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Enchantment, Vitality and Agency: A Posthuman Reflexive Exploration of the Willendorf Goddess

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## Abstract

During my science-based PhD at the start of the new millennium, I experienced what can only be described as an extreme enchantment with the Willendorf Goddess, a Palaeolithic female figurine found in Austria. This enchantment manifested itself as a visceral, compulsive need to shape her repeatedly, using clay and to sit with her form whilst being transformed through this embodied repetition. This reflexive paper explores that encounter as a lived entanglement with an ancient object. It does so through the philosophical lens of three theorists: Jane Bennett, Greta Gaard, and Val Plumwood. I position these clay figures, and the Willendorf idols that followed, not as mere representations of the Female Divine, but as co-conspirators and material entities that arrived to me and through me, each bearing their own mood, message, or metaphysical presence. To borrow Jane Bennett's term, the Willendorfs in my life radiated a vibrancy that unsettled the boundaries between subject and object, maker and the made. Through the lens of Val Plumwood's philosophical animism, I consider how this creative compulsion became a site of resistance to anthropocentric, patriarchal frameworks and dualisms. Finally, through Greta Gaard's queer ecofeminist lens, the Willendorf Goddess is reimagined not as a passive fertility icon but as an earthbound figure of embodied knowing, inviting a queer and more-than-human mode of relationality through the act of attentive listening.

## Key Words

Ecofeminism, Dualism, Goddess, Agency, Animism, Enchantment

## Introduction

I grew up confident in the knowledge that I would, one day, become a biologist simply because I loved nature so much. My bachelor's degree was in zoology, followed by a master's in the environmental sciences, and I was pursuing a PhD in biology. My life was proceeding as planned, yet I was profoundly unfulfilled and didn't know why. I felt something 'missing' within my scientific studies, and I struggled with just how 'impersonal' and cold everything felt.

During my second year of my PhD, I discovered the Willendorf Goddess. For the uninitiated, the Willendorf Goddess, more commonly called the Venus of Willendorf, is a small female Palaeolithic figurine estimated to be around 25,000 to 28,000 years old, which dates her to the Gravettian Culture. Re-discovered in 1908 near Willendorf, Austria, she is carved from oolitic limestone and is tinted with red ochre. She stands at 11 cm tall, and is characterised by her exaggerated breasts, abdomen, and hips, with detailed vulva and a head covered in concentric rows of what may be braids, a woven hat, or symbolic patterning. The absence of facial features and feet adds to her enigmatic presence and has invited various interpretations that range from a fertility idol and Earth Mother to a ritual object or the embodiment of an identity.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Marija Gimbutas, *The Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe: 6500–3500 B.C.* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982); Lynn Meskell, "Goddesses, Gimbutas and 'New Age' Archaeology," *Archaeological Dialogues* 2, no. 2 (1995): 93–108; D. W. Bailey, *Prehistoric Figurines: Representation and Corporeality in the Neolithic* (London: Routledge, 2005).



Figure 1: “Venus” of Willendorf (By User:MatthiasKabel - Own work, CC BY 2.5, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=1526553>)

Throughout this paper, I prefer to refer to this original figure as “The Willendorf”. For me, this naming is not merely a reference to the place of her re-discovery, but a personal invocation of the ancestral and cultural weight carried by that figure, one that is often positioned as a foundational representation of the divine feminine or early goddess traditions. While the term “Venus” has been critiqued for projecting classical or heteronormative ideals onto prehistoric artefacts, and “Goddess” carries its own ideological charge, my use of “Willendorf” is both geographical and reverential. It marks a personal starting point, a locus of origin in the lineage of symbolic female-bodied figures that informs this work and informed my journey. Naming her “Willendorf” becomes an anchor, both personal and collective, to a tradition of embodied memory and mythic resonance.

