An Ecofeminist Critique of Rural Studio:
Toward an Ethically-Sustainable Aesthetics

ABSTRACT:
In this article, I apply Australian logician and ecofeminist philosopher Val Plumwood's *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, specifically its alternative logic of "the dance of interaction," to a controversial community-engagement program in my home state of Alabama. At Rural Studio, Auburn University students design free housing and public works for one of the poorest regions in the United States, known as the "Black Belt." Through the lens of Plumwood's ecofeminist dancing logic, the marginalized source of Rural Studio's survival is revealed to be the resilience of the disempowered majority-Black community. Inspired thereby, I sketch an ecofeminist choreography with three "dancing" concepts (namely Plumwood's "the master model," Vandana Shiva's "nature's logic," and Ariel Salleh's "holding"), acknowledging the resilience of the disempowered as a necessary step toward an ethically-sustainable aesthetics.

KEYWORDS: sustainability; ecofeminist philosophy; dance; logic; Val Plumwood; Rural Studio

The structure of the present article is as follows. The first section introduces Australian logician and ecofeminist philosopher Val Plumwood's deployment of the "dance of interaction" as an alternative logic to the "classical propositional logic" of patriarchal colonialism.[1] The second section applies this ecofeminist dancing logic to Rural Studio, a community-engagement project of the Architecture Department of Auburn University in the present author's home state of Alabama, thereby illuminating that the program's survival is thanks to the unacknowledged resilience of the majority-Black community, which must be acknowledged for the studio to achieve its stated goal of ethical sustainability. Finally, the concluding section derives from this critique an ecofeminist choreography of three "dancing" concepts (namely Plumwood's "the master model," ecofeminist activist Vandana Shiva's "nature's logic," and ecofeminist sociologist Ariel Salleh's "holding") to empower an ethically-sustainable aesthetics, at Rural Studio and beyond.

[1] Val Plumwood, *Feminist and the Mastery of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1993). As noted below, Plumwood takes this concept of "dance of interaction" from psychoanalytic theory. See Jessica Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism and the Problem of Domination* (London: Virago, 1988).

I. An Ecofeminist Dancing Logic

Counterintuitively, Val Plumwood is famous as both a logician and an ecofeminist, thus helpfully challenging the stereotypes of both (namely that all logicians are white men indifferent to the real world, and that all ecofeminists are passionately irrational). While I focus here on her ecofeminist theory, I first briefly consider how her approach to logic clears the way and empowers her ecofeminism. Part of the virtue of Plumwood's approach—especially, in the present author's view, its maximally broad, inclusive, and detailed incorporation of various kinds of beings—is that she explicitly names a direct connection between logic and dance. More specifically, in her watershed *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, Plumwood articulates an alternative logic capable of sustaining "the dance of interaction."

To elaborate on this dancing logic, I turn to the philosophical core of Plumwood's book, Chapter 2's "Dualism: The Logic of Contradiction." There, her central objection to mainstream western formal logic ("classical propositional logic") concerns its unique concept of negation, wherein there "is no room here for the complexities of the dance of interaction between the one and the independent other" (57). In contrast to "other logical systems which define much weaker exclusion relationships," Plumwood explains, classical propositional logic deploys "the standard formalism of "p and ~p," which stand for the affirmation, and the negation, of any proposition, respectively. For example, if "p" stands for "It is the case that it is raining," then "~p" stands for "It is *not* the case that it is raining" (57).

Of these various alternate logics (to classical propositional logic), Plumwood's professional preference is for "relevant logic," which in her view can "claim to be a more adequate expression of actual reasoning practice than classical logic," and whose concept of negation "can be interpreted as expressing a notion of otherness as *non-hierarchical difference*"

(58). Put differently, whereas for classical propositional logic the negation of a thing is absolute (either there is rain or there is no rain at all), for relevant logic the negation can be relative (as in "It's sprinkling," "It's misting," or "It's kind of raining, but not really"). Or, in the domain of gender, from an LGBT+ perspective one can be "not a man" without having to be "a woman," the traditional dichotomous opposite thereof. Instead, there are various ways to not be a "man," including "nonbinary," "genderfluid," "agender," etc. And all these gendered possibilities are understood to exist on one egalitarian plane of difference (not a two-level hierarchy with "man" on the virtuous higher level, and "woman" on the vicious lower level).

Plumwood later acknowledges borrowing this "dance of interaction" concept from U.S. American psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin, who defines it as "the process of mutual transformation or recognition," which in turn serves as "the basis for the formation of self through mutuality, a process in which an external other sets a boundary or limit to the self and its desires" (156). Plumwood later deploys the phrase "dance of interaction" once more in her book, on the concluding page of Chapter 6, "Ethics and the Instrumentalizing Self" (164). The importance of the dance of interaction to Plumwood's conception of an alternative logic is therefore clear, as well as its relevance for the ethics of interpersonal interactions, including ethically-sustainable aesthetic practices, to which subject I now turn.

