

Chapter 6

Gendered Natures: Feminism, Politics, and Social Nature

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In recent years connections between women and nature have received a great deal of attention, both in popular culture and academic scholarship. Indeed, for some readers this connection may seem commonsense. After all, Western culture is replete with metaphors that link women and nature, or that figure human transformations of nature in terms of sexual violence – ‘mother’ earth, ‘virgin’ forests, ‘raping’ wild nature. There are also countless examples where women have stood in the forefront of political struggles over the environment – the Greenham Common peace camp in England, working-class women combating toxic pollution at Love Canal in New York state, ecofeminists leading protests against logging in Clayoquot Sound on Canada’s west coast, or the much discussed Chipko (‘tree-hugging’) movement in Uttar Pradesh, northern India. How these connections are understood, however, has varied widely, and has often been a matter of intense debate. In this chapter we examine competing approaches to understanding the relationship between gender and nature developed by scholars and activists who have sought to articulate a specifically feminist politics.

Before proceeding, it is important to note that although nature has long been *gendered* in Western culture (and others too), and although attention has recently been directed toward understanding the connection between gender and nature, this does not mean that issues surrounding gender and nature have always been taken seriously by academics and environmental activists. Indeed the opposite has often been the case. One needs to go no further than the reception of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962), a book often touted as the beginning of the contemporary environmental movement in the United States, to find an example. Carson’s exegesis of the harmful effects of pesticides, particularly DDT, called attention to the toxic landscapes produced by industrial capitalism and the military. Concurrent with the emergence of ecosystem ecology and its view of nature as an interconnected system, her cautionary tale

of a small rural village poisoned by unseen and unnamed toxins taught Americans to see their environments in a new light, and to understand human practices in terms of far-reaching environmental effects, both through time and across space. This clearly threatened a postwar order in which massive transformations of nature by industry, capital, and the state had been justified through ideologies of progress, and in which science and technology had become privileged sites. Not surprisingly, Carson came under sustained attack, and often it was her standing as a ‘woman’ that was the target of critics. Dismissed as ‘biased,’ ‘incompetent,’ ‘ignorant,’ ‘hysterical,’ a ‘communist sympathizer,’ and a ‘lesbian,’ she shouldered a barrage of criticism from other scientists, captains of industry and the mainstream press, even as her book went on to become a best-seller (Gottlieb, 1993). Women, after all, were ‘emotional’ rather than ‘rational’ – only (white) men could qualify as properly objective.

Equally as important as these attempts to dismiss Carson’s work, however, was the *gendering* of the mainstream environmental movement that occurred in the following decades. Carson’s book raised a number of key issues: the interconnections of humans and nature; public participation in science; public health, toxicity, and children’s safety. Perhaps above all else, she called for Americans to understand nature as ‘home,’ rather than something external, emphasizing people’s *lived relationship* to their environments (Norwood, 1993). For a variety of reasons, including divisions of labor within the US economy, these were issues that were important to women. Paradoxically, mainstream environmentalism in the decades after Carson’s pathbreaking book moved in quite different directions. Its rapid professionalization in the 1970s led to a predominantly white, affluent, male leadership. In turn, this leadership emphasized issues like wilderness preservation, wildlife conservation, and pollution control rather than issues surrounding health and home (Seager, 1993). This did not put an end to women’s environmental activism – women continued to be prominent in the antitoxics movement (Pardo, 1990; Krauss, 1993; Newman, 1994), the antinuclear movement (Unity Statement of the Women’s Pentagon Action, 1980/3; Caldecott and Leland, 1983; Sturgeon 1997), and in issues around workplace, home, and environment (as well as more mainstream issues like wilderness preservation) – but it meant that mainstream environmental groups often failed to understand the complex ways in which gender, nature, and power were intertwined in the construction of social natures, not only in the United States, but elsewhere too.

Although Rachel Carson did not consider herself a feminist, it is not surprising that many claim her as an ‘ecofeminist foremother’ (Sturgeon, 1997: 200n.4), echoing the introduction to a prominent ecofeminist anthology: “many would argue that it was not coincidental that a woman was the first to respond both emotionally and scientifically to the wanton human domination of the natural world” (Diamond and Orenstein, 1990: ix). This recalling of Carson, as well as a now well-established tradition of environmental activism

by women, raises a number of important questions. How are we to understand the relationship between gender and nature? Is gender an essential part of environmental issues? Are women somehow closer to the natural world? Is this connection to be understood in terms of biology? As a product of ideology? Or a result of everyday material practices? Is 'woman' a universal category, or do we need to attend to the ways in which gender, race, class, and nature are constructed in and through each other?

As we will see, these questions have been answered in very different ways. For analytical purposes, we will group these under four labels: ecofeminism, feminist environmentalism, feminist political ecology, and poststructural feminisms. These are labels of convenience. In reality feminist work on nature is streamed in more complex and cross-braiding ways. Moreover, the temptation is always present to understand these positions through a *progressivist* narrative that sees each as a stage that leads to and is superseded by the next. This is particularly true in intellectual debates and in the academy, in which there are often institutional incentives to dislodge established ideas and replace them with new ones. It is therefore perhaps best to see these approaches as a somewhat unstable and shifting constellation of ideas that exceed whatever typology is used to understand them. Indeed, many feminist scholars and activists have questioned the demand for 'purity' in theory or the demand for theoretical fidelity, making room for political and theoretical positions that allow for, and are open to, flexibility, fluidity, and coalition-building (see Haraway, 1991; 1997). This is captured well in what Chéla Sandoval (1991) calls 'differential consciousness' – a way of weaving between and among oppositional ideologies, not as an end in itself, but as a means for changing relations of power. By attending to competing viewpoints, we wish to develop the sort of 'differential consciousness' advocated by Sandoval, which moves between positions in nonreductive, but also non-innocent, ways in order to achieve the sort of political consciousness needed for specific, historically and geographically situated, contests over nature, gender, and power. Why this matters will become clear as we proceed.