I can’t remember where I first laid eyes upon her form, but I was transfixed and also strangely embarrassed by her overtly overweight feminine features. I felt shame when looking at her, yet I couldn’t take my eyes off her. She appeared nurturing and comforting, and I wanted to snuggle up against her large belly and breasts. I kept her a secret from others and did not discuss her with anyone, but the urge to embody her was overwhelming. I came across some air-drying clay that had been hanging around my house, and I started to mould my own little versions of her, taking so much pleasure in sculpting her hips and breasts. Before long, I had numerous versions of her dotted around the house and replicas purchased through eBay and other online stores. I started, tentatively, to wear Goddess figures as pendants around my neck, some carved of stone, some of bone, others from wood and some from hand-blown glass. I became interested in Goddess culture in general and made my first pagan altar for various goddesses I was drawn to, including Durga, Hecate, Demeter, and, of course, the faceless Willendorf.

That was over twenty years ago, and although my handmade goddesses have declined in production (sometimes years will go by between one being sculpted), she still holds an important place in my heart. She still adorns my house as a statue and my hand as a small tattoo. My fear of revealing my love for her was unfounded. People already recognised me as being a “bit of a hippy” or a bit “kooky”, so the fact I had a tiny figure of a naked woman around my neck was irrelevant. I do remember one occasion, however, when a female colleague stared at me with a guarded expression and asked me, “Why are you obsessed with naked women... are you a lesbian”? Nowadays, I wouldn’t bat an eyelid and would respond with a uncaring negative. Still, back then, my feelings were utter humiliation and embarrassment in the face of her almost distasteful expression. I still wore my goddesses, but that feeling remains with me.

This paper aims not simply to highlight my experience with the Willendorf, but also to discuss her meaning-making in my life with reference to three philosophical theorists whose work acts as a

theoretical lens and framework within which to place my experiencing. These theorists are Jane Bennett, Greta Gaard and Val Plumwood, and this paper will explore their relevant theories in reference to my experiences with the Willendorf. It is important to understand that approaching the Willendorf figure through the lens of these three theorists is not about locating explicit references within the literature, but about reorienting one's gaze and asking what becomes visible when we attend to her with a framework attuned to embodiment, relationality, and without dominant dualisms. This paper will also highlight instances of how my modes of knowing have been shaped by epistemic injustice<sup>2</sup>, in particular, the dismissal of intuitive, affective, or sacred knowledge as less valid than rationalist or empirical modes. In drawing on reflexivity, I aim to make space for a more expansive understanding of meaning-making, one that honours the entangled nature of being, knowing, and becoming.

### Jane Bennett

In the seminal book, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Jane Bennett argues for the concept of 'vibrant matter', that is, matter which is not inert nor passive, but possesses a vitality and agency with a capacity to affect and be affected. This "material agency or effectivity of nonhuman or not-quite-human things"<sup>3</sup> can challenge anthropocentric views that grant agency solely to humans.

One inspiring concept from this book is 'Thing-Power', which Bennett describes as "the strange ability of ordinary, man-made items to exceed their status as objects and to manifest traces of independence or aliveness, constituting the outside of our own experience."<sup>4</sup> In an example from the book, Bennett describes coming across a group of objects in a storm drain in Baltimore: a dead rat, a stick, a black plastic glove, a white plastic bottle cap, and a mat of oak pollen and how these 'things' produced an effect within. Bennett eloquently summarises Thing-Power as a beautifully straightforward concept that calls

to mind a childhood sense of the world as filled with all sorts of animate beings, some human, some not, some organic, some not. It draws attention to an efficacy of objects in excess of the human meanings, designs, or purposes they express or serve.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, in my world, my Willendorf Goddess, both in pictorial form and clay form, crafted by my own hands, can be seen as not simply a passive object, but as possessing her own Thing-Power. She produced an effect in me that remains difficult to describe, but, as far as I can identify, I was, and still feel, a sense of comfort, connection and safety when I look at the Willendorf. The word 'empowered' is used a lot in contemporary language, so I will use emancipated to describe how I feel when I look at her rolls of fat, and the recognition that this was a body that was so appreciated that it was carved into clay. Such is the agency that this Willendorf Thing-Power had and still has over me.