II. Application to Rural Studio

This section applies Plumwood's ecofeminist dancing logic to a critique of Rural Studio, now over twenty years old, housed in the Architecture Department of one of Alabama's most respected public universities. Notably, Auburn University was recently ranked by the New York Timeas as the single "least economically diverse" university in the United States, its already-low

Black enrollment has plummeted in recent years (from 8.7% in 2007 to 3.2% in 2020, in a state which is 25% Black), and yet it recently closed its office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion.[2] The primary source for this section is a book entitled *Rural Studio at Twenty*, whose primary authors are the current (second) director of the studio, Andrew Freear, and his fellow Auburn Architecture professor Elena Barthel (also Freear's spouse).[3] Unfortunately, despite Rural Studio's apparently extensive influence in the world of architecture, almost nothing has been written about it in the philosophy of art.[4]

From the beginning of *Rural Studio at Twenty*, it is immediately clear that Freear (who seems to be the primary author, speaking in the first-person singular for most of the book), is performing a difficult tightrope-dance of interaction himself. His figurative dance partner in this case is Samuel Mockbee, whom Freear describes as the "mythical" founder of Rural Studio. What makes this dance so difficult for Freear is that he is forced to articulate and emphasize his own more socially and environmental just vision for the studio while distancing himself from Mockbee's flaws, but in a way that does not alienate the corporate "partners" and community

[2] For more, see Rebecca Griesbach, "Why Auburn sits at the bottom of this New York Times college ranking list," *AL.com*, 28 Sep 2003: https://www.al.com/education/2023/09/why-auburn-sits-at-the-bottom-of-this-new-york-times-college-ranking-list.html; Drake Pooley, "Why Has Black Enrollment Fallen at an Elite Southern University?" *New York Times*, 17 Sep 2021: https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/17/opinion/auburn-university-black-students.html; and Rebecca Griesbach, "Auburn dissolves DEI office, moves staff to 'new roles'," *AL.com*, 29 Jul 2024, https://www.al.com/educationlab/2024/07/auburn-dissolves-dei-office-moves-staff-to-new-roles.html.

[3] Andrew Freear, Elena Barthel, Andrea Oppenheimer and Timothy Hursley, *Rural Studio at Twenty: Designing and Building in Hale County, Alabama* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Architectural Press, 2014).

[4] One exception is found in the influential book that started a new school of philosophical aesthetics, Yuriko Saito's *Everyday Aesthetics*, which briefly references Rural Studio. Saito notes approvingly that its projects "are constructed mostly with salvaged materials" and "undertaken with community involvement." As I explore below, however, the latter feature was not originally part of its vision, and arguably remains incompletely realized. See Yuriko Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 91.

organizations whose relationships Mockbee cultivated, and on whom Rural Studio's financial solvency depends.

The first hint of this difficulty appears on the first page: the self-chosen nickname of Mockbee, who was a white Alabamian, is "Sambo," which is also an infamous racist epithet for Black people. By choosing to include this nickname, Freear risks offending local Black readers and progressive academics (as it did the present author), as well as undermining his claim to have overseen a social justice reform of Rural Studio. However, if Freear had *not* included this nickname in the book, then many intended readers (especially wealthy white Alabama donors) might have been unaware that Freear is referring to Mockbee, or even offended that he did not use Mockbee's preferred nickname (perhaps detecting a whiff of the political correctness that they so despise in the British author).

Another hint of Freear's difficult dance, in the first titled section of the Introduction, "Mockbee and Me," can be found in Freear's concession that "Mockbee was nervous about me at first, because I was an outsider and different from him" (10). That is, Freear was "raised in the north of England in a modest family," and "educated in London by architects who had rebuilt England after World War II and remembered its privations" (11). Due to this background, Freear confesses, "I guess I'm a socialist at heart" and therefore a person who, like Mockbee, "roots for the underdog" (although "socialist" is synonymous with "evil" for most rural white Alabamians) (11). There are several problems with Freear's "underdog" formulation, however. For one thing, the rhetoric of "underdog" risks dehumanizing the majority-Black community who are being "rooted for" by these two white architects (Mockbee and Freear). For another thing, how does a non-native (to the Black Belt) like Freear know for sure that a local person is as powerless as they might seem? Moreover, what happens when an alleged underdog later rises to a higher

position? Does the wealthier white architect stop rooting for the former underdog at that point, and no longer help sustain them, even though that continuing support might be necessary to maintain the former underdog's new higher status? And if so, does the wealthier white architect move onto another perceived underdog, perhaps in part to feel once more the rush of the gratitude of those who are too desperate to say "no"?

Even more worrisome in this regard is a series of moments in the Introduction which suggest that Mockbee's flawed legacy might still be influencing Freear's administration. First, he notes that the main text of *Rural Studio at Twenty* begins "with a personal ode to west Alabama: its history, geography, landscape, economy, and arts, as well as its food, architecture, and, of course, people, and what we have 'learned to learn' from them" (12). Though this spotlighting of the local community is admirable, some readers might wonder why the phrase "learning to learn" is placed in scare quote here. Might it be irony, or an uncited quotation? And what exactly was involved in Rural Studio educating itself on listening to the majority-Black community in which it inserted itself? Put more bluntly, why did university-educated professional architects need to learn how to listen to Black folks in the first place?