Ecofeminism: Women, Nature, and an Ethics of Care

Ecofeminism provides a convenient point of departure for this journey into questions of gender and nature, in part because it has gained a certain currency in popular culture through its use in art, poetry, and nature writing, its presence in mainstream feminist publications (like *Ms.*), and its association – rightly or wrongly – with alternative cultural and spiritual movements like Wicca. For our purposes, ecofeminism refers to both a movement and a set of ideas positioned at the intersection between feminism and radical environmentalism. As a movement ecofeminism emerged in part as a response to the ways in which

women and nature were marginalized in modern, patriarchal societies, as well as in reaction to the patriarchal values embedded in mainstream environmental organizations like the Sierra Club and more radical groups such as the US Green Party and Earth First! As a set of ideas ecofeminism is most closely associated with the notion that the subjugation of women and the domination of nature are *connected*, and that the oppression of one cannot be eliminated without also eliminating the oppression of the other (Warren, 1993). Most ecofeminists operate within this definition. How they theorize the connection between nature and gender, however, can differ dramatically, and has been the source of considerable conflict and misunderstanding.

Feminist scholars and environmental activists commonly group ecofeminism into two opposing 'camps.' *Cultural ecofeminism* encompasses those who argue that women and nature are mutually associated, and that in patriarchal society both are devalued. Within this view, the emancipation of women and nature must come through women celebrating their connections with nature, thereby inverting patriarchy's hierarchical structure of power. Carolyn Merchant (1992) claims that this branch of ecofeminism is based on the assumption that women have a *biological* connection to nature (often termed an 'essentialist' position). Accordingly, women are seen as inherently *closer* to nature than men, on account of their 'natural' role as nurturers, or due to their bodily cycles, such as menstruation. Merchant further suggests that this belief in women's connection to nature has led cultural ecofeminists to look to earth-based spiritualities, premodern rituals, and the idea of a living, nurturing earth taken from Renaissance organicism, in order to locate resources for their efforts to revalue women's experience and to reestablish women's connection with nature. The appeal of these sites stems from their location in a time and place 'outside' of, or predating, patriarchy (and religious and cultural traditions – like Christianity – that are thought to reinforce patriarchal relations). Many populist ecofeminist movements in the US draw upon cultural ecofeminist positions (see Diamond and Orenstein, 1990; Plant, 1989; Caldecott and Leland, 1983).

Socialist ecofeminism, in contrast, encompasses ecofeminisms that are at least in part defined *against* cultural ecofeminism. Drawing again on Merchant's typology, socialist ecofeminism rejects the notion of women's *biological* connection with nature, and instead locates women's and nature's oppression as an effect of *capitalist patriarchy*. Within this view, patriarchal relations of production and reproduction subordinate women, while capitalist relations of production exploit nature for human 'need.' Capitalist market economies use both women and nature as resources to be exploited; therefore, the emancipation of nature and women can come about only with a restructuring of society to a economy not based on profit, but rather on sustainable development.

Typologies like these have an initial appeal, since they sharpen our sense of some of the analytical and political stakes involved. But they can also be misleading. Noel Sturgeon (1997) suggests that they lead to the dividing and

ranking of different feminisms, whereby certain feminists find themselves the 'losers' in the competition for the 'best' feminism. They can also give the impression that the distinctions between opposing 'camps' are clear, when in reality the boundaries between them are often blurred. Still, it is not difficult to see why some feminists have sought to draw these sharp divisions – many are uneasy with claims that there are important connections between women and nature, especially if the basis for these connections is posited as *biological*. The worry most often expressed is that this may inadvertently give support to the same biological determinist arguments that have historically been used within patriarchal societies to *justify* women's oppression (i.e. that women are, *by nature*, inferior). For critics of cultural ecofeminism, then, biology is decidedly *not* destiny, and to suggest otherwise is to posit antifeminist ideas (see Biehl, 1991; King, 1993).

In reality, few ecofeminists hold such a strong biological or 'essentialist' position. It is important to stress this, because at times this assumed link between ecofeminism and biological determinism has been used as a justification for disregarding the usefulness of ecofeminism for radical environmentalism, feminist theorizing, or political activism. As a challenge to this tendency to essentialize ecofeminism, Sturgeon (1997: 28–9) has suggested an alternative characterization of woman–nature connections in ecofeminist work, based on five key conceptualizations:

- a) Because patriarchy connects women and nature, a feminist analysis is needed to understand environmental degradation;
- b) Because women are associated with nature, and Western culture is steeped in a belief system that assumes culture's superiority over nature, women's oppression cannot be fully understood without an environmentalist analysis;
- c) Because of pervasive gendered divisions of labor, women are more likely to understand and more severely experience the impact of environmental degradation, therefore the woman–nature connection is best understood through a historical-materialist analysis of women's work;
- d) Because of their reproductive characteristics, women are closer to nature than men and therefore they are more in tune with nature's needs; and
- e) Because earth-based spiritualities often honor women, some feminists involved in creating feminist spiritualities turn to these traditions for resources.

