

on campus

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Natural Thinking: Women Working for the Future

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Feminists have long stated that the “personal is political.” Environmentalists consistently quip that we should “think globally and act locally.” While neither side has officially adopted the other’s motto, similarities in approaches are increasingly evident.

The evolving perspectives of both the women’s and environmental movements underscore the importance of working on many levels to address critical concerns. By mobilizing individuals and communities on the basis of relevant, immediate problems, broader solutions can emerge.

On Campus with Women is very much about making connections: between higher education trends and the status of women in the academy; between international changes and choice of disciplines; and between economic and social policies and the day-to-day lives of women (to name just a few previous themes). This issue of *OCWW* focuses on linkages between the most global of concerns—the natural environment—and the highly personal and political question of women’s status and opportunities.

The three main articles each focus on a different angle of the growing convergence of women and the environment. The first considers evolving schools of thought in this area, in particular ecofeminism and the integration of women’s and environmental studies in courses and curricula. The second moves to global perspectives, describing how gender has redefined environmental issues and how scholars and advocates are strengthening women’s voices in sustainable policies and practices. The third underscores how environmental work on campuses is increasingly manifested in student activism, in particular on the part of women.

All of these approaches are needed at a time when awareness of critical environmental problems—including climate change, resource scarcity, and loss of biodiversity—is rapidly entering both the political and academic spheres, as well as public consciousness. Addressing these trends and averting the worst impacts of ecological



crises require expanding both the knowledge and commitment of increasing numbers of policymakers, leaders, activists, and scientists.

Engaging women in this transformative work is essential. The science/technology piece in this issue of *OCWW* therefore examines trends in women’s participation in environmental studies and science. Carolyn Merchant, a leading expert on women and the environment, is the focus of our feature interview. Her ideas

lend historical perspective to women’s relation to the natural environment and point to future possible directions.

In a world in which many people do not understand the connections between their own lives, health, and actions and the natural systems that surround and sustain them, students often need guidance to find a sense of place and belonging on the planet. While researching and compiling the various pieces for this issue of *OCWW*, we found clear evidence that many individuals and groups involved in higher education seek to provide such guidance, and to foster a stronger environmental ethic as we move through the 21st century.

David Orr, chair and professor of environmental studies at Oberlin College and author of *Earth in Mind* and *Ecological Literacy*, emphasizes the important roles and responsibilities of higher education institutions in determining environmental outcomes. In a recent article responding to Oberlin’s long-range policies and plans, he called for “lateral rigor to combine knowledge from different fields” and stated that “the worth of education must now be measured against the standards of decency and human survival—the issues now looming so large before us.”

With this in mind, higher education institutions—where values are learned and opinions formed—can undoubtedly influence the course of our common environmental future. And as is the case with all significant challenges, women are ready and willing to lead the way.

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feature interview

Carolyn Merchant: Working Together for Nature



Currently a professor of environmental history, philosophy, and ethics at the University of California at Berkeley, Dr. Carolyn Merchant is the author of several books, including *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution*; *Ecological Revolutions: Nature, Gender, and Science in New England*; *Radical*

Ecology: The Search for a Livable World; *Earthcare: Women and the Environment*; and *the Columbia Guide to American Environmental History*. Dr. Merchant recently shared her thoughts about women and the environment with *On Campus with Women*; the following conversation includes extensive excerpts from an interview that appeared in *The California Monthly*, June 2002 (reprinted with permission).

When did you first become interested in environmental issues?

Like a lot of people, this came for me in reading Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, in 1962. This was a watershed moment of consciousness: the idea that there is a problem we could now identify as an environmental crisis. The next year, Betty Freidan's book, *The Feminine Mystique*, came out. And that was my entrée into thinking about feminism, into questioning the role of women in society. The two books in one sense were not connected until the 1970s, when women started asking questions about women's relation to nature.

How has that link been viewed historically? Does it still exist today?

This identification of women with nature has been very close in most of the history of western culture, and in other cultures, with the idea of nature, or *Natura*, as a feminine noun in many Latin and Romance languages. For example, we refer to Mother Nature or the Virgin Earth.

By the Renaissance, nature is conceptualized as female. The earth is a mother. The earth has physiological systems, circulation systems such as the tides and the movement of clouds forming and then pouring rain back on the earth, and so on. A lot of this goes back to Greek and Roman ideas as well. The cosmos is alive. The earth is a living organism. It has a body, soul, and spirit. Metal and stones are alive; it's a very animate earth. And nature is God's agent—God acts through nature as *Natura*, as female, bringing about punishments and rewards in the mundane world. Or withholding it, in the form of famine or drought.

The scientific revolution changed all that. It conceptualized matter as dead. Atoms are hard, glassy particles; they're inert, with no spirit or vital forces within them. They're simply moved about by external forces. God puts the motion or momentum—mass times velocity—into the world at the beginning, and it's simply exchanged among particles. That was Descartes' conception.