A partial answer to the latter question can perhaps be found in Freear's subsequent reference to Rural Studio's mission as being "to take care of the backyard of Auburn University" (13). That is, "backyard" is a strange word choice here, because (as is clear from the map provided in the book), Auburn University and its Rural Studio are as far apart from east to west as Alabama's state boundaries allows. Thus, the Studio is located, not in the 70% white, middle-class actual backyard of Auburn, but 150 miles away (about three hours by car) in the 64% Black, lower-class Black Belt, to which Auburn has never had any organic connection. On the contrary, the primary connection is arguably a vicious historical one, wherein wealthier white

Alabamians paternalistically arrogate to themselves the right and responsibility to transform the lives of poor Black Alabamians (as in Kipling's infamous phrase, "the white man's burden"), usually without any input from the poor Black Alabamians, who lack sufficient political power to reject that interference entirely.

Relatedly, Freear claims that Rural Studio's "ultimate lesson is that architects must be proactive, make projects happen, be in control of their own destinies, and believe in a better world" (13). To this, I would offer a counterproposal. Why not instead teach middle-class white architects in this majority-Black region to be responsive and responsible, facilitating the organic emergence of projects from the sharing of space and dialogue with community members? That way, the community members could be empowered to freely express their concerns and propose solutions, and the architects could release their need for total control by embracing a co-authorship of Rural Studio's destiny with the community.

Finally from *Rural Studio at Twenty*'s "Introduction," Freear sounds a disrespectful tone toward the community members, perhaps from a felt need to justify his heretofore micromanaging comportment toward them. To wit, Freear (a) notes "the peculiarities of" the free houses' "intended owners" (but not the peculiarities of the architects); (b) praises Rural Studio's intended "conquest" of the "public realm"; and (c) renders the stark judgment that this majority-Black community, the object of its attempted conquest, "has little resilience" (13). But how, without resilience, I would ask, could the Black Belt people have survived slavery, Jim Crow, mass incarceration, and economic and environmental devastation? Clearly, in Plumwood's terms, Rural Studio's "dance of interaction" remains woefully one-sided.

Turning from the Introduction to Chapter 1, "Learning in West Alabama" begins on a similarly problematic note. First, Freear compares his position in the Black Belt to "Other

activist practitioners who might helicopter into a third-world country, design, and build for six months, and then fly home again"; in contrast to such travelers, Freear and his Rural Studio peers have "dug ourselves in here" (15). Nevertheless, like those traveling interveners into Third World spaces, Freear sounds a bit resentful when reflecting on the times when the locals do not joyfully acquiesce to the entrenched diggers' results. "Since we live here," he writes, "if we screw up, we hear about it" (15). Though a brief aside, this is where I locate the most important agency and resistance in *Rural Studio at Twenty*: the people of this region, despite its considerable disempowerment, is nevertheless self-respecting and brave enough to speak out when they judge others to have mistreated them.

Implying that he has earned considerable trust from the community since first arriving, Freear admits that "When I first came here, the locals seemed hugely suspicious," which he thinks "was fueled, in part, by a history of academics coming to Hale County [Alabama] to work on projects with local people as a prerequisite for tenure," and then leaving (15-16). The comparative powerlessness of these locals vis-à-vis Rural Studio is clear from their economic demographics: "Twenty-six percent of the county's residents live below the poverty line, the majority of them in trailers," Freear notes, and much "of Alabama's land remains in the possession of absentee landowners who use their political clout and powers of persuasion to keep taxes low and the educational system consequently poorly supported" (17). The most important example of the latter, perhaps, involves local "education funds being divided between private and public schools," whereby both schools are "weakened because of the divided resources" (17). Note Freear's passive voice construction, here, which allows him not to name the wealthy white politicians and donors who maintain these unjust conditions. "Poor schools are largely to blame," he adds, again using a passive construction, this time blaming the schools themselves

rather than their leadership, for the fact that "voluntary integration tends to be the exception" in this town of Newbern, Alabama (18). Surprisingly, this is one of few places in the book where racial interactions are explicitly thematized. Similarly, no nonwhite Rural Studio professionals, are named or pictured in the entire book (and it includes only one Black architecture student).