Although there is a core difference between those conceptualizations that identify the connection between women and nature as oppressive (a, b, and c) and those who are empowered through their connection with nature (d and e), multiple and contradictory conceptualizations are often incorporated into a single work.

Ecofeminism has also had an important impact on, and drawn from, feminist philosophy. Feminist philosophers seek to dismantle the 'phallocentrism' of Western philosophical traditions (i.e. forms of logic that are masculinist or that provide ideological support for male privilege), in order to make room for alternate forms of reason not wedded to patriarchal norms. This has included challenges to conceptual frameworks that feminize nature and naturalize women. According to Karen Warren (1993), traditional philosophy constructs and connects women and nature through forms of *dualistic* and *hierarchical* thought whereby women are opposed to men, and nature to culture. In turn, these pairs are arranged hierarchically, where one term (i.e. men, culture) is elevated over the other (i.e. women, nature). These dualisms are then interlinked, such that men come to be associated with culture and women with nature, or, as we saw in the example of Rachel Carson, men with reason and women with emotion.

Gendered dualisms in Western thought

Culture / Nature
 Masculine / Feminine
 Human / non-Human
 Reason / Emotion
 Mind / Body
 Autonomous / Dependent
 Order / Chaos
 Objective / Subjective
 Production / Reproduction
 Rationality / Intuition
 Active / Passive
 Competition / Cooperation
 Subject / Object

Like Warren, Val Plumwood (1993) critiques the dualistic structure of ethics. As she notes, the definition of 'human' within modern philosophy rests upon Descartes's initial separation of mind from matter, and the privileging of the former over the latter. Plumwood explains that this leads to a 'divided-self theory' whereby human-as-biological (matter) is separate from and subordinate to human-as-rational (mind), and where that which is 'authentically' human is viewed as external to, or outside, nature (or the body). Not only does this disqualify women from being 'authentically' human (they are too closely associated with the body not the mind), it also provides support to forms of *instrumental rationality* that value matter only in terms of its usefulness for the mind. In other words, modern ethics presupposes that humanity and nature are separate spheres, values the former over the latter, and thereby serves to justify the 'control' or 'mastery' of nature and women.

These are important insights and have been enormously influential. The value of this critique is that it helps us see the masculinist and anthropocentric underpinnings of a system of ethical thought that accords intrinsic value based on rationality. The solution proposed by ecofeminists, however, has not been to merely *extend* value to nature and women, but instead to challenge the structure of thought that gives rise to notions of humans (and other entities) as discrete, autonomous beings. In other words, to merely extend intrinsic value (as many mainstream environmental philosophers advocate), does not address the core problem of the hierarchical dualistic frameworks that provide support for existing ethical systems. Rather, as the geographer Sarah Whatmore (1997) argues, ethics needs to provide a model that accounts for humans as social, connected, relational beings. Along these lines, ecofeminist philosophers have argued for an *ethics of care* that focuses on an experience of, and relationship with, nature in the place of the abstractions, universals, and disconnects associated with traditional (masculine) ethics (Plumwood, 1993: 288). Ynestra King (1993: 115) expands this argument to address not only anthropocentrism and sexism, but also racism and classism: "I contend that the systematic denigration of working-class people and people of color, women and animals are *all connected* to the basic dualism that lies at the root of western civilization" (emphasis added).

Historicizing Women and Nature: Feminist Environmentalism

Like Ynestra King, Val Plumwood, and Karen Warren, many ecofeminists are committed to critiquing modern dualisms, demonstrating their porousness, and creating alternative conceptualizations of human-environment interactions. However, not all feminists have embraced ecofeminism. One of ecofeminism's sharpest critics has been Bina Agarwal (1992), who faults ecofeminism for locating feminist ecopolitics in the realm of *ideology* (ideas) instead of in the historical, material *conditions* that shape women's everyday interactions with their environments. Agarwal calls instead for a *feminist environmentalism* that focuses on three themes: (1) understanding women's relationships with the environment through a political-economic lens, thereby producing explanations centered on the material conditions of production, reproduction, and distribution, and how these are in turn gendered; (2) tracing how these gendered relations mediate people's interaction with their environment and in turn lead to the production of different gendered environmental knowledges; and (3) understanding and accounting for how environmental conflicts and environmental social movements come to have gendered components. In short, Agarwal argues that we need to understand the relation between women and nature in terms of its *historical-geographical specificity*.

Agarwal illustrates the importance of a political-economic analysis through

her examination of resource scarcity in rural India. Here she positions herself directly against a body of influential work by ecofeminist Vandana Shiva (1988), who had explained the subordination of women and nature in India in terms of the ideological effects of Western interventions into India. While acknowledging Shiva's contribution to ecofeminism and her powerful critique of colonialism, patriarchy, and Western development projects, Agarwal finds fault with several aspects of her account. Most problematic, she argues, is that Shiva romanticizes precolonial India, with the result that she identifies Western reductionist science and development policies as the *root* of women's and nature's oppression, thereby missing the historical and local forces of power, privilege, and property rights that intermingle with outside (Western) interventions in the colonial and postcolonial periods. A focus on the historical and material conditions shaping competing ideologies, Agarwal suggests, provides a better explanation of how nature, culture, and gender come to be interwoven.