With that the ethic changes. If nature is dead and humans are external, humans are engineers and the image appears of God as a mathematician and engineer. Then people can manipulate and manage nature, without having to propitiate nature, and without nature retaliating. My argument is that

the mechanistic worldview, which has become the ideology of capitalism, is a framework that gives permission to exploit and dominate nature. The results are seen in the ecological crisis.

In recent decades, more people in industrialized countries have begun to develop an "eco-consciousness." Why do you think women are often at the forefront of environmental movements and initiatives?

In industrialized countries, women have been socialized into taking care of homes and families. They also reproduce life from their bodies. In some locales, women have had miscarriages and cancers, or have children with birth defects or leukemia in higher rates than in the general population, or their husbands may have succumbed to cancer. Increasing concern and anger over possible links between cancer, birth defects, and toxics in the environment and the home have led women to form coalitions to fight air and water pollution and industrial toxins. Such activism is a form of earth-care—an effort to clean up the environment as a home-writ-large for the sake of all forms of life, both human and non-human.

What particular roles can women play in mitigating environmental problems?

Women can become activists and organize political opposition to the proposed siting of an industrial plant or an incinerator. They can work together to mitigate forest and wilderness depletion, or to prevent the loss of a wild river or an estuary. They can raise funds for environmental causes or work on disseminating information on birth control. They can help to educate other women both about the environment itself and in obtaining education that will improve their own livelihoods and those of their families. They can become ecologists, chemists, engineers, and foresters dedicated to saving the environment and developing alternative technologies. Or, they can become philosophers and promote new forms of ethical engagement with nature and new ideas about the human place in nature.

I also believe that we need what I call a "partnership ethic." This recognizes that men and women can be partners and that humanity can be partners with the earth. It doesn't entail a gendering of the earth as female, and it doesn't blame men for causing all the damage. A partnership ethic recognizes that there's a history that is pertinent to dominant western culture, a history in which men have been the leaders in most political, economic, and social institutions, and that in fact this constitutes what we call patriarchy. What it doesn't do is to blame individual men living today for all the sins of the past and for all the institutions that have evolved historically.

A partnership ethic means that women and men can work together as equal partners; it means that nature is still active and a subject, but in equal interaction with humanity. It tries to bring the pendulum back to a dynamic that's rooted in the relationship between people and the environment, between men and women, between minorities and whites. We're in a global ecological crisis now, which has been apparent for at least the last quarter-century. My hope is that by the middle of the 21st century, we will have a different set of assumptions about production, reproduction, ecology, and consciousness that will constitute a global ecological revolution.

Interview with Carolyn Merchant

Continued from page 8

Many colleges and universities have expanded their academic and research programs in environmental issues. How can academia further understanding of and improvements in environmental policies and practices?

Most colleges and universities now have environmental studies programs. Some go back to the conservation movement of the early 20th century, others to the early years of the 1970s, while still others are just coming online today. Such programs are necessarily interdisciplinary and many focus on integrating the sciences with the social sciences and the humanities.

Research funds for the environmental sciences and the ecological humanities are of vital importance in forming new technologies, new politics, and new philosophies. All directions are important and their integration is vital. Universities are the places where breakthroughs can take place, but those involved in the academy must also interact with communities here and abroad to disseminate knowledge and to learn new ideas from the field and local peoples. In this endeavor, women can play leadership roles at all levels, in administration, research, teaching, and service.

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Join CampusWomenLead, the joint listserv of AAC&U's Program on the Status and Education of Women and the National Initiative for Women in Higher Education. (Visit www.aacu-edu.org/psew/index.cfm for more information.) This listserv is designed for women administrators, faculty, staff, and students to share information, solve problems, offer resources, and learn about professional development opportunities for women in higher education. Make

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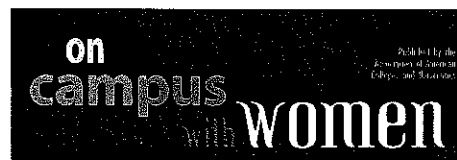
About AAC&U

AAC&U is the leading national association devoted to advancing and strengthening liberal learning for all students, regardless of academic specialization or intended career. Since its founding in 1915, AAC&U's membership has grown to more than 775 accredited public and private colleges and universities of every type and size.

AAC&U functions as a catalyst and facilitator, forging links among presidents, administrators, and faculty members who are engaged in institutional and curricular planning. Its mission is to reinforce the collective commitment to liberal education at both the national and local levels and to help individual institutions keep the quality of student learning at the core of their work as they evolve to meet new economic and social challenges.

on campus with women

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Rusty Barceló to speak at AAC&U's 2003 Annual Meeting

Rusty Barceló, Vice President for Minority Affairs and Diversity at the University of Washington, will speak on "The Courage to Lead," at the Women's Networking Breakfast on Thursday, January 23, 7:00 a.m. Having made the long climb from being the only Chicana student during college to her current position, Rusty Barceló has altered the landscape of higher education in the process. She was the moving force behind the creation of the National Initiative for Women in Higher Education and has reconceived the architecture for how higher education addresses racial and other diversity issues.

For more information about AAC&U's Annual Meeting, please see www.aacu.org/meetings/annual.cfm

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