

**“She Loves the River”:
Women Environmental Activists for Bay Area Watersheds**

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ABSTRACT

Environmental activism, like every other field, has been impacted by societal norms and expectations regarding gender and race. Historically, environmentalism has been a very white pursuit, and men tend to dominate the more technical professions and leadership positions, while women are better represented in the more social and community-based positions. Women and people of color have made names for themselves as grassroots environmental activists for decades, and now many grassroots environmental activists are female, but most are still white. In order to explore the intersections of gender, race, and environmentalism, I asked the question: how do women become environmental activists for San Francisco Bay Area watersheds? I conducted semi-structured interviews with ten women environmental activists in watershed organizations in the Bay Area. I found that both white women and women of color frequently feel connected to the environment, or feel that they must take care of it, but that women of color experience more societal and cultural barriers than white women when they attempt to become environmental activists. People of color do not receive the same environmental education or have the same ability to access environmental organizations as white environmentalists. To foster a more diverse and open environmentalist community, more communities should be educated about the impact of environmental issues, existing environmental organizations should make a greater effort to connect with environmentalists of color, and there should be more environmental organizations led by people of color, for people of color.

KEYWORDS

environmentalism, grass-roots activism, gender role socialization, ecofeminism, environmental justice

INTRODUCTION

My friend in Santa Fe... when he would introduce me to someone – like a friend or an acquaintance – he would say ‘She loves the river.’ - Mary

For over a century in the United States, women have changed the face of environmental activism, and given life to environmental campaigns that men could not support alone. Beginning in 1886, Audubon societies aimed to protect vulnerable species of birds hunted for their plumes, but the societies nearly disappeared by 1895, until women across the country started new chapters and revitalized the effort (Merchant 1984). Since those early days, women have blazed trails as environmentalists – including Margaret Morse Nice, an ornithologist; Annie Montague Alexander, the patron of the Museum of Vertebrate Zoology at UC Berkeley; and Rachel Carson, who published *Silent Spring*, shedding light on the harmful effects of organochlorine insecticides (Stein 1996, Krebs et al. 1999, Ogilvie and Harvey 2003). Unlike male-dominated fields, such as engineering and physics, environmentalism exhibits a long history of female participation and leadership (Hazari et al. 2010, Ghiasi et al. 2015). The San Francisco Bay Area has been a center for female environmentalist communities.

The Bay Area hosts many environmental organizations run by women, including non-profits dedicated to the health of watersheds. In the 1960s, Kay Kerr, Sylvia McLaughlin, and Esther Gulick – all wives of faculty members at UC Berkeley – learned that if the San Francisco Bay shoreline continued to be used as a dump and infilled for development, it would be reduced to a narrow channel in the next 60 years (“History” n.d.). These women organized the Save the San Francisco Bay Association, now Save the Bay, to advocate for the bay, eventually leading to state legislation protecting the water and shoreline from dumping and sewage (Rome 2003, “History” n.d.). The three women founders of Save the Bay supported a wave of women-led watershed organizations after them. One woman environmental activist, Eve, described in an interview that when she got involved with watersheds, mobilizing around urban creeks “was really a fringe concept. So we had a problem of credibility. But Sylvia and Esther would say ‘yes, this is really a good idea.’ Those World War II mentors provided... credibility for a movement that was really young and considered fringe.” In 1982, Carole Schemmerling and Ann Riley founded the Urban Creeks Council (UCC) after the first creek restoration project in the Bay Area, at Berkeley’s Strawberry Creek, to help local communities with their environmental

justice concerns regarding water pollution, flooding, and other watershed problems (Cerny 2003, Redding 2003). “Friends of” groups such as Friends of Five Creeks and Friends of Sausal Creek formed in the mid-1990s to work on and advocate for their local waterways (“About Friends of Five Creeks” n.d., “Friends of Sausal Creek” n.d.). Although their goals and tactics differ, these and other watershed groups continue to be largely women-run and women-supported.

How do women become environmentalists and environmental activists for watersheds in the San Francisco Bay Area, and how do their identities in terms of gender and race affect their transformation into environmental activists? I asked two sub-questions to explore this central research question: How have women’s identities in terms of race and gender affected their environmental activism? And, how do their identities and ideas compare to previously described philosophies regarding race, gender, and the environment? These research questions allowed me to explore how women become environmentalists and environmental activists how women shape the environmental field as a whole.

The History of Women in Environmental Activism

Americans became increasingly aware of environmental issues in the ‘60s and ‘70s, as texts like Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* made it impossible to ignore the effects of environmental degradation. The simultaneous development of the environmental, civil rights, and feminist movements meant that many previously silenced communities simultaneously began to demand better quality of life (Rome 2003). However, traditional environmentalism consisted mostly of large organizations devoted to enjoyment of nature and conservation in the name of that enjoyment, such as the Sierra Club and hunting and fishing organizations. The environmental organizations formed in this era of preservation and conservation tend to be very white and male (Verchick 1996). These organizations did not meet the demands of many new environmentalists, and grassroots environmental movements multiplied across the country. Women, people of color, and other marginalized groups found voices for themselves in local, community-based activist groups.

The new types of environmental organizations that have emerged in recent decades for these diverse communities offer the chance to examine the relationships between men, women, white people, and people of color in environmentalism and environmental activism. For the

purposes of this paper, a person who is an *environmentalist* is someone who cares about the health of the environment and enjoys being in the environment, but does not devote much time or energy to combating environmental issues. A person who is an *environmental activist* wants to have an impact on environmental issues, and becomes politicized by joining or founding an environmental organization that works for the health of the environment and the people within it. In the world of watershed activism, these organizations may restore impacted habitat, educate the public about the environment, work on environmental justice around waterways, protect wildlife, or any other field that organizes support and protection for watershed issues. How do women participate in these environmental activist organizations?