Another concept that Bennett discusses is that of 'assemblages', the natural successor to Thing-Power, a concept that Bennett states is needed to "theorise a materiality that is as much force as entity, as much energy as matter, as much intensity as extension."<sup>6</sup> Traditionally, the terms 'entity', 'matter', and 'extension' have implied fixed, passive, or inert 'things' which just are, and which humans act upon. In developing "assemblages", Bennett attempts to destabilise this traditional view by encouraging us to also focus on what something does (force), how something is dynamic and transformational (energy) and how things can be measured in force (intensity) as well as just in spatial occupation. Bennett describes 'assemblages' as "ad hoc groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant

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<sup>2</sup> Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), ix.

<sup>4</sup> Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, xvi.

<sup>5</sup> Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, 20.

<sup>6</sup> Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, 20.

materials of all sorts. Assemblages are living, throbbing confederations that can function despite the persistent presence of energies that confound them from within.”<sup>7</sup> Put simply, assemblages aren’t static structures, but alive, and their members form a loose alliance instead of any hierarchical system. Their energies are messy and can contradict one another, and yet, the assemblage survives, and this chaos gives the assemblage its vitality.

So, what assemblages did my Willendorf create or manifest around herself and me? If we consider assemblages that exist in one time-frame, we have the Goddess as an image and icon, a human being (myself), the air-dry clay used to create versions of her and the perceived social judgement I felt I would come up against if I shared her with anyone else. The total of this assemblage was to create a period in my life that was both comforting and isolating. I was comforted by the presence of the Willendorf and felt nourished and safe by her fullness, and yet, the secrecy surrounding my engagement with her provoked feelings of isolation from the rest of my friends and colleagues. An important aspect of myself and my life could not be shared. This embodiment in me of the Willendorf could have only been created by this assemblage, and that uniqueness represents another characteristic of assemblages, that of an ‘emergent’ phenomenon. As Bennett states, the effects generated by an assemblage are emergent because their ability to make something happen is distinct from the sum of the vital force of each materiality or ‘thing’ considered alone.<sup>8</sup>

While thing-power and the agency of assemblages might sound good, many people will ask, Why should we care whether matter has vitality or agency? To this question, Bennett answers,

Because my hunch is that the image of dead or thoroughly instrumentalised matter feeds human hubris and our earth-destroying fantasies of conquest and consumption. It does so by preventing us from detecting (seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling) a fuller range of the nonhuman powers circulating around and within human bodies.<sup>9</sup>

What a dull world mine would be if the Willendorf Goddess were not alive with vitality and agency.

Finally, in *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics*, Jane Bennett discusses the concept of ‘enchantment’. Disenchantment as a concept was first conceived by Max Weber, who lamented the loss of enchantment in the world because there are no longer “mysterious incalculable forces that come into play” and that “one can, in principle, master all things by calculation.”<sup>10</sup> To become re-encharnted, we must believe that there is more to the world than just that which is explainable, visible and material, with rationality and reason being unable to adequately define the totality of life,<sup>11</sup> whilst Beaman suggests that we ‘reclaim’ enchantment by expanding its definition to include “multiple frequencies or registers” thereby granting “religion and magic an equal place with non-religion.”<sup>12</sup> Bennett says that “to be enchanted is to be struck and shaken by the extraordinary that lives amid the familiar and the everyday” and that it can be “something that we encounter, that hits us, but it is also a comportment that can be fostered through deliberate strategies”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, 23-24.

<sup>8</sup> Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, 24.

<sup>9</sup> Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, ix.

<sup>10</sup> Max Weber, “Science as a Vocation,” *Daedalus* 87, no. 1 (1958): 111–134, 117.

<sup>11</sup> Richard Jenkins, “Disenchantment, Enchantment and Re-enchantment: Max Weber at the Millennium,” *Max Weber Studies* 1, no. 1 (2000): 11–32.

