Environment
AN INTERDISCIPLINARY ANTHOLOGY

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   Kate Soper, from *What Is Nature? Culture, Politics, and the Non-Human
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18. Poetry

   Lucretius, “Alma Venus” from *De rerum natura* (first century B.C.E.),
   translated by James Engell, 624
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.


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 “eco-feminism” 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. 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. 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). 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 reveal the domination of nature by mercantile economy’s use of both women ecofeminism has delved more deeply and socialist ecofeminism have the potential for a liberating social
Ecofeminism and the Earth

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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>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nature</th>
<th>Human nature</th>
<th>Feminist critique of environmentalism</th>
<th>Image of a feminist environmentalism</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Liberal feminism</td>
<td>Atoms</td>
<td>Rational agents</td>
<td>&quot;Man and his environment&quot; leaves out women</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mind/body dualism</td>
<td>Individualism</td>
<td>Maximization of self-interest</td>
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<td>Domination of nature</td>
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<td>Marxist feminism</td>
<td>Transformation of Nature by science and technology for human use</td>
<td>Creation of human nature through mode of production, praxis</td>
<td>Critique of capitalist control of resources and accumulation of goods and profits</td>
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<td>Domination of nature as a means to human freedom</td>
<td>Historically specific—not fixed</td>
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<td>Nature is material basis of life: food, clothing, shelter, energy</td>
<td>Species nature of humans</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cultural feminism</td>
<td>Nature is spiritual and personal</td>
<td>Biology is basic</td>
<td>Unaware of interconnectedness of male domination of nature and women</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Conventional science and technology problematic because of their emphasis on domination</td>
<td>Humans are sexually reproducing bodies</td>
<td>Male environmentalism retains hierarchy</td>
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<td>Sexed by biology/gendered by society</td>
<td>Insufficient attention to environmental threats to woman's reproduction (chemicals, nuclear war)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Socialist feminism</td>
<td>Nature is material basis of life: food, clothing, shelter, energy</td>
<td>Human nature created through biology and praxis (sex, race, class, age)</td>
<td>Leaves out nature as active and responsive</td>
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<td>Nature is socially and historically specific</td>
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<td>Historically specific and socially constructed</td>
<td>Leaves out women's role in reproduction and reproduction as a category</td>
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<td>Transformations of nature by production and reproduction</td>
<td>Systems approach is mechanistic and not dialectical</td>
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<td>Both nature and human production are active</td>
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<td>Centrality of biological and social reproduction</td>
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<td>Dialectic between production and reproduction</td>
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<td>Multileveled structural analysis</td>
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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 imperative 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.

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 to evolve, and respond to human active forests and damming rivers that man vulnerable to "natural disasters"; canals, earthquakes, hurricanes, and chaotic, natural surprises; and ever technologies such as pesticides, general weapons into ecosystems. Cons possibility of a personal or intimate relationship with nature and for feelings of com who are sexually, racially, or culturally nurturing mother or a goddess and are only one of many equal parts c equal to a bacterium or a mosquito.

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