The question seems simple enough, but immediately becomes tangled in theory. To answer this question requires exploring the kaleidoscope of perspectives on womanhood and environmental activism. Below, I describe five of the prevailing schools of thought that discuss womanhood and environmentalism: civic motherhood, activist motherhood, ecofeminism, gender role socialization, and environmental justice.

Major Schools of Thought on Women and Environmentalism

Civic motherhood

In many traditions, women are defined as bearers of children and caretakers of family (Merchant 1992, Jackson 1993). In Victorian society, wealthy, white men described all women as close to nature, and used that closeness to frame women as too unsophisticated to participate in complicated intellectual conversations (Gates 1998). Although the definition of women as close to nature meant they were excluded from academia and other high status fields, some women were empowered by that definition to protect nature from development and pollution.

The first environmentalist women considered taking care of the planet an extension of their duties as wives and mothers. During the Progressive Era, women participated in environmental conservation efforts to beautify and keep the planet, and called it “municipal housekeeping” or “civic mothering” (Rome 2003). Their feminine identities as caretakers and mothers should not be underestimated. These women mobilized large numbers of supporters and activated political change, leading to the creation of some of the first protected parks and first

instances of conservation legislation (Walker 2010). These “housekeeping” efforts led to today’s mainstream, conservation-focused environmental organizations.

Activist motherhood

“Activist mothers” consider their activism an extension of their caretaking duties as mothers, like the women of the original conservation movement (Pardo 1990, Verchick 1996). However, these activist mothers differ from previous conservationist mothers because they see environmental problems in their homes and families, rather than far from home in parks and refuges.

One of the first groups of “activist mothers” came together in Love Canal, New York, in the 1970s. In Love Canal, Lois Gibbs and other neighborhood women protested the government’s failure to help their community recover from hazardous waste disposed in the area by Hooker Chemical company decades prior (Merchant 1992, Newman 2001). These women called themselves “housewives-turned-activists,” demonstrating that their identities had transformed from traditional expectations of domesticity, to activism (Newman 2001). After Love Canal, mothers across the country gave birth to new grassroots movements. Women who had never been involved in activism before found themselves flung into the environmental ring. These mothers became such powerful environmental activists that the idea that women environmental activists tend to be mothers without much political experience is dominant in the literature (Hamilton 1985, Pardo 1990, Bell and Braun 2010). However, others contend that this idea of “activist mothering” does not explain every woman’s approach to activism, especially in the field of environmental justice (Perkins 2012).

Ecofeminism

In the 20th century, ecofeminism enshrined the connection between womanhood and the environment, spanning a number of philosophies on womanhood. Ecofeminism is a diverse philosophy; as one writer says, “Ask a half-dozen self-proclaimed ecofeminists ‘what ecofeminism is’, and you’ll get a half-dozen answers” (Verchick 1996). Cultural ecofeminists define women as reproductive beings who give birth to and nurture new generations of humans,

and see similarities between women and the Earth, which also nurtures the birth of new generations. Liberal ecofeminists believe that women and men share the responsibility to care for the environment, and that women are just as capable as men in taking on that responsibility. Social and socialist ecofeminists believe that women and the environment are connected because they are both dominated under Western society, with women being dominated by patriarchy, and nature being dominated by capitalist exploitation of its resources (Merchant 1992, Somma and Tolleson-Rinehart 1997). Although different ecofeminists may disagree on their specific ideologies, all encourage participation in politics and activism to protect both the environment and women. Ecofeminists have organized powerful protests against nuclear radiation, pesticides, household chemicals, and other problems which threaten their bodies, families, and connection to nature (Merchant 1992).

Gender role socialization

The school of gender role socialization challenges the idea of women as caregivers and mothers, and defines gender as a social construct. Women are not meant to be more altruistic or generous than men – they are taught to be so (Eccles 1994). These thinkers are wary of viewing women as mothers and caretakers, and especially wary of ecofeminism, because they feel these ideas veer towards essentialism, or reduction of women to their reproductive capabilities (Merchant 1992). These women might identify as “activists” or “environmentalists,” without a feminine qualifier, because they seek to dispel hierarchies between men and women. They might focus on ensuring that there are equal numbers of women and men in an organization, because they believe women and men can and should achieve the same things (Holt and Webb 2007). Other women embrace the nurturing and artistic traits they were socialized with, and use those traits as tools in their fight for the environment. Rachel Carson, for example, recognized that women were likely to share her concerns for the planet and future generations of humans, and built a network of women supporters (Rome 2003). These women might be happy to identify as “women environmentalists,” because their identities as women are important to them.

Environmental justice

Environmental justice movements contain large numbers of women of color. When environmental justice groups were surveyed in 1993, 59% were led by women, and most were women of color (Taylor 1997). Although many women environmental activists are mothers without previous activism experience, women in the field of environmental justice may have been activists for significant periods of time before becoming environmental activists (Cole and Foster 2008, Perkins 2012). One study interviewed 16 indigenous women leaders of grassroots movements and found that 7 identified as “lifelong activists” with roots in civil rights, women’s, and indigenous movements from the 1960s and 1970s (Prindeville and Bretting 1998). Working for environmental wellbeing was a natural progression of their work for social wellbeing. These women activists brought with them knowledge of direct action, awareness of social injustices, and a desire to rectify those injustices.