For our objective of developing politically savvy skills in negotiating theories of nature and gender, Agarwal's arguments merit further discussion. In India, village commons (land that is managed by the community for the community's use) and forests provide important communal sources of food, fodder, fuel, water, and other resources. Over a number of years the availability of these resources has declined. Agarwal suggests two reasons: (1) increasing degradation of the quality of natural resources in village commons due to environmental stresses, and (2) growing decline in the quantity of village commons due to statization (state control) and/or privatization of land and resources. The effects of this socially-produced resource scarcity, Agarwal argues, were felt differently according to class and gender. However, in contrast to ecofeminists, she insists that this must be understood in terms of a set of historical developments, not simply through ideology. For instance, while statization of land and resources began during British colonial rule (in order to extract products from forests for commercial use), the impact of these developments intersected with economic, social, and gender inequalities and environmental degradation that predated colonialism and Western development. As Agarwal notes, pre-British India was stratified by caste, class, and gender, and it is this history of local social structure – more than 'ideas' about woman and nature – that affected future patterns of access to and use of natural resources through each agrarian transition.

Here the details of agrarian change in India matter. Originally promoted by the colonial state, and later a mainstay of 'development' by the postcolonial Indian state, scientific management of natural resources was implemented by governmental and individual landholders in order to promote commercial development of land. This had several negative effects to local rural communities. The logic behind scientific management of agriculture is to maximize productivity by increasing inputs, such as genetically designed seeds, pesticides, herbicides, and harvesting machinery. As Noel Castree notes in this volume (see his chapter below), this logic of increased productivity and profitability

changes how land and natural resources are viewed. For instance, it encourages the cultivation of commercially profitable species, often to the detriment of indigenous species used by local populations. This results not only in the loss of easily accessible community resources, including land, but also undermines local knowledge systems about species varieties, environmental processes, and sustainable forms of interaction between people and nature (Agarwal, 1992: 134–5). Scientific management also promotes monocropping, which is thought to raise efficiency and productivity (and is also amenable to technologically-dependent agricultural practices). However, since such crops are more vulnerable to pests, they require increased use of pesticides that deteriorate soil and water quality. Finally, these forms of 'development' can also damage existing community resource management systems, since they are forced to shift from traditional, often communal, institutional arrangements of resource use and management to state or private ownership and management.

These agrarian transitions and their effects are *gendered* in part because divisions of labor that preexisted colonial and capitalist development placed the responsibility for subsistence agriculture and household provision on women. As common property dwindled (either through decreased acreage or declining quality of land), women were forced to travel greater distances to secure resources for their household. This limited the time women could spend on their own crop production, and led to reductions in personal income. Further, as common property became less accessible and less productive, women's and children's health was compromised due to declining nutrition and increased exposure to waterborne diseases and agricultural chemicals. Social support networks also suffered as daily patterns of interaction among women were disrupted and as families were forced to move due to lack of food and resources. Finally, with the privatization and statization of the village commons, women's knowledge about local species and natural processes was devalued and potentially lost (Agarwal, 1992: 136–43).

The importance of Agarwal's work goes far beyond the Indian context – it also challenges and broadens the frameworks through which we understand the relationship of gender and nature. A political-economic analysis, for instance, draws attention to the relationship between nature, gender, and class, something that has often been overlooked by ecofeminists, who have been criticized for universalizing the experience of white, middle-class women (see Sturgeon, 1997). Further, to the extent that the economy is often *racialized*, as it is in the United States, political-economic approaches can also help explain differentiation among women that extends beyond class alone. It also places the focus of analysis and politics on the specific, place-based forms that gender–environment interactions take in response to a broad set of economic, cultural, political, and technological relations. Ultimately, this places in question notions of an 'essential' relation between women and nature, and insists instead on the historical contingency of such relations. It also undermines the tendency to

construct an essentialized and romanticized image of the 'Third World Woman' who, perhaps even more than Western women, come to be seen as inherently 'closer' to nature (Mohanty, 1991).

Many of the issues raised by Agarwal and other critics have been thoughtfully integrated within ecofeminism (see Sturgeon, 1997), although not without some reservations. One of the most significant concerns is that historical-materialist approaches like Agarwal's remain trapped within the *instrumental* approach to nature that ecofeminists have struggled so hard to displace. As Karen Warren (1993) notes, the primary value of nature for Marxist-informed feminisms is its value as a resource for the production of commodities. Ecofeminism, by contrast, seeks to extend value to other, nonhuman entities, beyond their 'use-value' for humans.

Feminist Political Ecology: Gender, Environment, Politics

Feminist political ecologists and geographers have extended Agarwal's insights into the materiality of women's experiences of, and connections with, the environment. *Political ecology* – a research field that has grown tremendously in the 1990s – is concerned primarily with economic and environmental decision-making processes, the social, political, and economic contexts and scales of interaction that regulate human–environment practices (how 'global' institutions influence 'national' and 'local' environmental policies), and the uneven distribution of, access to, and control over resources on the basis of class and ethnicity. *Feminist* political ecologists depart from other political ecologists in their insistence that *gender* is a critical variable (in relation with class, caste, race, culture, and ethnicity) that shapes institutional practices, household-level politics that influence decision-making strategies, and how resources are distributed and controlled (see Bryant, this volume).

