

# Gender, Environment, and Nature: Two Episodes in Feminist Politics

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## Introduction

Environmental issues are shaped by gender in several overlapping ways. First, gender defines sociological locations that give differing shape to people's environmental interactions and knowledge, to their perception of and vulnerability to environmental hazards and degradation, and to their motivation and resources for doing something about such hazards. Second, the feelings that link people to nature and the ideologies that frame environmental concern and action have typically been gendered. Indeed, the uses and purview of the notion "environment" are in part dependent on gendered divisions of labor.

Third, in the late nineteenth century, and again in the 1970s, gender and environment became key concepts for both feminist reformers and males trying to adjust ideals of masculinity to changing American social conditions. Feminists in both periods needed to find persuasive new rationales for their claims to an enlarged set of political and social responsibilities, because older modes of argument were unsuccessful. Thus the maternalist and domestic science traditions of 1880 to 1950 achieved their protoenvironmental agendas through feminizing concern for urban and domestic health and safety; cultural feminists of the 1970s were able to use an essentialist conflation of woman and nature as a galvanizing analytic and rhetoric for the critique of consumer society and the technological excesses of modern industry.

Since the 1980s, poststructuralist philosophers such as Donna Haraway and Judith Butler have directed feminist lenses to the dismantling of the concept of "nature" itself, the linchpin of environmental thought. They and others have pointed to the ties between "naturalizing" the ideological work of marking off the underlying, inherent, inborn, and enduring from their opposites and the oppressive stabilization of gender categories and roles around those polarities.

Our aim in this essay is to keep all of these intersecting lines of thought in mind as we explore episodes in the history of environmental thought over the last two centuries. We begin with examples of ways in which gender as social location shapes contemporary environmental responses. Next we consider how feminists in critical periods in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries used an ideological coupling of women to nature as a political tool. We then consider the hazards of this coupling by contemporary development agencies and in political life, because the conflation can work both for and against dominant power structures. We conclude by asking whether contemporary environmentalist thought is as deeply gendered as in the historical instances cited and how this might affect future environmental action.

## Gender as Social Location

To the degree that gender determines the social location of the sexes, which in turn shapes their environmental interactions, gender is a critical component of environmental analysis. In particular, we must be aware of the environmental consequences of gendered divisions of labor, power, property ownership, and daily experience. One of the first and most prominent analyses of how forms of gendered social and economic stratification impact on environmental concerns and activism was given by Indian economist Bina Agarwal in her work on how women and the poor experience the degradation of the commons and forests in rural India.<sup>1</sup> She shows that rural poor women in particular spend more time in direct contact with the environment as they gather fuel, fodder, drinking water, and food from common lands; that they are more vulnerable nutritionally to degradation, privatization, or state appropriation of these resources, since they have lower access to food within households; that women are more exposed because of the nature of their daily tasks to a range of health hazards (e.g., waterborne diseases and pesticides) while health care is less accessible to them; that they are more dependent on social support networks that are destroyed by large irrigation projects or deforestation; and that by virtue of their location in the division of labor, women often have a greater stock of indigenous ecological knowledge that is being devalued and rendered obsolete with disappearing natural resources. Women also have less access than men to private property resources and therefore face a greater dependence on common property resources. Thus a convincing materialist explanation can be given for the commitment of rural women to the preservation of common property such as village commons and forests. Agarwal offers this formulation (which she terms "feminist environmentalism") as an alternative to ecofeminist claims that this commitment is evidence of women's greater inherent proximity to nature and natural processes.

A linking of environmental behavior to gender as social location, rather than to the feminine as essential principal, means that women are not a historically linked to proenvironmental behavior. Such linkages, when they exist, can be a function of quite mundane and fragile circumstances. As Cecile Jackson demonstrates in her work on gender and development,<sup>2</sup> women's social location can encourage environmental-destructive behaviors and attitudes, and struggles for gender equality. (e.g., for full participation in development) can be at odds with efforts for environmental protection. Women may prefer gathering dead wood to cutting living trees not because of their reverential attitudes to nature and commitment to future generations, as some might claim, but because dead wood is lighter and easier to carry (400). Under systems of patrilineal inheritance women will be more mobile than men, have less of a stake in a particular place or property, and may therefore be less motivated to adopt conservation practices than men who hold primary land rights (406). Under conditions of stress it may be men who are in closer contact with the land, common property resources, and their care (408-411) and who exhibit the "conserving" characteristics seen by ecofeminists as inherently associated with women and female roles.

This kind of analysis of the linkages between social location and environmental behavior is most often applied to Third World situations, but it is equally relevant to the highly industrialized nations. Accounts of the predominantly female engagement with community in organizing against toxics, for example, can be

read not so much as an expression of feminine caring and environmental connectedness as a function of the gendered patterning of daily time and space trajectories (women notice different things), divisions of labor (women tend ailing children), and social resources (women are part of a network of neighborhood friendships and PTA affiliations).