Women of color in environmental justice movements see environmental issues as interwoven with social issues such as racial discrimination, civil rights, and labor rights. Many environmental justice concerns have been rejected by conventional environmental organizations as “not environmental enough,” because of their overlap with issues of housing, homelessness, hazardous working conditions, and other social problems. For example, in the 1970s, spraying of pesticides was disregarded by white environmentalists when farmworkers of color were sprayed, and only became an accepted “environmental” issue when wealthier, white communities were sprayed (Taylor 1997). This disregard for social inequalities has alienated women and men of color from many traditionally white-led movements, including feminism. Because of these alienations between white communities and communities of color, women of color often do not feel comfortable identifying with the same labels as white women, such as “feminist,” or “environmentalist” (Prindeville and Bretting 1998).

Environmental justice activism is similar to ecofeminism, but many supporters of environmental justice are uncomfortable with calling themselves ecofeminists. Both ecofeminism and environmental justice movements connect environmental problems to systems of domination. Both also deal with the impact of environmental problems on reproductive rights (Zimmerman and Miao 2009). However, many ecofeminists challenge only domination of women by men, whereas women of color also challenge domination of people of color by white

people. Women of color are oppressed not only by white men, but also by white women, and by men of color. Ecofeminism fails to sufficiently tackle racial and class inequalities, making it largely a white woman's movement.

Environmental justice also overlaps with ideas of activist motherhood. Many women struggle with participating in activism because it is seen as outside of traditional ideas of women. Women in EJ movements created a new rhetoric in which being a "good mother" included standing up to racial, class, and gender inequalities, for the sake of their families and communities (Peoples and DeLuca 2006). Both white mothers and mothers of color empower themselves to participate in activism by transforming what it means to be a mother.

These five conceptualizations have been used to describe many previous women activists. Watershed organizations in the Bay Area include a diverse community of women activists for various issues including creek restoration, environmental education, environmental justice, and tribal rights. This varied community provides a unique opportunity to test whether previous ideas of womanhood and environmentalism work to describe the experiences of many women working in close quarters on one central issue: the health of watersheds in the Bay Area.

METHODS

Semi-structured Interviews

I found subjects for semi-structured interviews by reaching out to watershed organizations around the Bay Area. I contacted nine organizations spanning a number of facets of watershed activism: creek restoration, environmental education, wildlife conservation, environmental justice, and environmental engineering (Table 1).

Table 1. Watershed organizations that participated in interviews.

Name	Type of Organization
Urban Creeks Council	Environmental Justice
Creeks of UC Berkeley	Creek Restoration
Friends of Five Creeks	Creek Restoration
Friends of Sausal Creek	Creek Restoration
Clearwater Hydrology	Creek and Wetland Restoration
The Watershed Project	Environmental Education & Creek Restoration
EarthTeam	Environmental Education
SPAWN	Wildlife Conservation
Worth a Dam	Wildlife Conservation

I used a combination of snowball sampling and purposive sampling, in that I selected the watershed organizations that I wanted to contact, then asked each woman who I interviewed to recommend someone else to interview. After the first 5 interviews, I chose to focus on contacting more women of color in hopes of interviewing about 50% white women and 50% women of color. Because of this purposive sampling, the ratio of women to color to white women in my interviews should not be taken as a representation of the ratio of women to color and white women in the field at large. I conducted semi-structured interviews to establish similar lines of questioning with each woman, but allow for freeform telling of stories and experiences. The semi-structured interviews were based on six basic questions (Table 2).

Table 2. Questions from semi-structured interviews.

Number	Interview Question
1	What environmental organizations are you involved with, and what do you do with those organizations?
2	How did you first become aware of environmental problems? When did you decide to do something about it?
3	What is it about [specific issue within watershed activism] that makes you want to work on it, out of all other issues?
4	What has your experience been as a white woman/woman of color in environmental organizations?
5	What is the most important part of your work to you?
6	What does nature and the environment mean to you?

Structural Narrative Analysis

Narrative analysis explores the origins and implications of stories through the telling of the stories themselves. Narratives are constructed to share particular meanings with the audience (Riessman 2005). Analyzing those meanings reveals the speaker's own thought process. I used

structural narrative analysis, a particular type of narrative analysis, to explore not only the content of each woman's narrative, but also the form in which she tells her narrative in order to communicate her perspective. Structural narrative analysis asks not only what is said, but how it is said. This technique of structural analysis follows the foundational work of William Labov and Joshua Waletzky, who maintained that a phrase can mean more than its literal transcription, and can be analyzed to understand the function that each phrase performs beyond the literal (Labov and Waletzky 1997). This analysis has been used before in examinations of interviews with women activists (Perkins 2012). Analyzing my interviews through this structural narrative lens allowed me to examine the words and phrases that each woman uses, and explore what that revealed about her identity, experience, and goals.

Once I transcribed the interviews, I used structural narrative analysis to explore two important moments: the moment when each woman began to care about the environment, and the moment when she became an active participant in environmental activism. I combined the experiences of all of the women to come up with one theory about how the transformation from environmentalist to environmental activist occurs. I then continued analyzing the interviews to understand the advantages or disadvantages that each woman experienced in her environmental journey, especially with relation to her gender and her race. I compared the advantages, disadvantages, and thoughts that each woman described to the five dominant ideas of women as environmental activists: civic motherhood, activist motherhood, ecofeminism, gender role socialization, and environmental justice.