<sup>12</sup> Lori G. Beaman, “Reclaiming Enchantment: The Transformational Possibilities of Immanence,” *Secularism and Nonreligion* 10, no. 1 (2021): 8, 6.

<sup>13</sup> Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 4.

with one of those strategies being to hone our “sensory receptivity to the marvellous specificity of things.”<sup>14</sup>

In my experiences with the Willendorf, I am frequently and perpetually enchanted by her presence and the messages she brings to me. All my encounters with her are enchanted, and to me, she is not just a relic of an ancient past, but is alive with a magnetic presence. I feel an unspoken embodied vitality in her curvaceous form and, in her flesh, carries the weight of millennia and a deep, lost knowledge. She reminds me of what sacred and interconnected relationships have been lost over time since her birth.

### Val Plumwood

Val Plumwood (1939-2008) was an Australian ecofeminist philosopher known for powerful critiques of Western rationalism, anthropocentrism, and the dualisms that underpin much of Western thought. Dualism, as defined by Plumwood in the book *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, is “the process by which contrasting concepts (for example, masculine and feminine gender identities) are formed by domination and subordination and constructed as oppositional and exclusive.”<sup>15</sup> Plumwood later elaborates in *Nature in the Active Voice* that

the hyperbolised opposition between humans and the non-human order I call human/nature dualism is a western-based cultural formation going back thousands of years that sees the essentially human as part of a radically separate order of reason, mind, or consciousness, set apart from the lower order that comprises the body, the woman, the animal and the pre-human.<sup>16</sup>

Major dualisms within Western thought include Culture/Nature, Reason/Emotion, Male/Female, Mind/Body and Civilised/Primitive, with the actual number of dualisms being unquantifiable because, as Plumwood states, any distinction in society can be treated as a dualism.<sup>17</sup> Dualisms can be seen as the source of contemporary human and environmental plights, and Plumwood stresses the urgency of resolving such dualisms. Otherwise, we risk remaining trapped within this period of multiple crises.<sup>18</sup>

Faced with the sheer scale and entrenchment of dualisms, it can feel like an insurmountable challenge even to envisage how one can break free. Plumwood offers one such way, the concept of animism, a theory and way of believing that can instruct both science and creationism to “Forget the passive machine model and tell us more about the self-inventive and self-elaborative capacity of nature, about the intentionality of the non-human world.”<sup>19</sup>

Animism can be defined as a theory that attributes a living soul to both living (animate) and non-living (inanimate) objects and natural phenomena.<sup>20</sup> It is a concept where “The world is full of persons, only some of whom are human and that life is always lived in relationship to others.”<sup>21</sup> In *Nature in the Active Voice*, Plumwood identifies as a philosophical animist, stating that such a belief in philosophical animism can open doors to a richer world and can enable us to begin to negotiate life

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<sup>14</sup> Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics*, 4.

<sup>15</sup> Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1993), 31.

<sup>16</sup> Val Plumwood, “Nature in the Active Voice,” *Australian Humanities Review*, no. 46 (2009): 116.

<sup>17</sup> Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, 43.

<sup>18</sup> Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, 6.

<sup>19</sup> Plumwood, “Nature in the Active Voice”, 122.

<sup>20</sup> Deborah Bird Rose, “Val Plumwood’s Philosophical Animism: Attentive Interactions in the Sentient World,” *Environmental Humanities* 3, no. 1 (2013): 93–109.