These material or sociological aspects of the gendered differentiation of social location shade into gender differences in ideological location and subjectivity that also have environmental consequences. Men and women have available to them different repertoires of ideological claims they can mobilize to get their grievances addressed. Relatedly, environmental claims (e.g., for the safeguarding of household water supplies or the preservation of game species) are often linked to gender-patterned desires. In the nineteenth century, the convergence of these material, sociological, and ideological factors is well illustrated in the formation of two disconnected forms of what can retroactively be called "environmental" concern.

### **The Politics of Gender, Environment, and Nature at the Turn of the Century: Maternalism, Domestic Science, and the Origins of Preservationism**

To describe the impact of maternalist thought on environmental issues in the Progressive Era, we need to understand how this historical example fits into the larger picture of Western thought about woman and her relationship to the nonhuman. That larger picture has been shaped by the political fact of the subjection of women, a situation that has resulted in the definition of the female as less than the male, whether in theology, social contract theory, psychoanalytic theory, or the mainstream of evolutionary thought. Gender boundaries have thus been drawn to define women as closer to nature than man. In those revolutionary moments when social hierarchies were dismantled, this differential proximity to the natural was used to bar women from participation in the new political rights granted to the "common" man.

Western feminists have naturally framed their arguments advocating raising the status of women in terms of the major intellectual movements of their day. Eighteenth-century women drew upon Enlightenment rationalism when they stressed the universality of human reason as a basis for educating women, whereas nineteenth-century feminists used the stress on the differences between male and female present in both Romanticism and evolutionary thought to argue for complementary but equally important roles for men and women. This focus on difference is the intellectual frame for maternalist thought, though its proponents are often unclear whether it is the experience of giving birth, the potential for doing so, the experience of nurturing the young, or the social training to prepare women for doing so that produced in women the special qualities claimed as necessary in the public sphere.

In the line of feminist thinkers from Mary Wollstonecraft to Carol Gilligan the claim of women's essential difference from men, whether in moral sense, patterns of reasoning, or motivation for service, has been used to put a positive value upon human qualities denigrated in patriarchal society, and the existence of those qualities has most frequently been explained through women's supposed closeness to nature. There are, of course, sound historical and social reasons for American women's

interest in environmental hazards and for Third World women's concerns with land use and the preservation of common lands, but the traditional pattern in feminist thought has been not to seek such explanations but to essentialize the capacity to be concerned with the natural environment.

These essentialist claims, however, feed a conservative view of the female, because they classify women in terms used to suppress women under patriarchy. Ecofeminist thinkers have accepted the "closer to nature" claim in their assertion that women's role in agriculture and the domestication of animals in prehistoric times led to the development of peaceful and nonviolent matriarchal societies. Such arguments romanticize agriculture, which is in itself a disturbance of the biophysical environment, and the domestication of animals, which involves power relationships and not simply nurture. Nonetheless, the "woman closer to nature" theme has been the basis on which feminist agitation for change has been most successful in modern societies, because it often permits the entry of women into new gendered social and political territories without disturbing traditional male/female power relationships. Thus maternalist thought in feminism is double-edged: accepting qualities assigned to women under patriarchy, even while providing a strategy that may open up, at least for the short term, new areas of social and intellectual life for women within a changing social and economic system.

It was just such a set of short-term opportunities that appealed to American "social feminists" during the 1890s. Earlier nineteenth-century feminist thought had drawn on Enlightenment ideas about the universality of human reason and argued for votes for women because they shared the same intellectual capacities and civic concerns as men. But following the Civil War, when black males received the vote while women's postponed claims were denied, new strategies were needed. Feminist leaders divided over whether to continue to argue for women's rights on the basis of equality or on the basis of their capacity to bring special sex-linked qualities to the political process.

Social feminism drew upon evolutionary thought to claim for females a special set of essential qualities that were necessary to foster racial and social progress qualities of nurturance, empathy, and altruism, sex linked qualities essential to the female biological role. On this basis, social feminists argued with varying degrees of success for protective legislation limiting the exploitation of female and child labor; for pacifism as an international policy, as opposed to the militarism fostered by male aggressiveness; and for training for women in home economics and domestic science so that they could continue their role of caring for the health of their families within an urban and industrial society. It was in the establishment of a special system of education promoting "domestic science" that the social feminists were most successful in influencing the curriculum of American schools and colleges. They created a new field, opened a new teaching role for women scientists, and made instruction in domestic science mandatory for girls in two-thirds of the U.S. public education system. In the United States, they also fostered the development of a new medical field, "industrial medicine," which initially had only female practitioners. Its major proponent, Alice Hamilton, developed her interest in industrial pollutants because she was shut out of more conventional forms of medical research. In a period when female empathy was seen as desirable in women, Hamilton could be concerned with the health of the working poor, even though a man with her scientific interests in

the United States would have been seen as sentimental. "It seemed natural and right," she wrote, "that a woman should put the care of the producing workman ahead of the value of the thing he was producing. In a man it would have been seen as sentimentality or radicalism" (49-50).<sup>3</sup>