DISCUSSION

From Environmentalism to Environmental Activism

My conversations with women environmental activists in the Bay Area suggest that becoming an environmentalist requires two qualities in a person, and becoming an environmental activist requires two additional qualities. To become an environmentalist, one must form a personal connection with nature, and care about its health. To become an environmental activist, one must feel a need to participate and help with an environmental problem, and have the ability to do so. The transformation from environmentalist to environmental activist is a movement from

enjoyment of nature, to action in favor of nature and the people in it; it is a movement from the passive to the active. In the following paragraphs, I showcase my interview subjects' experiences as environmentalists, as environmental activists, and as women in the Bay Area (Table 3). All of the women who participated in the interviews have been assigned pseudonyms to protect their identities, due to the sensitive nature of our conversations.

Table 3. Pseudonyms and demographics of women interviewed.

Pseudonym	Ethnicity	Involvement with Watersheds
Mary	White	Environmental Engineering
Eve	White	Environmental Justice; Creek Restoration
Harriet	White	Creek Restoration
Lily	Asian	Environmental Engineering
Kate	White	Creek Restoration
Lauren	White	Wildlife Conservation
Monica	Latina	Creek Restoration; Environmental Education
Susie	White	Wildlife Conservation
Ruby	White and Asian	Environmental Education
Mia	Latina	Environmental Education

Becoming environmentalists

Environmentalism begins with understanding the significance of the environment. This significance comes in two breeds, depending on each person's values: appreciation of the environment because of its intrinsic value, or "ecocentrism," and appreciation of the environment for its impact on humans, or "anthropocentrism" (Thompson and Barton 1994). Almost all of the women with whom I spoke began their adventures with the environment because of an ecocentric love for, and connection with, the planet, especially waterways. Simply put, these women valued the environment and their personal connection with it.

I feel this connection to the Bay as a water body. It's hard sometimes, I don't expect to live here forever because it's so densely urban, but I love the centrality of this body of water that supports so much bird and sea life, and that connection between the ocean and where we're all living... I always remember when I go back to L.A. – if you fly back, you see the geographical feature, and it feels like home. - Kate

I mean the rain in New Mexico is intense... It's a sight to see. It's amazing. You have to pull over in your car. You can't see out of your windshield. You can't – your windshield wipers can't go fast enough to deal with the amount of rain. And it comes in like 20

minutes and then it's gone. And I would, like, run down to the river after each rain or during the rain, and just watch it come. - Mary

As easy as it may be to describe the difference between ecocentrism and anthropocentrism on paper, it is much more difficult to outline those differences in reality. Almost all of the women appreciated the environment simply because it existed, which could be described as pure ecocentrism because of its focus solely on the planet, but they also appreciated the environment for its impact on their wellbeing. This appreciation for the environment's impact on their mental and physical health is still ecocentric, but also anthropocentric because of its focus on what the planet can do for the women. The women described that being in the environment gave them joy, and at times, was one of their only escapes from the difficulties of their day-to-day lives:

I think that so often we feel – at least for me, and I can probably speak for some of my students – you feel trapped in your own world. Taking a step outside and going outside for a walk, if you are exposed to it in some way, you can start to see that there is a whole world outside of you that goes on. It kind of puts in perspective the vastness of the world. - Ruby

Why I love science and why I love nature in general is from an early, very vivid series of exposures that had that particular kind of connection – also having a place where you go and feel connected, which I had with my grandparents' home in a small town. I have lived in small villages, in the Amazon, I have spent months and months and months by myself in the jungle. I have done those intense experiences in nature... So when I came here, I wanted to do it in the city. - Monica

One of the women explicitly combined ecocentric and anthropocentric ideas when she described that she appreciates how her work improves the health of the environment, but also how it allows her to have valuable experiences in nature:

I think that there is a habitat value to having biodiversity, and lots of plants, and some kind of reasonable alternation of shade and sun, and lots of insect life, which is gonna help the fish, which is gonna feed the birds. And I think it's great to have birds. If I ever have time when I'm out there by myself, I actually sometimes get to watch birds, and that's a great thrill. And you know the herons and the egrets, several species, come up and we can watch them fishing, and this is a transcendent experience. When the tide is high, the cormorants come in. It's a fabulous thing. I don't talk about this stuff very readily, about what nature means to me. It means a lot to me. - Harriett

All but one of the women described this kind of connection between her emotional wellbeing and the wellbeing of the environment. This relationship between oneself and one's surroundings are a powerful influence that led many of the women into environmentalism in the first place. They further described influences that led them to become not only environmentalists, but also environmental activists.

Movement to environmental activism

Anyone who loves the environment and cares about its health can be an environmentalist. To be an environmental activist requires action in the name of the environment. As Eve described, "I think I became an environmental activist – which is different from being an environmentalist – when I took a class at UC Berkeley." In almost every woman's journey is one moment, whether conscious or not, when she goes from simply thinking and appreciating the environment, to movement and activism. Harriett described the train of thought that led her from being active in her neighborhood to active with the creek: "Early on, when I was still involved [in another organization], I thought, 'Oh, there needs to be a voice for the creek.'" She already knew that "someday [she] wanted to be an activist," but it was the presence of the creek near her house that inspired her to be an activist for creeks. Her shift from neighborhood involvement to political and environmental issues is a frequent story.