Also like these white absentee landlords and local politicians, when Freear tries to balance his condescension toward the locals with praise, the result is romanticizing and thereby disrespectful. The architects at Rural Studio "like the authenticity of this hard-bitten region," Freear observes, "with its lack of pretense and airs," being instead "full of can-do farmers, artists, and civil-rights foot soldiers," as well as "characters who sit on front porches with a cup of sweet tea, sharing memories, dreams, and myths" (17). Unfortunately, this spunk apparently does not extend to the basics of healthy nutrition, according to Freear, prompting him to create a community farm at Rural Studio. "By growing and cooking our own food," he explains, "we are trying to set an example of how to be more self-sustaining" (22). It is hard to be more condescending than accusing an entire, majority-Black poor community of not knowing how to properly feed themselves and their families. Sensitive to such criticisms, which apparently are nothing new to Rural Studio, Freear protests that they are "often perceived as a crusader against poverty," but that they "do not want to be perceived as ambulance chasers" (22). Note, again, the passive voice construction; unlike the previous example, where it shielded wealthier white politicians from justified criticism, this time it mutes and anonymizes liberal critics of Rural Studio itself. In juxtaposition, these two moments of passive voice construction seem to align the white Rural Studio architects with the unjust white powers-that-be.

Chapter 2, however, performs a 180-degree shift in tone from the beginning of the book. For starters, Freear now claims that "The most important lesson we can teach aspiring architects

is to feel accountable for their work, to assume ethical responsibility for the social, political, and environmental consequences of what they design and build" (23). Similarly, he affirms, "I don't believe that anyone has a God-given right to build," and that especially "in a poor place like Hale County, building is a privilege" (24). Freear also emphasizes that his central focus is on "sustainability with a small *s*, a sustainability born of necessity and frugality," for example by avoiding "prohibitive up-front costs," and by not building things that "few local people will actually know how to repair" (24). The most promising example of this, in the present author's view, is the "20K House program," whose goal is "to create prototypes that can be built for $20,000 in three weeks by local contractors" (24). This program is the flagship work, along with the Rural Studio Farm, for what Freear calls "the Rural Studio (R)evolution" (28).

Looking back, the need for this revolution seems painfully obvious. Whereas in Mockbee's original method (for the first seven years of Rural Studio's operations) the students "often suggested their own projects," ever since the (R)evolution "the studio makes the final project choices from a selection recommended by the community" (29). The reason for this is simple, and embarrassing. "Some of the early projects that were initiated by Rural Studio rather than by the community," Freear admits, "were weak programmatically, or lacked sufficient community support, or both" (30). I would emphasize here the direct link between weakness and denying community agency. Unlike the original "client houses," however, "which are designed to help one family at a time," Freear proudly notes that "the $20,000 prototypes give us the opportunity to help a much larger segment of the population" (32).

In Chapter 4, "Becoming the Town Architect," Freear touches on several more important points for this ethically-sustainable approach. He insists that Rural Studio does not want Newbern, Alabama "to end up like Marfa, Texas, where the artists have taken over and changed

the place forever" (which could easily happen, as the "students' arrival expands the place by about 25 percent)" (48). To that end, Freear "admonish[es] the students against a 'pack mentality,'" for example by having them "go to church in twos and threes, never as a big crew" (49). Freear also learned from one early Rural Studio project, called "Spencer House," whose "slightly eccentric new front porch attracted strong criticisms" from the community (51). In his words, this failure "taught us a lesson" (51). The Studio ultimately "replaced the wonky porch with an inconspicuous, traditional one," and "No one complains about the porch now" (51). In fact—and Freear's tone of exultant surprise here seems a strong indictment of Rural Studio's history of community partnership—"People now even like the buildings we design!" (57). The fact that this is a novel state of affairs, meriting an exclamation point, shows in a nutshell Rural Studio's struggles with ethical sustainability. Further evidence thereof can be seen in Freear's following conclusion: "I hope we can help the town survive, but I'm not sure we can" (57). How, I would ask, can it be ethically justifiable, or sustainable, for Rural Studio's own community's survival *not* to be the studio's highest goal? Perhaps Newburn, Hale County, and the Black Belt are not really the studio's intended community after all. Perhaps the studio's community is instead the white, middle-class, actual backyard of Auburn University and its Architecture Department, a comfortably-safe three hours away.

In support of the latter possibility is a section entitled "Voices," featuring short reflections by various stakeholders in the community, relegated to the very end of the book. Several critical moments there are worth noting. The first is found in an essay entitled "Impact of Rural Studio on Our Community," by Stephen P. Gentry, introduced as "community partner." "I have heard comments about odd-looking structures that appear out of nowhere in our county or town," Gentry relates. "Sometimes," he adds, "it's a 'what the heck is that?'" (261). Gentry

makes his own position on the issue clear in his next sentence. “In community-owned structures,” he writes, “I personally would rather the buildings be more in keeping with local norms” (261). “There is a ‘Southern charm’ about Greensborough [Alabama] and the South in general,” he argues, “which I think we have a responsibility and desire to preserve” (262). Note here Gentry’s emphasis on community ownership, responsibility, and respecting norms. Finally, a brief bio, placed after this reflection, indicates that Gentry “served as a Greensboro city councilman from 2008 to 2012,” which means that these thoughts reflect not just the community in general, but also its political representatives, and thus carry additional weight and significance. Though his thoughts presumably would have had more impact if this relevant information about Gentry were not buried after the reflection.