We can explore what is gained through a political ecology approach by turning to the work of the geographer Richard Schroeder (1997), who illustrates many of these concepts in a fascinating study of gender, nature, and politics in rural Gambia (for our purposes he also illustrates that men can do *feminist* research too). In it, he shows how gender politics infuse struggles over land tenure systems in the context of shifting funding agendas and development paradigms of NGOs, large donor agencies, and organizations such as the World Bank. The traditional land tenure system in the area Schroeder studied relegated upland regions to groundnut production by men, with land inherited through patrilineal lines. Swampland regions were used for rice production by women and were passed from mother to daughter. The low-lying regions that separated the two were owned by male landholders, but were not usually farmed due to poor growing conditions. During a significant decline in both rice and groundnut production in the 1980s, three competing development projects

were initiated in the nonproductive low-lying land in order to ease economic burdens and provide subsistence crops: small-scale market gardens, primarily tended by women; fruit tree orchards, primarily owned by male landholders but tended by women; and rice production by women for family consumption.

What interests us in this tale of swamps, gardens, and orchards, is what we can learn about how gender-environment relations become a site of political struggle where outcomes are not known in advance, but instead shaped by a variety of different actors and events. Schroeder shows how through Women in Development (WID) grants, women were able to obtain usufruct rights to garden the low-lying land, destabilizing the existing tenure system.² Previously, senior males had issued usufruct land rights to these lands, while maintaining ownership rights such as decision-making control. Their degree of control diminished over the duration of women's gardening, in large part due to women directly transferring land to other women without the knowledge of male landholders. As defined by traditional land tenure rules, the original exchange was accompanied by a one-time claim payment and any transfer thereafter was expected to happen through the male landholders with the exchange of another payment. What Schroeder discovered, however, was that 70 percent of transfers between women happened surreptitiously, resulting in a loss of male privilege, power, and wealth.

Schroeder documents the process by which male landholders over time reclaimed control of low-lying lands. This occurred within a complex set of local-global relations and actors and eventually resulted in considerable hardship for women. Again, the details are important. Responding to the recent history of famine, drought, and economic problems in the region, international donor agencies in the mid-1980s shifted their focus from gender equality initiatives, which had supported women's gardens, to environmental rehabilitation. Monies poured into sustainable ecological and economic development schemes, but this also put pressure on granting agencies to create results. In this context, there was considerable pressure to transform women's garden plots to (male-owned) orchards, despite the fact that it had been women's labor and initiative that had rehabilitated this land. Over time, women's use rights of garden plots were increasingly restricted, and in many cases they became tied to women's management of the men's orchards. Adding to these changes, a government-planned, USAID-funded soil and water management program was initiated, resulting in the development of an expansive dike system in low-lying areas to control salination and soil erosion. This allowed for the reintroduction of rice production in the region. Although celebrated among community members as a good source of family sustenance, Schroeder shows how the reintroduction of rice production had dire consequences for women due to traditional divisions of labor dictating women as harvesters of the rice. The overlapping growing seasons for rice, a crop for communal good, and for vegetables, a crop for women's individual profit, increased the burden on

women. When women eventually challenged men to share in the household obligation of rice harvesting, men declined, leaving women in the predicament of balancing both gardening and rice production.

This case study illustrates many of the key themes found in feminist political ecology, and adds to the conceptual tools available for feminist scholars to understand the relation between gender and nature. By explicitly addressing livelihood *strategies* and the (limited) control, status, and power that accompanies gendered *shifts* in primary household providers, feminist geographers and political ecologists have brought to light the ways in which these occur within complex and shifting social, political, and institutional fields. To fully understand gender-environment relations, it becomes necessary to understand land tenure systems, legal structures, international NGOs, state agencies, development discourses, and cultural norms and ideologies. Within this complex nexus of actors and institutions, people (men and women) *struggle* over issues of environmental health and economic well-being, as well as over who has authority to define how this will occur. This is not determined in advance either by ideology or economic conditions.

What feminist political ecologists have put on the agenda for political ecology more generally is how these struggles often reflect gendered relations of power, resulting in outcomes that are experienced differently by men and women. Although not directly addressed in this example, feminist political ecologists have also focused attention on two other key issues: the gendering of science and the role of women's collective activism around environmental issues. Here important points of intersection can be found with our earlier discussion of ecofeminism. Drawing upon ecofeminist insights into the professionalized, fragmented nature of Western scientific knowledge and methodologies, feminist political ecologists have sought to locate and articulate an alternative 'science of survival' that takes a more holistic and integrated approach to environment and health issues, and that takes seriously women's knowledges (Rocheleau et al., 1996). The study of women's collective activism has also led feminist political ecologists to examine how 'gender' itself is being reconfigured in these struggles, consistent with attempts by ecofeminist philosophers to challenge the way gender has been constructed in Western philosophical traditions. And, like the ecofeminists we examined earlier, they are also concerned with bringing women's experience and knowledge back into how environmental issues are understood and addressed. As Rocheleau et al. (1996: 15) state: "women are beginning to redefine their identities, and the meaning of gender, through expressions of human agency and collective action emphasizing struggle, resistance, and cooperation. In so doing, they have also begun to redefine environmental issues to include women's knowledge, experience, and interests."