By contrast it was legitimate for Hamilton's contemporaries, Theodore Roosevelt, Gifford Pinchot, and other male conservationists, to express deep concerns for preserving wildlife and wilderness, because hunting and the outdoor life were identified with the regeneration of masculinity, seen as undermined by city life and the supposed closing of the frontier.<sup>4</sup> The gendered nature of our perception of what constitutes "environmentalism" is illustrated by the omission of domestic science and industrial medicine from the canonical story of American environmentalism of this period, which has been exclusively a narrative about the preservation of the wild as a transcendent good or about the battle for a rational conservation of nature.<sup>5</sup>

Masculine forms of concern with preservation came not from the motivation to nurture others, but from what has been called "the crisis of American masculinity," a crisis triggered by the shrinking ranks of individual farmers and small entrepreneurs and the rise of urban industrial capitalism, a process highlighted by the 1893 announcement by the U.S. Census Bureau that the "frontier" was closing.<sup>6</sup> Early wilderness preservation efforts must be seen against American men's preoccupation with the assertion of masculinity in the face of these changes.

Whereas a previous generation had encouraged young men to develop qualities of piety, thrift, and industry the virtues of nineteenth-century evangelical Christianity these idealized traits were replaced in the closing decades of the century by the affirmation of a maleness that was vigorous, forceful, and muscularly adventurous. American football (invented at West Point) took cultural precedence over gentler recreations and came to be played in giant stadia modeled on the gladiatorial combats of the late Roman Empire. The supposedly disappearing frontier fostered a new concern with the outdoors and organized leisure activities that developed the skills of the backwoodsman, such as the Boy Scouts. These changed relationships to the outdoors and recreation were matched by the effort to transform professional education in fields such as medicine, law, and business into strenuous agonistic activities that produced "tough-mindedness," a desired quality in a society that, in William James's terms, was searching for "moral equivalents to war."<sup>7</sup>

Theodore Roosevelt embodies the ambiguities of the relationships to nature and culture subsumed within the American response to the closing of the frontier and the recognition that urban society was the pattern of the future. His encounters with the natural world as soldier, cowboy, hunter for big game, and early explorer of Brazil were epic and widely publicized. The Boone and Crockett Club, which he founded in New York in 1887, was designed to foster "manly sport with a rifle," travel and exploration of unknown parts of the globe, and the preservation of "the large game of this country" by promoting conservation legislation. Admission to the club was through proof of killing "in fair chase" at least three of various kinds of American game. This club was the center of influence that lobbied for the passage of the Forest Reserve Act of 1891 and for the designation of the country's first national park, Yellowstone (est. 1872), as a wildlife refuge, and in this respect the sportsmen were the founders of the conservation movement.

Yet there was a gender contradiction in the promotion of sports hunting in a country becoming more aware of the need to conserve diminishing game populations. The need to sustain the potential and sites for masculine regeneration based on untrammelled adventure and killing ran counter to the prevalent stereotyping of preserving wild creatures and of opposition to killing as feminine.<sup>8</sup> Much of Theodore Roosevelt's thinking about conservation was an attempt to negotiate this dilemma. This he did through promoting the idea of a "fair chase" and decrying wanton killing as "unsportsmanlike," an attitude to game that resulted in his fabled rescue of the bear cub and the creation of the Teddy Bear. The proponent of "the strenuous life" and vigorous pursuit of game thus worked, as president, to create fifty-three wildlife reserves, sixteen national monuments, five other national parks, and numerous forest reserves. In this era, both feminists and proponents of vigorous American masculinity essentialized important aspects of maleness and femaleness in American culture and linked their existence and future strength to a particular relation to the "environment," be it the natural one or the human and built environment of the modern city. The male linkage to the environment has been made central to the history of American conservation. The female linkage has been of central importance in the history of American feminism. These paired essentialisms are dependent on each other and vary dynamically within larger cultural changes, sometimes being fundamentally reworked in moments of cultural crisis within American society<sup>9</sup>

### **The Politics of Gender, Environment, and Nature in the 1970s and 1980s: The Emergence of Ecofeminism**

In the early 1960s "environmentalism" had come to denote not only traditional turn-of-the-century concerns with preservation of open space and wildlife but newer concerns about the health consequences of environmental degradation and pollution. The publication of Rachel Carson's (1962) *Silent Spring* was the key event in forging these two ideological concerns into a single movement.