Similarly critical in tone is the next reflection in this “Voices” section, entitled “Lions Park,” and written by Bill Hemstreet, who like Gentry before him is introduced simply as a “community partner.” Though Hemstreet’s opinion of the organization evolved with later changes he saw in it, he admits that his “first experience with Rural Studio staff was not terribly positive” (262). More specifically, Hemstreet “was quick to criticize them at the time, but now realize[s] that their ideas about what constituted a good project for both the community and the students were evolving and that they weren’t yet ready for the park” (262). Hemstreet is alluding to the fact that Rural Studio originally rejected a request to help refurbish Lions Park. More generally, “there have been some failures and shortcomings, which is to be expected in an educational project of this magnitude” (262). Note Hemstreet’s patient tone, and his reframing of the situation, which makes the community the mature and responsible partner in the endeavor, while Rural Studio is figured as a young, faltering entity, slowly making fewer mistakes as it grows up alongside its students. Finally from Hemstreet, as with former councilman Gentry, he

too is an official leader in the community, namely President of the local Lions Club (one of the organizations that co-own the park in question, Lions Park).

A grudging acknowledgement of this problematic dimension of Rural Studio is also suggested by the "Voices" reflection from its associate director, Rusty Smith. In "We Have Met the Institution and It is Us," Smith writes that "Typically, the studio was portrayed as a band of outlaw cowboys who, unshackled from the oversight of the academy, could exercise their freedom in the wild west of the Alabama Black Belt" (268). Note, again, the passive verb construction, eliding critical voices. In this case, such voices might belong not only to the local community, but also to fellow liberal professionals (such as journalists and academics). To his cred, rather than try to defend Rural Studio, Smith shows admirable honesty and openness in conceding the point of this criticism. "As with most legends, this line of thinking did have a seed of truth," he writes, despite insisting that those negative conditions had changed under Freear's leadership (268). I would argue that this frequent "cowboy" criticism reflects very negatively on Rural Studio, since this "Wild West" analogy positions the majority-Black community members as "Indians," imagined by racist cowboys to be barbaric sub-humans, whose allegedly irrational beliefs can thus be overridden without ethical compunction or consequence.

Finally from these "Voices" is "The Environmental Education of Citizen Architects," by architecture professor Paul Stoller, credited as a "consultant" to Rural Studio. "The paradox of the studio's success at the end of the first decade," Stoller writes of Mockbee's original project (before Freear's "(R)evolution"), is that "while its services were in demand across the region and conserved resources on each project, the studio itself was becoming an ever less sustainable operation" (269). For one thing, its "fuel bills and carbon footprint were soaring" (269). Put bluntly, Rural Studio was in a deeply hypocritical and self-contradictory state (as white savior

projects in majority-Black communities tend to be). On this latter point, Stoller affirms that "it is as important for a successful building or landscape to respect local opportunities, limitations, and customs as it is to challenge them" (270). Note the adverb "equally" here, as well as the recognition—unfortunately belated, and only from an external consultant rather than from the in-house leaders—that there are existing institutions and ways of life in place in this majority-Black community, which deserve respect and ongoing empowerment.

III. Ecofeminst Choreography, Ethically-Sustainable Aesthetics

From the foregoing critique, it becomes clear that whatever progress Rural Studio has made toward being more ethically sustainable and respectful of the community did not happen in a vacuum, or by itself, in some kind of spontaneous self-actualization. Instead, and crucially, from the beginning it was concrete pushback, or resistance, from the local, majority-Black community that led directly to the positive changes reflection in Freear's (R)evolution. In other words, insofar as Rural Studio has become less problematic and vicious, and more ethically sustainable, this outcome would have been inconceivable without the very resilience of the local, majority-Black community that Freear (in his "Introduction") denies that it even possesses (with his abovementioned offhand remark about that community having "little resilience"). Yet again, therefore, the Black Belt shows itself to be the exact opposite of that stereotype.

It is this recognition of the community's resilience, born of a more respectful "dance of interaction" between studio and community, that promises an ethically-sustainable aesthetics. To flesh out what this might look like in practice, I now close the present article by sketching an ecofeminist choreography, consisting of three "dancing" concepts. Its objective is to further empower Rural Studio's "community partners" to co-choreograph their dance of interaction with

the studio, as a model for disempowered communities generally in relation to more empowered and privileged artists (and their funders and supporters).

For the first of these three "dancing" concepts, I return to Plumwood, to what she terms "the master model." Whereas "Much feminist theory," Plumwood writes, "has detected a masculine presence in the officially gender-neutral concept of reason," her account instead "suggests that it is not a masculine identity pure and simple, but the multiple, complex cultural identity of the master formed in the context of race, class, species and gender domination, which is at issue" (5). Plumwood calls this the master "model" in part because it has become a template for non-male others to imitate (including even some liberal feminist women), in an attempt to acquire some of that "master" power, at the steep cost of tragically perpetuating its oppressiveness (26). In a later elaboration, Plumwood writes that "the master claims for himself reason, contemplation, and higher pursuits, and disdains the slave's merely manual occupations, while the slave is forced to exclude from his or her makeup the characteristics of the master, to eschew intellect and become submissive and lacking in initiative" (50).