<sup>21</sup> Graham Harvey, *Animism: Respecting the Living World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), xi.

membership in an ecological community of kindred beings.<sup>22</sup> Plumwood believed that the planet is full of persons, only some of whom are human and by participating within a framework such as philosophical animism, we can then begin to engage with non-human others and earth systems in a more ethical, empathic and sustainable way.<sup>23</sup>

So, how can we explore my Willendorf obsession within the framework of Plumwood? Firstly, she has an animistic aspect, particularly in how I see her. As mentioned above, she exudes comfort and warmth, and in my experience, clearly possesses a kind of agency and presence. She became my co-conspirator and source of ancient knowledge that only I felt I could access, partly due to my reluctance to put myself out there and share her with others. My relationship with her was analytical to begin with; was she indeed a fertility symbol, as most of the literature I came across viewed her as? I purchased a copy of Marija Gimbutas's book *The Language of the Goddess* and was captured by the analysis of symbolism and the claim that a social order had existed in Old European palaeolithic and Neolithic cultures whereby the women were the heads of clans or priestesses and that the Goddess symbolism was one of birth, death and renewal.<sup>24</sup>

As a female who has never wanted children nor had a particularly good relationship with her mother, I struggled with bestowing fertility and 'earth mother' sentiments to the Willendorf. I was able to later move from an analytical relationship with her to one of animism, and, being aware of Plumwood's philosophical animism, I now find the language to honour her as a being rather than a symbol, and as an embodied presence whose rounded form calls forth a deep, relational knowing. Through Plumwood's lens of philosophical animism, I now understand this comfort not as projection, but as relational encounter. She appeared to me not as a dead stone, but as a being dense with care, and she was alive, albeit via a different frequency.

Plumwood identified a deep Western tension between the scientific disenchantment of the world and the anthropocentric narratives of creationism, both of which, in different ways, deny agency and subjectivity to the other-than-human. In invoking "the Willendorf," I pay homage to Plumwood's theory and gesture toward a third possibility: one that neither reduces the figure to an archaeological object nor elevates her to an untouchable symbol of divine authorship. Instead, she becomes a site of encounter, a figure who resists easy classification and who invites a relationship rooted in kinship, not control. As a presence situated in deep time, yet still resonant in contemporary imagination, the Willendorf allows for a reclaiming of narrative space that honours embodied wisdom, ancestral memory, and the vitality of matter and is exactly the kind of reorientation Plumwood calls for.

Such discourse on Willendorf's fertility aspect moves us into the world of dualisms. As mentioned above, the western predisposition for a world of dualisms is considered by Plumwood to be a source of contemporary and environmental crises, with Woman and Nature being lumped together as the 'other' in opposition to Man and Master. This is where critical ecofeminism, another of Plumwood's theories, comes into play, which I will explain as concisely as I can below.

The precursor to critical ecofeminism is (somewhat obviously) ecofeminism, which draws on insights of ecology, feminism and socialism and has a basic premise that the ideology which enables oppressions such as those based on race, physical ability, class, gender, sexuality and species, is the same ideology that sanctions and enables the oppression of nature.<sup>25</sup> Critical ecofeminism recognises

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<sup>22</sup> Plumwood, "Nature in the Active Voice", 119.

<sup>23</sup> Plumwood, "Nature in the Active Voice".

<sup>24</sup> Marija Gimbutas, *The Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe: 6500–3500 B.C.* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

<sup>25</sup> Greta Gaard, "Living Interconnections with Animals and Nature," in *Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, Nature*, ed. Greta Gaard (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 1–12, 1.

all that and advances past ecofeminism's essentialist and Euro-Western roots to address intersections of race, nation, gender and species.<sup>26</sup> Through the combined works of Plumwood and Gaard (whose theories will be discussed later in the paper), and other scholars such as Alicia H. Puleo<sup>27</sup>, and Lisa Siegel<sup>28</sup>, we can summarise Critical Ecofeminism as this - an intersectional, posthumanist framework that links environmental and social justice by exposing how systems of domination, such as patriarchy, colonialism, and speciesism, mutually reinforce each other. It challenges binaries like nature/culture and human/other, emphasising embodied, relational, and affective ways of knowing. This theory also seeks to 'queer' our relationships with the other-than-human world by refusing to essentialise women as being 'closer to nature' and by trans-species listening. Thus, "critical ecological feminism can reject both the distorted choices generated by nature/culture dualism" by rejecting "the model of women and women's reproductivity as undifferentiated nature" and "the attempt to fit them into a model of oppositional and masculinised culture."<sup>29</sup> Women, therefore, do not have to be reduced to just their reproductive abilities and their so-called connection to nature, and as Plumwood expresses, "If we think that the fact of being female guarantees that we are automatically provided with an ecological consciousness and can do no wrong to nature or one another, we are going to be badly disappointed."<sup>30</sup> Critical ecofeminism can therefore position women alongside nature as opposed to the more powerless and oppositional inclusion or exclusion, with all duality transformed into dichotomies and spectra as opposed to oppositional and hierarchical ways.<sup>31</sup>