Many women activists have described first becoming involved in neighborhood associations or simply discussing issues with their neighbors, and then eventually becoming politicized through that involvement (Pardo 1990). Many environmental justice activists, in particular, became involved first with issues of civil rights, then with issues of environmental racism, and eventually environmental justice organizations (Perkins 2012). Activism requires not only being able to see that an issue exists, but also feeling the need to do fix it. Many of the women described that their environmental work was what they were meant to do, and what they had to do:

I feel like in some sense I was meant to do this. - Lily

The issue kinda picked me, I didn't pick the issue. I was at Berkeley; I was learning about river science. I got pulled into the issues of the black community that was being flooded... I met people in Oakland who were dealing with issues in their neighborhood, and it continued from there. Somehow, I would be the one who people would call. - Eve

One woman, who loved watching a beaver family near her home, learned that officials wanted to get rid of the beavers, and explained her thought process as:

The first year, the mom [beaver] had four kids and they were adorable. It's not like everyone gets to see beaver every day. What really surprised me is that kits actually vocalize and make this little sound that's really like a child... [I remember thinking] 'Do the people that want the beavers dead know they make that sound, and if I let them die, will I ever hear that sound again?' I'll give it a weekend, I'll give it a week to do interviews and try to stop them. I'll give it a year. - Lauren

Many of the women described that instant of realizing that someone or something needed help, and another instant of deciding they would be the help. The life of an activist can be hard, dirty, and frequently unpaid, but someone has to do it, and each of these women all decided to be that person.

People of Color in Environmentalism

Four of the subjects were women of color, hailing from Colombian, Mexican, Indian, and Filipina heritage, respectively. Many of the women, not just those of color, agreed that their environmental communities are largely white-dominated. Their anecdotes are mirrored by studies that show that the leaders of traditional, mainstream environmental organizations tend to be mostly white men, sometimes white women, and rarely people of color. Women of color are best represented as leaders and supporters in the field of environmental justice (Taylor 1997). Why is it that white environmentalists and environmentalists of color gravitate to such different parts of the environmental community?

Barriers to environmental access

The most straightforward barrier to the traditional environmental movement for people of color is access. People of color, who disproportionately inhabit heavily urbanized and developed areas, may not be able to visit the same undeveloped natural areas or parks as white people can (Harrington 1991). One woman who leads restoration events in Oakland, California, both above Interstate 580 (I580), where wealthier, whiter communities live, and below I580, where lower-income communities with more people of color live, found that the creek restoration projects are completely different in the two locations due to development of the creek.

Below I-580, there's an utter lack of green space... [There is only one] place with open creek below I-580, and it's behind a locked gate. So for 10 years our volunteers unlock the gate and do restorations, and then lock the gate. - Kate

One woman of color describes that there is also a divide in what people consider environmental in the first place. She points out that people who think of the environment solely as pristine areas devoid of humans may not understand the perspective of someone who connects to the environment in a more urbanized place.

Most of the time, I am surrounded by white men and women. I don't know why that is, but I have a feeling that more often than not... people don't really see walking or running as connecting with the environmental world. It has to be an outdoor sport, something that gets you to appreciate the natural world, but those hobbies are expensive. There's a bit of a divide where not many people of color are being exposed to that passion. That's kind of how environmental education has become even a field, or even a career path, because people are starting to understand that youth need to have that passion ignited in them, so they can get into the field and study ecology and get into different sciences. - Ruby

The problem of access is not just the case that people of color might live further away from creeks, or national parks – it includes the issue that environmentalists who think of nature as solely those undeveloped, protected areas may not be very welcoming to environmentalists who are more familiar with nature in its developed form. A person of color raised in a heavily urbanized area may develop a love for their urban combination of humans and nature and then not be able to find like-minded peers in conventional environmental organizations. Increasing access to the environment requires not only increasing the amount of protected land, but also

encouraging people in urban places to connect with their own surroundings, and encouraging traditional environmentalists to broaden their definitions of nature.

Cultural differences in organization

White-dominated environmental organizations can be unwelcoming to environmentalists of color not only because of the differences in philosophies, but also simply because of cultural differences. A white person and a person of color may behave differently or expect others to behave differently around them in their organizations. Both of the Latina women with whom I spoke pointed out that their Latino communities don't interact with the environment in the same way as white communities do:

Most Latinos do not go hiking for pleasure, and you need leisure time to do it... Any time I went on a hike, most of the people that went were white and had expensive equipment... Those white women have had leisure time. - Mia

White people – it doesn't matter male or female – use parks as a couple, they bring their dog; while the Latinos use the park for a picnic with their grandma and their dog and 50 family members. It's just like that same structure you see in the volunteering, and also in how they perceive their role in society to build those networks. In the white community, you see more of the white individual who wants to do the right thing, and joins the creek group, and is there all the time, while if it's like a community where there are a lot more people, you'll see the entire Latino community coming with everybody and their dog, and it's more of a festival feel. - Monica

White environmentalists cannot assume that all environmentalists want to participate in their organizations in the same way. Diversity requires creating a space where people of many cultures feel comfortable – which, in turn, requires learning how cultures differ and how people from different backgrounds can come together in mutual understanding and support.

