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Environment

AN INTERDISCIPLINARY ANTHOLOGY



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further our understanding of evolution by general appeals to "laws of nature" to which all life must bend. Rather, we must ask how, within the general constraints of the laws of nature, organisms have constructed environments that are the conditions for their further evolution and reconstruction of nature into new environments. Organisms within their individual lifetimes and in the course of their evolution as a species do not *adapt* to environments; they *construct* them. They are not simply *objects* of the laws of nature, altering themselves to bend to the inevitable, but active *subjects* transforming nature according to its laws.

Carolyn Merchant, from "Gaia: Ecofeminism and the Earth"
in *Earthcare: Women and the Environment* (1996)

Nature, as a life-giving source, has long been associated with the female. Recasting our views of nature as being gendered provides not only a set of important philosophical perspectives, but prescriptions on how humans could and should interact with the natural world. Carolyn Merchant introduces the concept of "ecofeminism" and presents diverse categories of ecofeminism, each offering a different perspective and prescription.

Ecofeminism emerged in the 1970s with an increasing consciousness of the connections between women and nature. The term, "écoféminisme," was coined in 1974 by French writer Françoise d'Eaubonne who called upon women to lead an ecological revolution to save the planet.¹ Such an ecological revolution would entail new gender relations between women and men and between humans and nature.

Developed by Ynestra King at the Institute for Social Ecology in Vermont about 1976, the concept became a movement in 1980 with a major conference on "Women and Life on Earth" held in Amherst, Massachusetts, and the ensuing Women's Pentagon Action to protest anti-life nuclear war and weapons development.² During the 1980s cultural feminists in the United States injected new life into ecofeminism by arguing that both women and nature could be liberated together.

Liberal, cultural, social, and socialist feminism have all been concerned with improving the human/nature relationship, and each has contributed to an ecofeminist perspective in different ways (Table 17.1).³ Liberal feminism is consistent with the objectives of reform environmentalism to alter human relations with nature from within existing structures of governance through the passage of new laws and regulations. Cultural ecofeminism analyzes environmental problems from within its critique of patriarchy and offers alternatives that could liberate both women and nature.

Social and socialist ecofeminism, on the other hand, ground their analyses in capitalist patriarchy. They ask how patriarchal relations of reproduction reveal the domination of women by men, and how capitalist relations of production re-



Figure 17.5 *Earth Mother* by Edward Burr
E. W. Buffington Funds, Worcester
Photograph © W

veal the domination of nature by the market economy's use of both women and nature. Cultural ecofeminism has delved more deeply into the critique of patriarchy, and socialist ecofeminism has the potential to reveal the domination and for a liberating social

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Ecofeminism and the Earth”
The Environment (1996)

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inism have all been concerned with, and each has contributed to an article 17.1).³ Liberal feminism is commitment to alter human relations of governance through the passage of feminism analyzes environmental by and offers alternatives that could

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Figure 17.5 *Earth Mother* by Edward Burne-Jones, 1882. Sarah C. Garver and Charlotte E. W. Buffington Funds, Worcester Art Museum, Worcester, Massachusetts. Photograph © Worcester Art Museum.

veal the domination of nature by men. They seek the total restructuring of the market economy’s use of both women and nature as resources. Although cultural ecofeminism has delved more deeply into the woman-nature connection, social and socialist ecofeminism have the potential for a more thorough critique of domination and for a liberating social justice.

TABLE 17.1
Feminism and the Environment

| | Nature | Human nature | Feminist critique of environmentalism | Image of a feminist environmentalism |
|--------------------|---|--|---|--|
| Liberal feminism | Atoms Mind/body dualism Domination of nature | Rational agents Individualism Maximization of self-interest | "Man and his environment" leaves out women | Women in natural resources and environmental sciences |
| Marxist feminism | Transformation of Nature by science and technology for human use Domination of nature as a means to human freedom Nature is material basis of life: food, clothing, shelter, energy | Creation of human nature through mode of production, praxis Historically specific—not fixed Species nature of humans | Critique of capitalist control of resources and accumulation of goods and profits | Socialist society will use resources for good of all men and women Resources will be controlled by workers Environmental pollution could be minimal since no surpluses would be produced Environmental research |
| Cultural feminism | Nature is spiritual and personal Conventional science and technology problematic because of their emphasis on domination | Biology is basic Humans are sexually reproducing bodies Sexed by biology/gendered by society | Unaware of interconnectedness of male domination of nature and women Male environmentalism retains hierarchy Insufficient attention to environmental threats to woman's reproduction (chemicals, nuclear war) | Woman/Nature both valorized and celebrated Reproductive freedom Against pornographic depictions of both women and nature Cultural ecofeminism |
| Socialist feminism | Nature is material basis of life: food, clothing, shelter, energy Nature is socially and | Human nature created through biology and praxis (sex, race, class, age) Historically specific and | Leaves out nature as active and responsive Leaves out women's role | Both nature and human production are active Centrality of biological |

| | | | | |
|--------------------|---|--|--|---|
| Cultural feminism | <p>Nature is spiritual and personal</p> <p>Conventional science and technology problematic because of their emphasis on domination</p> | <p>Biology is basic</p> <p>Humans are sexually reproducing bodies</p> <p>Sexed by biology/ gendered by society</p> | <p>Unaware of inter-connectedness of male domination of nature and women</p> <p>Male environmentalism retains hierarchy</p> <p>Insufficient attention to environmental threats to woman's reproduction (chemicals, nuclear war)</p> <p>Leaves out nature as active and responsive</p> <p>Leaves out women's role in reproduction and reproduction as a category</p> <p>Systems approach is mechanistic and not dialectical</p> | <p>Woman/Nature both valorized and celebrated</p> <p>Reproductive freedom</p> <p>Against pornographic depictions of both women and nature</p> <p>Cultural ecofeminism</p> |
| Socialist feminism | <p>Nature is material basis of life: food, clothing, shelter, energy</p> <p>Nature is socially and historically constructed</p> <p>Transformations of nature by production and reproduction</p> | <p>Human nature created through biology and praxis (sex, race, class, age)</p> <p>Historically specific and socially constructed</p> | <p>Both nature and human production are active</p> <p>Centrality of biological and social reproduction</p> <p>Dialectic between production and reproduction</p> <p>Multileveled structural analysis</p> <p>Dialectical (not mechanical) systems</p> <p>Socialist ecofeminism</p> | |