Applying this concept of the "master model" to Rural Studio, its leadership consists of wealthier white architects, and architects are archetypical "masters" (including literally so, as they hold Master's degrees). Moreover, Rural Studio has tended to hoard the intellection and decision-making of its projects while condescending toward the majority-Black community's manual laborers, encouraging them to be submissive and misperceiving them as lacking initiative (for example by alleging that they simply do not bother to feed themselves properly). The upshot here for an ecofeminist choreography is that the "master" partner in the dance of the architectural (or other) artwork must deliberately question and subvert their own authority (and likely their

residual unconscious negative stereotypes of the "slave"). In Rural Studio's case, of course, this involves actual descendants of enslaved peoples in the Black Belt.

The second "dancing" concept of this ecofeminist choreography, "nature's logic," derives from the most famous and influential thinker in ecofeminism' history, Indian physicist and environmental theorist/activist Vandana Shiva, aka "the Gandhi of grain." The context in which Shiva introduces this concept of "nature's logic" is her discussion of a contrasting concept, which she calls "masculinism." Note, in this formulation, that the object of critique is an ideology, as opposed to the more common terms "male" or "man," which stereotype every member of a gender as inherently vicious (including poor Black men in Newbern, Alabama). This illustrates Shiva's nuanced, antiracist recognition (as also evident in the "master model" of Plumwood, who approvingly cites her), that stereotypically-masculine destructive behaviors are also coded in terms of race, class, and other axes of embodiment and social position. Shiva traces this phenomenon of "masculinism" to a specific historical conjuncture. "The Royal Society," she writes, "inspired by [Francis] Bacon's philosophy, was clearly seen by its organizers as a masculine project" (19).[5] Shiva supports this contention with a quote from 1664 by Henry Oldenburg, who at the time was Secretary of the Royal Society, that "the intention of the society was to 'raise a *masculine philosophy*'" (19).[6] This tendency, Shiva notes, continues to dominate what she calls "western masculine science," despite the fact that she herself holds a Ph.D. in Physics from the University of Western Ontario in Canada (208).

For a concrete example of this "masculinism" and its opposite, "nature's logic," consider Shiva's frequent example of a series of controversial damming projects in India. She

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[5] Vandana Shiva, *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology, and Development* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2016).

[6] Quoting from Brian Eeaslea, *Science and Sexual Oppression: Patriarchy's Confrontation with Woman and Nature* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1981), 64.

characterizes the thinking behind these projects as “engineering logic” (184). The latter recalls both Plumwood’s critique of classical propositional logic, and also what one might call the “colonizing logic” evidenced by Rural Studio, especially in its pre-(R)evolution form, which denied and denigrated the existing architectural logics of the poor majority-Black community. Guided by this “engineering logic,” Shiva claims, this damning project in India, “by taking water away to where it does not belong, creates wet and salt-laden deserts,” while the dams—and here she introduces the second “dancing” concept of this ecofeminist choreography—“also divert water away from where it belongs in *nature’s logic*” (184, emphasis added).

Crucially for Shiva, however, these opposing tendencies toward “nature’s logic” or “engineering logic” are not essentially tied to biological cismen or ciswomen, respectively. In her words, “masculine and feminine as gendered concepts based on exclusiveness are ideologically defined categories, as is the association of violence and activity with the former, and nonviolence and passivity with the latter” (52). For this reason, according to Shiva’s “non-gender based philosophy,” what she calls “the feminine principle is not exclusively embodied in women, but is the principle of activity and creativity in nature, women, and men” (52). Thus, her call for the “recovery of the feminine principle,” she explains, “stands for” the “liberation” of, among others, “the men who, in dominating nature and women, have sacrificed their own human-ness” (53). In short, liberation must “begin from the colonised and end with the coloniser” (53). Returning to the competing “engineering logic” of the damming project, Shiva quotes “an old woman” in the area “who quietly said to me, ‘They do not see the huge water reservoir nature provides below the ground,’ because ‘They do not see nature’s work and our [nonwhite peasant women’s] work in distributing water’”—instead, “‘All they can see is the structures they build’” (184). In short, for organizations like Rural Studio, the masters must see

beyond what they build, in order to recognize and respect the often-invisible (to them) work of especially poor nonwhite local partners in their art.

To further flesh out Shiva's "nature's logic," consider the following metaphor that she invokes, involving the deity from whom her last name derives. The source for this metaphor is "the story of the mighty river Ganga, rolling down the Himalayan slopes with no one to hold the Earth together in the face of her might" (176). In response to this power, Vandana Shiva relates, the creator-god Brahma proclaimed the following:

> Win Shiva, that his aid be lent
> To hold her in her mid-descent
> For earth alone will never bear
> These torrents traveled from the upper air.[7]

One could also compare, I would add, (a) the raging river to Vandana Shiva's ecofeminist critique, (b) the mountains to our hierarchical unjust world, and (c) the god Shiva's hair to the work of Vandana Shiva, "holding" and channeling that mighty power in a constructively compassionate way. As H. C. Reiger interprets the poem, "In Shiva's hair we have a very well known physical device which breaks the force of the water coming down…the vegetation of the mountains" (2). Not a masculinist dam, as ordered by "engineering logic," therefore, but rather the femininized trees, supplied by "nature's logic."