Poststructural Feminist Interventions: Gender/Discourse/Power

This 'redefining' of gender and identity brings us to yet another, increasingly important, resource for conceptualizing gender and nature: poststructuralist feminism. The key contribution of poststructural feminism to the study of gendered nature is its vigilant attention to how categories like 'gender,' 'sex,' 'race,' or 'nature' come to be *constructed* and *stabilized* within intellectual, political, and ecological projects. Or, to say this differently, poststructuralist thought questions the self-evidence of the categories that we use to understand ourselves and the world. Disrupting the coherence of such categories and identities is not simply an academic exercise, but a political one, since it shows these to be the effect of power rather than ahistorical essences (see Braun and Wainwright, this volume). In other words, how social identities and categories are constructed – or fixed – is never innocent, but instead part of how relations of power and domination are set in place to begin with.

In its understanding of 'gender' and 'nature' as constructed rather than fixed categories, poststructuralism is resolutely *antiessentialist*. As we hinted at in our discussion of ecofeminism, *essentialist* positions are those that take as fixed, static, and natural, categories that are actually mutable, cultural, and historical. In other words, they understand categories to have some sort of unified, universal, inherent quality consistent over time and space. Poststructuralist feminist philosopher Judith Butler (1990) argues that essentialist positions mistake cultural processes for natural ones, and instead she defines the processes that lead us to think that there is an essential character to any concept or identity as 'regulatory fictions.' According to Butler, gender categories have no ontological foundation; instead, they are created – and stabilized – through repeated acts which have the effect of congealing over time to produce the appearance of something substantial, real, and natural (Butler, 1990: 33). When we speak of gender as an ontological category – something found in nature – these processes fall from view. Indeed, in our everyday lives we tend to live as though these identities are really 'out there,' prior to, and apart from, their articulation in cultural practices, and thus we participate in making them seem 'real.' Butler speaks of this as a non-articulated (i.e. unconscious) agreement to "perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions" where "the construction 'compels' our belief in its necessity and naturalness" (Butler, 1990: 140). This is a difficult, and at times counter-intuitive argument, precisely because Western culture is predicated on patriarchal and heterosexual norms that compel us to understand ourselves *through* these terms, although not without also producing a certain ambivalence, especially among those who do not quite 'fit' the prescribed categories. It is perhaps appropriate, then, to let RuPaul – North America's most famous drag queen – express poststructuralism's

antiessentialist position: "We are born naked. From then on we're all in drag" (RuPaul, 2000).

What is at stake in poststructuralist interventions? Why insist that 'gender,' 'sex,' 'race,' and 'nature' are socially constructed rather than pre-given? And how does this contribute to how we understand 'gender' and 'nature'? To begin, it is worth noting that poststructuralist feminists share with ecofeminists a concern with the dualistic conceptual frameworks of modern, Western thought. However, in contrast to some ecofeminists who understand the goal of feminist politics to be the inverting of hierarchical relations between 'male' and 'female,' poststructuralists seek to place the very category of 'woman' in question. In other words, they criticize ecofeminists for taking as an ontological given something that is in reality an ideological or cultural construct. As we saw earlier, the essentializing of gender by some ecofeminists can actually hide the operation of power, since it is precisely by constructing women in opposition to (and inferior to) men, and then naturalizing this difference (rendering it ontological and ahistorical), that patriarchy works to marginalize women. Rather than understand society-environment issues in terms of political struggles between 'men' and 'women,' poststructuralists argue that it is necessary to also analyze how constructions of 'gender' are part of what is at stake and negotiated in these struggles. In other words, gender is always 'up for grabs.' Thus, as we saw in the case analyzed by Schroeder, what is of interest was not merely that men and women were situated differently *vis-à-vis* land and resources, but that gendered identities were being reworked and redefined as these struggles proceeded.

Poststructural feminists have also called attention to a number of other problematic assumptions in the existing literature on gendered nature. As we showed earlier, many ecofeminists privilege meaning and ideology in their explanations of women's domination. On the other hand, feminist environmentalism and feminist political ecology tend to focus solely on material conditions. Poststructural feminist perspectives recognize this common tendency to separate meaning and materiality – and to privilege one over the other – as another expression of modern dualistic thinking. Writers like Donna Haraway (1997) instead point to how material and discursive practices are always implicated in each other, such that environmental struggles are never simply about 'nature' or about 'meanings,' but about how the material world is rendered legible in and through ideas and concepts (and these are themselves constructed within particular historical and material conditions). For example, Haraway (1989) examines the history of science and technology from a feminist and antiracist position in order to craft a view of nature as it is (re)constructed in the bodies and lives of apes. Her exploration of the Carl Akeley African Hall in the American Museum of Natural History in New York City unearths the implicit social relations built into representations of natural history in postcolonial United States. Haraway argues that artefacts such as mounted animals, dio-

ramas, and pictures supposedly depicting Africa's wildlife and landscapes instead author a story about race, sex, gender, and class relations in twentieth-century North America. In the context of the African exhibit, the bodies of apes reinforce social structures, including the male-female dichotomy, heterosexual family structures, and race and colonial relations.

