep ecology platform and apron diagram, see *The Culture of Extinction*, pp. 404-414.

6. Cited in Bender, *The Culture of Extinction*, p. 405.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 406.

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.*

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Ibid.*

12. *Ibid.*

13. *Ibid.*, p. 407.

14. Bender, *The Culture of Extinction*, pp. 448-449