Could my encounter with the Willendorf subvert dualisms, and if so, in what form does this subversion take? Let us now explore some of the many dualisms within which the Willendorf and my experiences of her occupy.

**Primitive/Culture** - The Willendorf is often framed as a "primitive" artefact tied to nature, instinct, and fertility, and therefore set in opposition to Western civilisation's supposedly "cultured" narrative. Such a sentiment aligns perfectly with Plumwood's critique of how "nature" is feminised, devalued, and othered. My changing experience of the Willendorf illustrates this fluid dynamic, from one of a purely fertility idol, reduced to just her reproductive capability, to one of co-conspirator and companion.

**Body/Mind** - Despite her initial presence being one of 'all body', with her exaggerated physical characteristics and her lack of face, the Willendorf still has the power to disrupt the Body/Mind dualism through her enigmatic presence and the questions she induces in those who behold her.

**Emotion/Reason** - The Willendorf also acts to subvert, through me, the Emotion/Reason dualism. My interaction with her with such an obsessional reverence could be dismissed as irrational and, one might say, rather unfitting of a science postgraduate researcher at a well-respected university. My love for her challenged the dualism of emotion and reason.

**Past/Present** - The Willendorf is often confined to "prehistory", a relic, a fossil, and a figure of the Palaeolithic past. Yet, my work and collaboration with her push against this by treating her as though she is alive and present (and in terms of animism, treating her as an entity with her own purpose and agency). She is, to me, alive, relational, and present, thereby subverting the dualism of the past being irrelevant or dead.

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<sup>26</sup> Greta Gaard, *Critical Ecofeminism* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017), xvi.

<sup>27</sup> Alicia H. Puleo, "What Is Ecofeminism," *Quaderns de la Mediterrània* 25 (2017): 27–34.

<sup>28</sup> Lisa Siegel, "Ecofeminism Intraconnectivism: Working Beyond Binaries in Environmental Education," *Gender and Education* 36, no. 4 (2024): 328–344.

<sup>29</sup> Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, 39.

<sup>30</sup> Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, 10, 20.

<sup>31</sup> Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*.

Fat/Thin - The first dualism that struck me long before I knew anything about dualisms was that the Willendorf was unabashedly 'fat' with her large breasts, belly and vulva. In a society where being fat is still taboo, here was an idol, a woman, who had been cherished by someone so much that they spent time, energy and effort creating her likeness in clay. She represents a powerful subversion in contemporary Western culture and reminds women that there is power in all body types, not just the dominant 'Thin'.

Before moving on to my final posthuman scholar, it is important to note the distinction between dualism and dichotomy. A dichotomy need not be problematic if neither side is privileged or dominant over the other; instead, it can reveal a dynamic tension that invites deeper relational understanding. The Willendorf can exist as both a mere archaeological object and as a deity of reverence. And along this spectrum, she can be an infinite blend of both.

#### Greta Gaard

Greta Gaard is another foundational figure in ecofeminist thought and is particularly known scholarship at the intersections of environmentalism, posthumanism and feminism. Across two of Gaard's works, *Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, Nature* and *Critical Ecofeminism*, Gaard argues that environmental justice must be understood as inseparable from social justice, particularly in relation to gender, sexuality, species, and colonialism, and these two works challenge anthropocentric and heteronormative assumptions by queering ecological discourse and foregrounding marginalised perspectives.<sup>32,33</sup> Queering in this context is used as a critical methodology and a way of unsettling norms and binaries, and making room for fluid, relational, and unexpected ways of being with the more-than-human world. From Gaard's theories and discourses, I have chosen to focus on one critical ecofeminist aspect, and that is other-than-human or attentive 'listening'. Listening is an essential tenet of critical ecofeminism, a theory we have already discussed, which originated with Val Plumwood and which Gaard and other scholars extended and continue to expand.