Haraway's (1991) work has also been central to attempts by poststructural feminists to deconstruct the category of biological 'sex' in order to disrupt a sex-gender dualism that emerged in earlier feminist writings (this earlier work is often referred to as 'second-wave' feminism). Although this can be a difficult discussion, it is worth reviewing, since it has become central to recent attempts to move beyond the mind/matter, culture/nature dualisms that organize Western thought. As we saw in the case of ecofeminism, feminists have long battled biologically determinist justifications for women's oppression. Most feminists today argue that differences between men and women are primarily social, advocating a social constructivist rather than a biological determinist argument. Implied in this division, however, is a separation between 'gender' (which is taken to be socially constructed) and 'sex' (which is assumed to be biological and therefore grounded in nature). It is easy to understand why feminists have made this move: by understanding 'gender' as cultural, rather than biological, it became possible to combat the justifications for patriarchal relations of domination that rested upon women as biologically inferior to men. However, this leaves intact a culture-nature dualism, such that sex now becomes the 'core' of gender. Still caught within a hierarchical and dualistic structure of thought, 'sex' and 'nature' were constituted as a 'reality' *against which* social constructions of gender and culture were defined, thus allowing 'sex' (nature) to continue to serve as a resource or foundation for all manner of political projects, including what many would consider reactionary movements – like antigay activists who ground a normative sexuality in biology. Haraway (1992: 298) counters this move with a simple, but consequential statement: "biology is a discourse, not the world itself."

This gender-sex divide may be partially responsible for limits to feminist interrogations of gender and nature. For the most part, studies have limited their attention to the relation between gender and (external) nature. Perhaps because feminists have found the gender-sex divide so useful politically, the question of the 'body' has been left off the agenda. Yet, how 'bodies' come to matter within discursive and material practices (such as technoscience) is no *less* important to theories of gender and nature than how women come to have roles defined in relation to their surrounding environment. It is only recently – mostly in the past decade – that sustained efforts have begun to understand how the body has been 'sexed' in Western medical discourse (see Oudshoorn, 1994). For example, Emily Martin (1991) has examined the use of economic metaphors in science textbooks that characterize women's reproductive processes as wasteful and unproductive. These representations shape medical instruc-

tion, influence medical practices, and help construct popular (mis)perceptions about male and female reproductive roles, as can be seen in the complex arena of reproductive technologies eloquently described by Rapp (1999). This production of the 'sexed' body is not unimportant, for it can authorize particular practices *on* the body.

Rather than ask what is gained through poststructural feminist interventions, it might be better to ask what is politically at stake in *not* incorporating a poststructural feminist approach. As we have sought to show, ignoring poststructuralist interventions runs the risk that categories become reified, erasing the complex processes by which social identities come to be fixed within specific bounds. That which falls *outside* of such bounded identities is not acknowledged. Queer theory – at times closely aligned with poststructuralist feminist theory – has focused attention precisely on the manner in which a whole set of social identities and actors – gays, lesbians, bisexuals, transsexuals, and transgendered people – are left 'outside' conventional understandings of society, nature, and politics. It is in this context that we should understand Haraway's (1994) claim that her intellectual and political project is to 'queer nature.' It is also why Haraway (1991) takes the 'cyborg' as her privileged metaphor for 'nature' at the end of the twentieth century. Not only does this draw attention to how nature, culture, and technology are intricately interwoven in technoscientific cultures, with its new, and powerful, biotechnological capacities, it also draws attention to the fact that the boundaries that we establish to differentiate between entities – human/nonhuman, organism/machine, nature/culture – are porous (or, more to the point, ideological rather than ontological). The cyborg is a politically potent metaphor precisely because it refuses to accept closure around 'nature,' 'culture,' 'human,' 'machine,' and 'animal,' but instead shows each to be fluid. As Haraway notes, it is only when we understand the dualisms of Western patriarchal thought to have 'leaky boundaries' that we can begin to imagine alternatives.

While it should be clear that we find poststructuralist feminist interventions not only provocative, but productive, there have been a number of important concerns raised about its potential political implications. Among some feminists there is a fear that poststructuralism's emphasis on destabilizing 'gender' and 'nature' undercuts the foundation of political movements. If the meaning of 'woman' is called into question, then what political subject can ground a women's movement? In turn, can we have a feminist ecopolitics if what counts as 'nature' is historically contingent? Further, although most poststructuralists insist on the simultaneity of materiality and meaning, critics argue that poststructuralism focuses almost entirely on questions of representation (how meanings are produced). This brings us back full circle to Agarwal's (1992) initial critique of ecofeminism, in which she faults its focus on the realm of 'ideas' rather than historical-material conditions. The worry expressed by poststructuralism's critics is that if the focus rests only on meaning, political

activism can be undercut. Finally, antiessentialist critiques can also fall into the same epistemological traps that they critique others for reproducing. The obvious problem is that the essentialism/antiessentialism debate may simply produce another dualism. One way out of this impasse may be to reframe *antiessentialist* accounts as *non-essentialist*, thereby allowing for accounts that focus on the processes that continually decenter or interrupt seemingly fixed identities, without implying that the resulting identities are polar opposites to 'essences' (Reynolds, 1999). Yet another issue with antiessentialism centers on how antiessentialist critiques are employed. Critics have asked whether the sole focus of antiessentialist work should be to disrupt coherent identities and categories, or whether there is in fact a way to expand antiessentialist pursuits. Can we strive for the conceptual disruptions that antiessentialism advocates as well as acknowledge that much of our experiences and the way we understand them function through essentialisms? This suggests that we refocus our attention on interrogating *how* and *why* essentialisms are employed, explaining why at certain moments making a link between 'women' and 'nature' based on biology may indeed be a reasonable, strategic decision (Sturgeon, 1997).