It is important to note, from Shiva's perspective, that this centering of "nature's logic" is not a reduction or diminution of "engineering logic"; on the contrary, it could not be more affirming. As she explains in an earlier chapter, "Forests have always been central to Indian civilization," for example being "worshipped as Aranyani, the Goddess of the Forest, the primary

[7] Shiva 176, quoting from H. C. Reiger, "Whose Himalaya? A Study in Geopiety," in T. Singh, (ed.), *Studies in Himalayan Ecology and Development Strategies*, New Delhi: The English Book Store, 1980), 2.

source of life and fertility" (55). In support of this point, Shiva quotes the great Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore, for whom "the distinctiveness of Indian culture consists of its having defined life in the forest as the highest form of cultural evolution" (55). Finally on this point, since the deity Shiva is perhaps most famous in the Global North as a god of dance, the relevant epithet for which is *Nataraja* ("Lord of the Dance"), this metaphor also connects Vandana Shiva's concept of "nature's logic" directly to dance.[8]

The third and final "dancing" concept in this ecofeminist choreography, "holding," is derived from Australian sociologist Ariel Salleh (for the twentieth anniversary of whose book, *Ecofeminism as Politics: Nature, Marx and the Postmodern*, Vandana Shiva provided the "Foreword").[9] Salleh introduces the term "holding" in paraphrasing U.S. American philosopher Naomi Scheman's claim that "men are free to imagine themselves as self-defining – but only because women hold the intimate world together" (144).[10] Later in her book, Salleh explicitly thematizes this concept of holding, beginning with a discussion of another U.S. American philosopher, Sara Ruddick.[11] "Ruddick's concept of 'holding'," Salleh claims, "is especially relevant to ecopolitics," involving reconciliation, harmony, sustainability, and repairing the world. Salleh then claims that "Australian indigenous workers also practice a kind of holding in their traditional nurture of sustainability," for example insofar as they "move through country

[8] For more on Shiva as a god of dance and of disempowered being including women, darker-skinned people, the poor, and the natural world, see Joshua M. Hall, "Dionysus Lyseus Reborn: The Revolutionary Philosophy Chorus," *Philosophy Today* 66(1): 2022, 57-74.

[9] Ariel Salleh, *Ecofeminism as Politics: Nature, Marx and the Postmodern* (London: Zed, 2017).

[10] Quoting Naomi Scheman, "Individualism and the Objects of Psychology," in S. Harding and M. Hintikka (eds.), *Discovering Reality* (Boston: Reidel, 1983), 234.

[11] Sarah Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace* (Boston: Beacon, 1989).

[the preferred Aboriginal alternative term for "wilderness"] in the knowledge that nature will replenish and provide for them again when they return" (216).

Moreover, and reaching beyond an Aboriginal Australian context to a global one, Salleh affirms U.S. American political scientist Nancy Harstock's observation, regarding what she calls "mothering practice," that "this gentle labor by mediation distinguishes enduring work from slave or proletarian labour, which must break Nature's back at the master's command" (217). More generally, Salleh claims that holding "is based neither on separation and control of Others, nor on some ephemeral cosmic fusion, but on practical deferral," and it "exemplifies a strong, decentered subject" (219). It is decentered, I interpolate, because it moves in a non-hierarchical dancing partnership. Salleh later elaborates on holding via "decentered oscillation," elaborated as follows: "People who are privileged enough to work with all their senses together, come to a kinaesthetic awareness of the multiple timings embedded in what is handled"; in short, such people "learn holding, synchronizing their agency with the rhythms of growth" (237).

This holding, in Salleh's view, is nothing less than the linchpin of the entire ecofeminist movement. "The common denominator of women's struggles for survival North and South," she writes, "is their holding work and consciousness of enduring time," as exemplified by "Vandana Shiva's forest dwellers (249-250, 262) (The latter is a reference to the Chipko forest conservation movement in India, whose female activists embraced "the living trees as their protectors," thus inspiring the environmentalist epithet "tree hugger") (Shiva 66). Additionally, and recalling Plumwood's "master model," Salleh concludes that "Mastery is not the only model of agency," because of the "alternative" case of "holding actions," including "organic cultivation" (278). In short, Salleh is calling for a "holding ethic of ecofeminism" (281). Finally from Salleh, as also with Shiva and Plumwood, she too connects this ecofeminist concept

explicitly to dance, as for example when she suggests that holding's "kinaesthetic knowing" is exemplified by "the age-old wisdom of Middle Eastern belly dance ritual" (203). In sum, "Moving into a new millennium, modernist science and politics will have to respond to the *dance* and holler of this conceptual challenge" (207, emphasis added).