Differing motivations: clean environments, clean homes

Most respondents described their start in environmentalism through appreciation for the planet and its impact on their own wellbeing, but not all of them. One woman in particular

underlined that this connection is not the case for everyone. This woman, who came from an environmental justice background, pointed out that:

Some found their way into the environmental movement because of hiking and mountain climbing. And others found their way into the environmental movement because they had polluted water in their homes. – Eve

Environmental justice activists, the majority of whom are women of color, often chastise traditional environmental organizations for ignoring the impacts of environmental racism and environmental degradation on low-income communities and communities of color (Taylor 1997). In this case, where women come to the movement because their own families and communities are threatened, there can be less of an ecocentric perspective, and more of an anthropocentric view. These women fight for a clean environment not because they enjoy birdwatching and canoeing in clean parks, but because they see the impacts of environmental degradation in their own homes (Newman 2001). This can be one of the major ideological differences between white women and women of color: women of color are disproportionately affected by poor environmental conditions, and as a result, may come into environmentalism with a much more personal understanding of development, pollution, and waste than white women, who may appreciate the environment from a more privileged point of view (Harrington 1991). All four subjects who were women of color described that they became environmentalists because they loved the environment, not because of issues of environmental racism. However, they still had experiences with racism and discrimination that affected their experiences.

Even when women of color do not have personal experiences with pollution or other threats at home, they may view society through a lens of colonialism, cultural appropriation, and other racial issues that white women do not encounter (Prindeville and Bretting 1998). Traditional environmental organizations, which tend to be run and supported by white women of high socioeconomic status, may not align with the agendas of environmentalists of color, and those environmentalists of color may feel barred from entry.

It's very difficult to find women of color to join... We always try to hire someone of color. We try to find that gem who can be brought out and put in a better life because it is a very female white profession... But we had this girl from a Vietnamese family who was so lonely in the field. - Monica

For people of color, barriers exist both at the first step of becoming an environmentalist, and at the second step of becoming an environmental activist. People of color may be unable to access the environment around them, and when they are able to, they may feel unwelcome in traditional environmental organizations. Their ability to become activists is lessened by both societal and cultural differences between themselves, and the white women and men who they will likely encounter in large organizations.

Effects of Gender on Environmentalism and Activism

The barriers between white environmentalists and environmentalists of color prevent people of color both from becoming environmentalists and environmental activists. The barriers between men and women have their greatest impact not on the environmentalist stage, but at the moment when each person becomes an environmental activist.

The risks of being a woman activist

Environmental activism is low-paying, sometimes completely free, and often not favored highly by members of the public. As risky as activism is, it can be even riskier for women, who can be ignored at best, and villainized at worst (Verchick 1996, Bell and Braun 2010). Some of the women shared their own experiences at the hands of those who disagree with their activism:

People who made a fuss were denigrated. Even something like Silent Spring – Rachel Carson was denigrated as a woman. The chemical industry said that she was a weak-minded woman. They really went for very sexist directions to devalue her work... That was part of organizing for environmental issues. You had to prepare to be humiliated and marginalized. - Eve

We've often been villainized for [our work] ... Some people in the community get mad that we get rid of property rights. We get called jihadists. I get things ripped off my car. - Susie

These experiences are far from the first attacks upon women activists. Male officials, decision-makers, and leaders have frequently been recorded devaluing the work of women activists. Cora Tucker, an organizer against toxic-waste, shared her own story with Celene

Krauss regarding sexist officials, which shares similarities with the experiences the participants shared:

When they first called me a hysterical housewife I used to get very upset and go home and cry... I've learned that's a tactic men use to keep us in our place. So when they started the stuff on toxic waste ... I went back and a guy says, 'We have a whole room full of hysterical housewives today, so men we need to get prepared.' I said, 'You're exactly right. We're hysterical and when it comes to matters of life and death, especially mine, I get hysterical.' And I said, 'If men don't get hysterical, there's something wrong with them.' From then on, they stopped calling us hysterical housewives. (Krauss 2002)

So women environmental activists have frequently found themselves facing male officials – but why is it that women tend to be on the side of community organizing, and men tend to be on the technical and leadership sides?

Horizontal stratification

In most fields, including environmentalism, men dominate the more technical fields such as engineering and construction, while women dominate the more social fields such as education and grassroots activism (Verchick 1996). In organizations themselves, men may end up in leadership, while women play supporting roles, such as in Friends of Sausal Creek, which has five staff, all of whom are women, and 14 people on their Board of Directors, only four of whom are women (“Friends of Sausal Creek” n.d.). Multiple women explained the power imbalance they experienced in the field of environmentalism:

We're an all-female staff now, but before that, we had a lot of issues with male staff members creating a hierarchy and treating us as subordinates, so that was a reoccurring situation. I think that because in the science field – in general, women in the science field is still something that's new... and it has moments where there can be some competition.
- Ruby

In terms of firms that I've worked with around the bay, multiple firms, I have not... I have yet – and I'm not saying they don't exist – I have yet to meet one woman environmental engineer for hydrology. And I don't know what that means. It's not like the men are bad, they're great, but it is kind of interesting that I notice that. And I do a lot of review for construction projects... and almost always it's a room full of men. So construction engineering is still very male-dominated even though there's a lot of women in academic

programs. So their time is probably coming, but it's not quite there yet. They have to work their way through the ranks. Oh—I know one woman in engineering that works on creek restoration. I know one. At least one. And it's not like they're not working in the firms, they are, but they're more in the landscape architecture, [city planning, administrative work]. - Mary

This separation of women and men into different parts of the field manifests beyond environmentalism. This “horizontal stratification”, or the congregation of men and women into different parts of a field, has been noted in numerous occupations (Charles and Bradley 2002). Feminist scholars have questioned this phenomenon numerous ways, but make sure to caution against asking why women are not interested in doing what men do, because that question can erase the experiences and desires of the women in its attempt to make women more like men. Instead, they ask “Why do women choose particular occupations?” (Eccles 1994). Indeed, many theorists have asked this very question in the field of environmentalism, and have identified the influences of gender roles, the spiritual and biological connections of ecofeminism, and the woman’s identity with motherhood or her community, as described above. Coincidentally or not, the women I spoke with expressed all three of those types of connections.