Shifting Fields: Gender, Nature, Politics, and Theory

Gendered nature is clearly a complex field of analysis with many competing perspectives. Because environmental conflicts unfold in and through social, political, economic, and cultural contexts, 'gender' is necessarily part of social nature. Here we have brought together four perspectives – ecofeminism, feminist environmentalism, feminist political ecology, and poststructural feminisms – in order to stage a debate about how the connections between gender and nature should be conceptualized. The points of contention between these approaches are important, as are their points of convergence. Attending to these brings us to a number of key themes and questions that any future ecopolitics will need to consider. What is at stake for environmental and feminist politics when essentialist positions positing women as closer to nature than men are employed, and can 'strategic essentialisms' avoid these political pitfalls? How do examinations of social change differ according to idealist or materialist perspectives, and does poststructuralism adequately bridge the divide between the two positions? By employing Sandoval's 'differential consciousness' we are able to shift between approaches, not *transcending* the differences but rather *engaging* with the boundaries between them in a non-innocent and nonreductive manner. This is especially important for feminists traversing the muddy terrain of social natures – we need theoretical and political flexibility in order to account for the potentially dangerous margins between the constructions and 'reality' of nature, gender, sex, race, class, and the body.

We have focused on feminist contributions to gendered nature, in large part

because feminism offers the most developed critique of 'gender' as a specific power relation. But what of masculinity or critical theories of sexuality? Can a feminist gender analysis stretch to address these social relations? We would argue that a future ecopolitics would need to expand its boundaries to consider these perspectives too. Critical theories of masculinity (Connell, 1997) and queer theories of sexuality, 'sex,' and 'gender' (Gaard, 1997) both overlap with feminist concepts of gender while charting new territory for gendered analyses of nature. This allows us to ask why it is that Rachel Carson was labeled a lesbian for challenging pesticide use, or how motherist claims in antitoxics conflicts reinforce and/or challenge heterosexist notions of family or construction of fatherhood based on a biologically defined masculinity. Feminist conceptualizations of the body and embodiment also open up gender analyses of nature. As genetic information is mapped and monitored, bodies are reshaped through liposuction, skin is smoothed through antiwrinkle technologies, and embryos are preselected for certain traits through reproductive technologies, the connections between the body and science and technology are intensified. Further, as sexuality, masculinity, embodiment, and issues of ableism and ageism are further defined and developed both within and outside of feminist theory and politics, we will have a more textured understanding of how these interwoven categories enable particular 'natures' to emerge. Such expansions of feminist analysis will undoubtedly result in a rich terrain for thinking about the specificities of gendered environments and environmentalisms, something as necessary today as it was when ecofeminism took shape in the 1970s. Perhaps today we need a feminist ecopolitics that turns on the figure of the cyborg – an ecopolitics that is resolutely about *connections* yet without recourse to 'essences' that assume a preexisting natural order outside history, a politics about imagining survivable futures, but without a transcendental blueprint. It would be, above all else, about a sort of vigilance to account for what has been left out of our futures/natures.

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Notes

- 1 'Political-economy' emphasizes how people's life chances are bound-up with their access to economic and political resources. Because most societies are characterized

by inequalities between social classes, political-economy accents the role of this inequality in explaining things like poverty, marginalization, and starvation.

2. Usufruct rights refer to the right to use another's property, short of its destruction or waste of its substance.

Further Reading

Within geography Nesmith and Raddcliffe (1993) provide a solid exploration of gendered nature, including the influence of cultural geography and landscape literature, and the potential to develop them further to include gender. For an excellent interrogation of 'race,' gender, and nature, see Kobayashi and Peake (1994). Also the edited volume by Rocheleau et al. (1996) on feminist political ecology provides a geographical perspective on a number of important themes in gender-environment studies. This can be further supplemented by the work of Carney (1993), Merchant (1980), Shiva (1988), Agarwal (1992), Plumwood (1993), and Haraway (1989, 1991, 1997).

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Chapter 7

Social Nature and Environmental Policy in the South: Views from Verandah and Veld

Piers Blaikie

Envisioning the Environment

This chapter takes a critical look at contemporary environmental management in lesser developed countries (LDCs). It focuses on two main issues. We start with the different ways in which the environment is interpreted and explained by the various people involved in its management. Among others, these people include government officials and policy-makers (hence the allusion to 'the view from the verandah' in the title of this chapter), as well as local civil society (farmers and pastoralists for the most part, who view things 'from the veld' or open rangeland). Often their views about what is happening to the environment and its natural and social causes are in direct contradiction. For instance, how is it that a range ecologist in semiarid southern Africa, drawing upon scientific research indicating a 'maximum sustainable stocking density' (number of animals per unit area) for a particular range, sees this density greatly exceeded and can point to evidence of desiccation, land degradation, and the poor condition of cattle, while a pastoralist denies that the range is degraded, continues to exceed notional maximum densities, and manages to extract a livelihood? What is going on here is that two (admittedly stereotypical) pairs of people are looking at the same landscape, but drawing upon completely different cultural and professional repertoires to interpret it. They see, or fail to see, different things and interpret their landscapes in a different way: in short, different people, different nature.

The second main issue explored in this chapter is how, and with what effects, these different views about nature are contested. Specifically, I focus on the ways in which these views inform (or fail to be heard in) environmental policy-making in the developing world. But my arguments about environmental policy – its construction and contestation – have a wider resonance. After all,