Summarizing these three "dancing" concepts, derived from Plumwood, Shiva, and Salleh, this sketch of an ecofeminist choreography requires the following: (1) self-deconstructing "the master model," (2) bending masculinizing tendencies in STEM toward a transgender feminizing principle intrinsic to "nature's logic," and (3) self-consciously reworking artistic and aesthetic practices around "holding" spaces with disempowered beings under patriarchal colonialism, including women, people of color, queer, disabled and poor folks, nonhuman beings and the environment. As applied to Rural Studio and the art of architecture, the goal of an ethically-sustainable aesthetics should be first and foremost not merely to build, but rather a literal and figurative dance of interaction with our community, including with the most disempowered-yet-resilient.

I will now conclude by fleshing out these three concepts' application to Rural Studio, proposing one concrete practice for each, to make the studio's artistic practices more ethically sustainable. First, from (1) the self-deconstructing of "the master model," the architects of Rural Studio could creatively seek out ways to position themselves as servants in submissive positions relative to the poor, majority-Black community members where they work. One strategy would be to identify practices in which these community members already possess mastery, albeit in field which the architects might deem trivial or irrelevant, requesting permission to learn from those masters, thereby reversing the power dynamics in at least one context. This would not only temporarily level the playing field, but also facilitate the humility that comes, not merely from

engaging in manual labor (which the architects already proudly do), but from subordinating oneself to someone with less social capital, and in an area in which one is ignorant and unskilled. To repeat, the goal is not to construct new buildings for Rural Studio, but to improve the quality of relationships, deepening mutual understanding and respect, between locals and outsiders.

Secondly, in terms of (2) bending masculinizing tendencies in STEM toward "nature's logic," Rural Studio could create new employment positions, preferably recruiting from local communities, seeking workers with experience and expertise involving the natural world surrounding Rural Studio, including Native American practitioners, small family farmers, herbalists, gardeners, wildlife enthusiasts, and people who live off the land. One goal here is to recuperate the natural features and powers of this region prior to Rural Studio's creation, and independently of the ways that STEM practices self-consciously override nature into predetermined shapes and functions. Put in terms of the qualitative-over-quantitative theme, the ideal dance between STEM and nature involves accepting a certain amount of chaos, fluidity, spontaneity, coexistence, and openness to "being" (rather than always demanding control, order, stability, planning, colonization, and the transformation of being into "becoming").

Finally, in terms of (3) self-consciously reworking artistic practices around "holding" spaces, the fact that the latter term originated in Nancy Harstock's discussion of "mothering" suggests an opportunity to address rural Alabama's crisis of reproductive healthcare. Just two months ago, for example (in August 2024), Alabama Public Radio reported that in Clarke County (two counties south of Rural Studio's Hale County), "One of the last remaining birthing

units in southern Alabama is closing," namely that of Grove Hill Memorial Hospital.[12] For context, the state of Alabama

> has the highest maternal mortality rate in the nation and one of the highest infant death rates in the country. Black infants and Black Alabamians who give birth experience higher mortality rates than their white and Hispanic counterparts, reports the advocacy group Alabama Arise. The nonprofit also relays data that shows the infant mortality rate for Black babies is 1.5 times higher than the state average and nearly twice as high as the infant mortality rate for white babies. Similarly, Black mothers in Alabama are twice as likely to die during childbirth as their white counterparts.

Against this grim background, NBC news reports that, because of the newest closure at Grove Hill Memorial, "In the coming months, a large part of southern Alabama will no longer have close access to hospital obstetric delivery services."[13] I therefore propose that Rural Studio, with the support of Auburn University (whose endowment in 2022 was $911 million), fund and establish a new midwife-operated birthing center in Hale County. Although a 2017 Alabama law reversed the state's 40-year ban on midwifery, an ongoing court battle started in 2023 concerns regulations and restrictions that the ACLU and others argue make it impossible for clinics to keep their doors open.[14] It would therefore be a tremendous help, at both a clinical and legal

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[12] Baillee Majors, "Southern Alabama birthing unit closing, health experts warn of obstetric care loss," *Alabama Public Radio* 15 Aug 2024: https://www.apr.org/news/2024-08-15/southern-alabama-birthing-unit-closing-health-experts-warn-of-obstetric-care-loss.

[13] The Associated Press, "Alabama birthing units are closing to save money and get funding. Some say babies are at risk," *NBC News*, 19 Jul 2024: https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/alabama-birthing-units-are-closing-money-get-funding-say-babies-are-ri-rcna162662.

[14] For more see Emily Baumgaertner, "For Black Mothers, Birthing Centers, Once a Refuge, Become a Battleground," *New York Times*, 30 Sep 2023: https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/30/health/birthing-centers-alabama.html.

level, if the prestigious Auburn University and its celebrated Rural Studio were to throw their considerable weight and resources behind access to reproductive healthcare for our most disempowered community members, through the concrete and visible action of creating a new birthing center. In sum, an ethically-sustainable aesthetics requires holding spaces for those holding on to our most vulnerable/promising members, so that the dance of life may continue.