Gender roles in action. The most commonly expressed connection between womanhood and the environment was that of embracing gender roles. Women felt that they had been raised to be more altruistic than their male counterparts, which spurred them into activism for their environment and community, and spurred men into more profitable fields. They also felt that there was an element of sexism in how they were raised, but that through that sexism, they had been taught selflessness, which they cherished.

I just feel that [nonprofit work is] a little bit of an altruistic desire. Maybe [women are] willing to do things for less, because we see the value of building society, or networks, or solidarity at that level. It tends to come more naturally to women in the roles that we play in society today... There is also the perception that there is more flexibility in the scheduling [in nonprofit work] that can help people balance kids and work, because women in society today have to play both roles, and kind of have to be the one that balances those needs in a family. Not in every case, but I do feel that there is a tendency to feel that way. So maybe that, a little bit of that – If one has to be the breadwinner, then he has the serious job, and the other one is free to do more of what comes to them in their heart. - Monica

I don't think much of what we've said has to do with my being a woman, but of course it has a lot to do with my being a woman.... I was a child of the '50s in the south. Colored drinking fountains and all that... I'm not out to defend it. But women volunteered. That's what they did. You didn't work unless you had to. Something wrong with your husband if you had to work. And that was pretty much your only way, unless you were really extraordinary, of exercising power. So I grew up never expecting to have a career. Most of us did... I was in love with newspapers because they gave me a sense that I had an important role in democracy... It gave me a role in society. I was being paid, I earned enough money, but it was way more than career and advancement. So I can't imagine any other way of being. And I probably would not be that way had I not grown up at a time when that was all that women could do. - Harriett

I think women are taught from a young age to think about others, and others' children, other peoples' children, not just their own, and to be more in a caretaker role. So I think sometimes it's easier, just from that cultural teaching, for women to think more holistically about the world. And so, it's a gift, really. Men maybe have to learn that. Men are really taught more by society to think about themselves and be successful and provide for themselves and provide for their family, and not so much thinking about other peoples' families. - Mary

Whether the women knew it or not, they were echoing two very influential theories. The first is that altruism and empathy are two of the defining characteristics of environmentalists, and that women tend to exhibit more environmental empathy than men (Zelezny et al. 2000, Dietz et al. 2002, Arnocky and Stroink 2010). The second is that men feel they must focus on profits and their own achievements, while women are encouraged to focus on family and community (Mohai 1992, Dietz et al. 2002, Hazari et al. 2010). This male focus on profit and personal achievement was explicitly linked to the pursuit of physics by one set of researchers (Hazari et al. 2010), and could conceivably be used to explain why men tend to gravitate towards more scientific and more powerful positions, such as environmental engineering or executive director positions, while women gravitate more towards community organizing. However, these women did not see these gender roles as a source of negativity. They believed that these roles allowed them a freedom that men did not have. They believed that because men felt they should provide for their families, they didn't feel comfortable pursuing low-paying jobs that might fulfill their emotional or creative needs, and instead strove for high-paying jobs that satisfied their economic needs. Women, on the other hand, were not expected to hold high-paying jobs, so they were free to pursue their dreams, which might be those low-paying, altruistic jobs that men avoided. This phenomenon of women feeling free to participate in activism, and men feeling unable to do the

same, has also been noted in cases like Love Canal and coal mining communities in Central Appalachia (Newman 2001, Bell and Braun 2010). For example, in those coal mining communities, men felt that they couldn't participate in environmental activism because of their employers and colleague's scrutiny, while their wives who didn't work in the coal mines were free to protest (Bell and Braun 2010). The majority of the women I spoke to delved into the relationship between societal expectations and activism – although not all did so.

Ecofeminism. Two of the women with whom I spoke saw femininity as crucial when healing the environment. This idea is similar to cultural or radical ecofeminism. In this brand of ecofeminism, the relationship between women and the environment is revered, notably through Goddess worship, rituals based on the lunar and menstrual cycles, and a focus on the power of both women and nature. Radical ecofeminism has been synthesized as a philosophy that “embraces intuition, an ethic of caring, and weblike human/nature relationships” (Merchant 1990). For radical ecofeminists, the difference between the feminine and the masculine is that focus on intuition and caring, and that difference exists for this woman, as well:

I think the entire world is one big living organism and you can't look at just one thing. That's a very masculine energy. The masculine approach to things is very logical and looking at just one part. The feminine approach to things is looking at the whole thing... Nature is such a reminder – living in cities and looking at our lives, we're just consumed with living our lives and focusing on ourselves. Being in nature reminds you you are part of a whole, and reminds me of that feminine energy. You need to pay attention to the neighboring plants to make sure this one is getting enough... You need to pay attention to the third thing to make sure the first thing is working. - Lily

Ecofeminism is a powerful philosophy that has driven many women to activism, including protests against nuclear power, war, and toxic waste (Merchant 1990). One might expect it to be a prominent identity among groups of women environmental activists, but in this particular cohort of women, only two of the women spoke directly of the nurturing characteristics of women and femininity.

Motherhood on the sideline. Only two women spoke about their thoughts on motherhood, which is a vast departure from the general assumption that women activists become activists for their families and communities. The narrative of all female activists being mothers is a popular

one, but has been challenged before (Perkins 2012), and I challenge it as well. These women who referenced their motherhood and children did describe them as important factors for their activism, but spoke in more length about the idea of gender roles, much like the other women.