Ecofeminist actions address the contradiction between production and reproduction. Women attempt to reverse the assaults of production on both biological and social reproduction by making problems visible and proposing solutions. When radioactivity from nuclear powerplant accidents, toxic chemicals, and hazardous wastes threaten the biological reproduction of the human species, women experience this contradiction as assaults on their own bodies and on those of their children and act to halt them. Household products, industrial pollutants, plastics, and packaging wastes invade the homes of First World women threatening the reproduction of daily life, while direct access to food, fuel, and clean water for many Third World women is imperiled by cash cropping on traditional homelands and by pesticides used in agribusiness. First World women combat these assaults by altering consumption habits, recycling wastes, and protesting production and disposal methods, while Third World women act to protect traditional ways of life and reverse ecological damage from multinational corporations and the extractive industries. Women challenge the ways in which mainstream society reproduces itself through socialization and politics by envisioning and enacting alternative gender roles, employment options, and political practices.

Many ecofeminists advocate some form of an environmental ethic that deals with the twin oppressions of the domination of women and nature through an ethic of care and nurture that arises out of women's culturally constructed experiences. As philosopher Karen Warren conceptualizes it:

An ecofeminist ethic is both a critique of male domination of both women and nature and an attempt to frame an ethic free of male-gender bias about women and nature. It not only recognizes the multiple voices of women, located differently by race, class, age, [and] ethnic considerations, it centralizes those voices. Ecofeminism builds on the multiple perspectives of those whose perspectives are typically omitted or undervalued in dominant discourses, for example Chipko women, in developing a global perspective on the role of male domination in the exploitation of women and nature. An ecofeminist perspective is thereby . . . structurally pluralistic, inclusivist, and contextualist, emphasizing through concrete example the crucial role context plays in understanding sexist and naturist practice.⁴

An ecofeminist ethic, she argues, would constrain traditional ethics based on rights, rules, and utilities, with considerations based on care, love, and trust. Yet an ethic of care, as elaborated by some feminists, falls prey to an essentialist critique that women's nature is to nurture.

My own approach is a partnership ethic that treats humans (including male partners and female partners) as equals in personal, household, and political relations and humans as equal partners with (rather than controlled-by or dominant-over) nonhuman nature. Just as human partners, regardless of sex, race, or class, must give each other space, time, and care, allowing each other to grow and

develop individually within support must give nonhuman nature space evolve, and respond to human actions forests and damming rivers that make vulnerable to "natural disasters"; hurricanes, earthquakes, hurricanes, and chaotic, natural surprises; and emerging technologies such as pesticides, genetic weapons into ecosystems. Consider possibility of a personal or intimate with nature and for feelings of connection who are sexually, racially, or culturally nurturing mother or a goddess and are only one of many equal parts equal to a bacterium or a mosquito.

1. Françoise d'Eaubonne, "Feminism or Dea *New French Feminisms: An Anthology* (Amherst but see especially 25.
2. Ynestra King, "Toward an Ecological Feminism *Machina Ex Dea* (New York: Pergamon Press 1980).
3. Alison Jaggar, *Feminist Politics and Human Nature* (New York: Oxford University Press 1989). Karen Warren, "Feminism and Ecology: A Response to Alison Jaggar" (1987): 3-10.
4. Karen Warren, "Toward an Ecofeminist Ethic" 56, quotation on 151.

develop individually within supportive nondominating relationships, so humans must give nonhuman nature space, time, and care, allowing it to reproduce, evolve, and respond to human actions. In practice, this would mean not cutting forests and damming rivers that make people and wildlife in flood plains more vulnerable to "natural disasters"; curtailing development in areas subject to volcanos, earthquakes, hurricanes, and tornados to allow room for unpredictable, chaotic, natural surprises; and exercising ethical restraint in introducing new technologies such as pesticides, genetically engineered organisms, and biological weapons into ecosystems. Constructing nature as a partner allows for the possibility of a personal or intimate (but not necessarily spiritual) relationship with nature and for feelings of compassion for nonhumans as well as for people who are sexually, racially, or culturally different. It avoids gendering nature as a nurturing mother or a goddess and avoids the ecocentric dilemma that humans are only one of many equal parts of an ecological web and therefore morally equal to a bacterium or a mosquito.

Notes

1. Françoise d'Eaubonne, "Feminism or Death," in Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron, ed., *New French Feminisms: An Anthology* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980), 64-67, but see especially 25.
2. Ynestra King, "Toward an Ecological Feminism and a Feminist Ecology," in Joan Rothschild, ed., *Machina Ex Dea* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1983), 118-29.
3. Alison Jaggar, *Feminist Politics and Human Nature* (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Allanheld, 1983); Karen Warren, "Feminism and Ecology: Making Connections," *Environmental Ethics* 9, no. 1 (1987): 3-10.
4. Karen Warren, "Toward an Ecofeminist Ethic," *Studies in the Humanities* (December 1988): 140-56, quotation on 151.