In Gaard's book, *Critical Ecofeminism*, 'listening' as an action is discussed with regard to dualisms. For example, Gaard states that "speaking is associated with power, knowledge and dominance, whilst listening is associated with subordination",<sup>34</sup> a sentiment which makes feminists emphasise the importance of listening to marginalised groups and those whose voices are rarely allowed to be heard beyond that of continuing a dominant discourse.<sup>35</sup> Taking this further, ecofeminists stress the importance of listening to more-than-humans, the entities and 'others' around us and with whom we share the planet, such as plants, animals, minerals, etc. Gaard elaborates on "listening as a way of knowing"<sup>36</sup> and draws attention to the fact that this already exists in Indigenous Peoples who actively and naturally engage in trans-species communication and kinship.

How do I 'listen' to the Willendorf? It is pretty straightforward, and as I write this section, I have a bronze-cast Willendorf sitting just under my monitor. To listen to her, I stop typing and let the thoughts arise naturally and organically. Today, she communicates knowing and self-awareness, and her faceless gaze appears introspective. By shadowing her pose with my hands above my breasts, I get communications of contentment, peace and being 'at one'. On a more intellectual level, she offers encouragement to be your unique self and live authentically. She communicates through silence and offers me a space to stop and connect. She also communicates with her body and her flesh. When I hold her in my hands, she ceases to be an object of motherly, maternalness and instead transfers that imagery onto me. I become the one who is protective over her, and she cradles into the palm of my

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<sup>32</sup> Gaard, *Living Interconnections with Animals and Nature*.

<sup>33</sup> Gaard, *Critical Ecofeminism*.

<sup>34</sup> Gaard, *Critical Ecofeminism*, xvii.

<sup>35</sup> Gaard, *Critical Ecofeminism*.

<sup>36</sup> Gaard, *Critical Ecofeminism*, xviii.

hand like a tiny child. I feel a strange sense of guardianship over her, akin to what a child may experience with a doll.

## Conclusion

To conclude and put all the above into context, the Willendorf, to me (and it is important to stress that these are my relational interactions with her), ceased to be an object long ago. She became my co-conspirator when I was deeply disillusioned with science and supported me through difficult times due to her mystical and strangely 'all-knowing' air. She reminded me about a connection to a more Earth-based existence where nature and natural phenomena were viewed as omnipotent and alive. This rekindled my appreciation for animism, which had been with me since childhood but had almost been exorcised by my academic science route. Her presence led me to read Gimbutas's book, and I was enthralled and moved by the thought of an ancient woman-centred culture of priestesses and queens. Although this sentiment may not be echoed today, this book still elicits a feeling of empowerment, magic and feminism. Even the now 'essentialist' point of view regarding her status as a fertility idol and earth-mother brings forth feelings of oneness and a connection with the other-than-human entities in the world. Finally, she reminded me that beauty is on a spectrum and emotion and relational love are just as valuable as reason.

In further analysing the meaning-making of my Willendorf interactions, I am struck by the strong and insidious presence of epistemic injustice running throughout my life. Epistemic injustice, as theorised by Miranda Fricker, describes a wrong done to someone in their capacity as a knower. Fricker identifies two primary forms: testimonial injustice<sup>37</sup>, where a speaker's credibility is unjustly downgraded due to prejudice (e.g. based on gender, race, or class), and hermeneutical injustice<sup>38</sup>, where someone's experience is misunderstood or not fully intelligible because the collective interpretive resources of society are lacking or biased. My own experiences align more closely with the latter. For instance, my discomfort in sitting with the naked form of the Willendorf reflects an inherited Western hyper-sexualisation of the female body. My hesitance to voice the sense of enchantment I feel in her presence echoes longstanding dualisms between emotion and reason. And my reluctance to speak openly about my attentive, almost conversational interactions with her gestures to a broader cultural dismissal of non-rational, other-than-human forms of knowing. In naming, however tentatively, these layered injustices, I begin to locate their origins, and in doing so, reassert the validity of the epistemologies they have long suppressed.