I think for me as a woman, I think about other peoples' children, and making sure that the world is better for everyone, because if the world is better for everyone, then it's gonna be better for my daughter too. And it's not just about my daughter's happiness and my daughter. For her to be happy, her peer group needs to be happy. For her peer group to be happy, it's her generation, which includes everyone. - Mary

When the children were born... I would go off... I don't know how I did this, but one in the front and one in the back, and they had nature as part of their life from the beginning. And we lived here, so they had the creek. I thought that was just really important. I don't have to argue about why. - Harriett

While only two women explicitly referenced their children as a cause for their activism, the idea of “motherhood” could be expanded to include more than simply having a child. Many women who have become activists in the name of their families have expanded the definition of “motherhood” to include activism (Pardo 1990, Bell and Braun 2010). This broadening of motherhood has in some cases been pushed to the point where any female activist qualifies as a mother, such as when Erlinda Robles said (Pardo 1990):

When you are fighting for a better life for children and 'doing' for them, isn't that what mothers do? So we're all mothers. You don't have to have children to be a 'mother'.

In this activist motherhood perspective, and in some ecofeminist perspectives, all women environmental activists could be seen as mothers for the earth, and mothers for their communities.

Previous theorists have identified numerous connections between women and the environment, and these women identified with three of them: gender roles, ecofeminism, and activist motherhood. These connections influence how the women visualize themselves within environmentalism, and what their goals are for their activism. The women who identified with the idea of gender roles encouraged the expansion of empathy to include the environment, and celebrated the selfless choice to do what they love, even if it is less profitable or even dangerous.

The women with ecofeminist ideals wanted to pursue that holistic, caring femininity in all parts of life, not just environmentalism. The women who identified with their motherhood wanted to improve life for their children, and the children of others. Even within those categories, there were as many ideas about womanhood and environmentalism as there were women. The point is not to identify one over-arching and all-encompassing idea of gender and nature. It is more important to understand that every woman brings her own understanding to the field. One cannot assume that every woman environmental activist agrees on the relationship between gender and nature. The only thing one can assume is that every woman brings a unique perspective to the topic, and in order to fully understand each other and work together, those perspectives must be understood and respected.

Future Directions

My research is limited by its small scope, as I was only able to interview ten women out of the hundreds of women working on watershed health in the Bay Area. My research would benefit from more interviews with more women, and women in other parts of the watershed field, to ensure that the themes and ideas discovered apply to a larger population. Further research could delve into the relationships between men and women in environmental communities, and how their experiences as activists differ or affect each other. Another question could tackle the difference between the grassroots, community-based organizations discussed in this thesis and the large, mainstream organizations alluded to earlier. These comparisons between people throughout the same environmental activist community could increase understanding on how people with varying interests or backgrounds find themselves on different tracks of life. That greater understanding could allow for more collaboration between unique groups of people.

Broader Implications

The main lesson that can be learned is that although the women's ideas fit into broad categories, they differ in both crucial ways and smaller, nuanced ways. Women in environmental activism are intelligent, passionate, and diverse individuals. Research like this may offer a way to understand the large-scale topics of discussion and issues in a field, and offer possible

solutions, but the best way to understand any community is to participate in it. In a diverse community like environmental activism, the two most important steps to being a better ally are to listen to the perspectives of others, and allow those perspectives to educate future pursuits.

Organizations already exist to further the voices of women and people of color in the environmental community. Environmentalists of color have long pointed out that the field is white-dominated and can be inhospitable to marginalized communities. Many organizations such as Communities for a Better Environment and the Students of Color Environmental Collective call attention to the environmental issues that impact communities of color. On the other hand, women environmental activists have gathered for decades in organizations such as the Women's Environmental Network and the Women's Earth Alliance to support each other. The resources for people to access, learn from, and act on for a better environmental community already exist.

There are numerous ways for environmentalists to act to ensure that their community becomes more open to people from all ways of life. Many of the subjects described that the first step to opening up opportunities for people from marginalized communities is education.

[I consider what I do] environmental education and empowerment. The point is to inspire [students] and show them that they have the power to make change... And I started to see that I'm getting students started at a younger age than even I started. - Mia

If you go into these places and don't feel welcome, you're not going to have that a-ha moment. [During one creek walk for kids], this guide would help translate in Spanish. I told her that I felt really dumb because I felt like [she] could lead this. Science isn't that hard. You could tell that she was a really great leader, and those little bits of information were all that she was missing. I told her I do this [naturalist] training class and she was so elated. She ended up getting a job in the state. - Susie

I feel most fulfilled when I see that green light-bulb spark in a student. So if a student is outside doing water quality testing, and you notice that suddenly they're more interested, they're asking questions, they want to do it again, that's what fuels me. Maybe I just created the next huge environmentalist who's going to make the next profound impact on the planet. - Ruby

Environmental issues affect all communities, so people from all communities should feel welcome and able to participate in their solutions. Education is the first step – not only educating more people about environmental issues, but also educating current members of the community on how to shape organizations that are more accessible to marginalized communities.

Environmentalists in white-dominated organizations can work to employ and educate more people of color, and make sure that their organizations support people of color both culturally and socially. There should be more organizations by people of color, for people of color, so that they always have a community that understands their perspectives and advocates for their issues. And finally, organizations that are white-dominated and led by people of color can educate themselves on how to meet and work together so that their energies can be combined in the name of environmental and social issues. Understanding each other is the first step to collaboration, and collaboration is the first step to overcoming the vast environmental problems that our society faces today.

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