Occupying a social space with The Willendorf has, over time, diminished my sense of social embarrassment. Her unapologetic form, rounded, ancient, unbothered by typical Western aesthetic convention, invited me to relate to my own body, social conditioning and experience with greater acceptance and reverence. Rolls of fat are no longer considered grotesque, hanging breasts are no longer seen as errant, and a vulva is no longer something to be witnessed with shame or widened eyes. These are simply body parts that perform an amazing function. While I was initially hesitant to write about these embodied, spiritual, and intimate dimensions in an academic context, that hesitation has shifted, although I do admit to this internal shadow work needing constant vigilance against seepage. The very act of attending to Willendorf's presence, her vital materiality and her persistence across time became a quiet unlearning of shame. What once felt risky or exposing now feels necessary: these are insights rooted in lived experience, and they deserve a place in scholarly discourse precisely because they challenge the false boundary between the intellectual and the embodied, the sacred and the scholarly.

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<sup>37</sup> Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 9.

<sup>38</sup> Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 147.

My sustained engagement with the Willendorf figure has deepened not only my personal sense of embodied selfhood but also my commitment to a posthuman ethic of relationality, one that will form the backbone to the rest of my life. Within this framework, knowledge is not possessed by autonomous individuals but emerges through entangled encounters, in this case, with a figure whose presence refuses to be reduced to mere artefact, icon, or symbol alone. The Willendorf Goddess, in my opinion, illustrates a form of epistemic resistance to disembodied reason and to anthropocentric exceptionalism. In this way, she re-enchants the world not through nostalgia, but by activating an other-than-human mode of vital meaning-making, and her presence calls forth a form of quiet activism rooted in solidarity with the marginalised, both human and nonhuman. Perhaps 25,000 years ago, she signified fecundity, survival, or ancestral power. Today, she is no less alive, and in her enduring presence, I encounter a living embodiment of dualism, a challenge to epistemic injustice, and a call to listen differently, with a porous, posthuman imagination. In this way, this paper contributes to current research in Goddess Studies by offering a posthuman reconfiguration of sacred embodiment, animacy, and meaning-making. Rather than treating the Goddess as solely a cultural symbol or historical artefact, this account foregrounds her ‘Thing-Power’ presence within lived, contemporary relational ontologies and holds space for enchantment, reflexivity, and epistemic justice, within and beyond the academic study of the sacred feminine.

To finish this paper, I would like to share three Willendorfs from my collection and the knowledge and relationality they share with me through trans-species listening and kinship. My handmade Willendorf was one of the first I tried to fashion. She was not a perfect replica (if there is such a thing within handmade copies), but she let me know that this was ok and that the essence of her likeness was what mattered. She was also the first time my hands had dared to sculpt breasts, therefore helping me to break down a taboo I had regarding the female body. My bronze Willendorf Goddess was unceremoniously purchased from a US website before Brexit, when postage to the UK from the US was not so extortionate. She is and always will be my favourite, and she is the one who whispers feelings of protectiveness, a harking, maybe, to the maternal instincts (if I dare be essentialist) that were never acted upon. I once had a gut-wrenching experience dusting my altar, and she fell behind it, breaking into two pieces. I felt genuinely guilty and apologised profusely. She communicated that it was ok to super-glue her together and that nothing is perfect anyway. Finally, I purchased my rose quartz Willendorf from a Facebook group. The seller was getting rid of her at a ridiculously cheap price, and I snapped her up immediately. How someone didn't want such a beautiful and loving Willendorf escapes me.



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