Contrary to claims by some feminist historians, *Silent Spring* contains few explicitly feminine (much less feminist) motifs (Vera Norwood). Nor was Carson a feminist or the center of female networks (Hynes).<sup>10</sup> Yet the incorporation of the kinds of concerns voiced in *Silent Spring* into the mainstream of public debate was, at a deeper level, an outcome of the maternalist and domestic care traditions launched by earlier feminists. A sizeable group of American women in high schools, colleges, and universities had been, for some seven decades, taught that nutrition, sanitation, and hygiene were important female concerns and that one should use one's scientific knowledge to assess, with some skepticism, the advertising claims of all those suppliers of products and services that impacted on the home and the health of its inhabitants. When we realize the size of the female population whose schooling included home economics, we can see that a potential mass audience for environmental issues had been formed. The extent to which two generations of American women were taught to think that nutrition, sanitation, and hygiene were peculiarly female concerns is indicated, Minakshi Menon reminds us, by the journals that Carson and her agent considered suitable for publishing her work.<sup>11</sup> They approached *Reader's Digest*, the *Ladies' Home Journal*, *Women's Home Companion*, and *Good Housekeeping*, all of whom refused. Carson's book implicitly linked

women's practical attention to domestic health and environmental safety, already manifested in the anti-nuclear testing movement of the same period, with concerns about chemical pollution, both culturally defined as central to women's maternal functions.

These environmental concerns became focused in the 1960s at a time when other cultural forces were prompting a profound reevaluation of what it means to be feminine. Arguments for zero population growth prompted by demographers' expectations of a world population crisis made many question the centrality of reproduction in the female experience. Moreover, the availability of the Pill placed in women's hands an effective form of birth control that had the consequence of completing a century long Western trend toward separating female sexuality from reproduction. Thus, in the 1960s it became necessary to consider maternalism not as function of actual childbearing but as a psychosocial trait, since it seemed clear that responsible women would not spend more than a small segment of their adult life in childbearing. At the same time, research on female sexual response ended the myth of the vaginal orgasm and changed perceptions of the nature of female erotic life. Moreover, systematic feminist criticism of the Freudian model of human sexuality. focused attention on female-to-female bonds in human development, making women's networks and social bonds assume a position in social theory previously ignored. In religious life, feminist theologians, frustrated in their desire to dismantle patriarchy in both Judeo-Christian doctrine and practice, turned in the late 1960s to asserting the importance of female symbols of transcendence and reviving earlier female cult practices. A maternalist interest in environmental protection and its linkage to a redefinition of the female occurred within the context of these larger cultural trends.

While the cultural imagery of femininity was being redrawn, the social and economic forces that limited women's aspirations remained unchanged. The *Presidential Report on the Status of Women* of 1964 revealed the magnitude of economic discrimination continuing from the Depression, discrimination that was attacked by women activists who had been politicized by their participation in the civil rights movement. When women civil rights workers found that their political commitments were not respected and their participation was limited to helping roles, they began to work on theoretical analyses of the roots of oppression based on sex.

The sustained attack on economic and social discrimination launched by women and blacks during the late 1960s bore fruit in the 1970s with improved access for women to high-status professional work in fields such as law, medicine, academic life, and business. But work patterns and rewards in these occupations remained based upon the assumption of an exclusively male workforce and allowed women no time for domestic nurturing roles or for childbearing. Thus, when the high-achieving women pioneers in the male professions reached their midthirties in the late 1970s, they displayed a new interest in maternalist thinking and in the stereotyping of males as aggressive, acquisitive, and incapable of nurturance. More radical feminists extended these ideas to include a definition of male domination as a unitary and all encompassing social phenomenon, the root model of other forms of domination in all cultures and societies.

At the same time that the feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s reached an analysis that made male domination the ur form of ruling power and women's relation to nature an essential component of femininity, the concept of maleness in American culture was called into question by a set of social transformations as profound as those that prompted maternalist thought. Traditional male military virtues were challenged by broadly based opposition to the American military role in Vietnam. These challenges were accompanied by widespread and publicly avowed male pacifism and efforts to evade the draft. While many of these challenges were male led, they did not betoken these men's critique of the war as rooted in masculine values. The feminist proponents of the antinuclear movement, on the other hand, characterized as masculine the power-crazed and irrational mentality of America's military-industrial complex, which, if unopposed, could lead to Armageddon. Meanwhile, the subsequent surging growth of the Japanese economy challenged America's position as the number one economic power in the world, a position hitherto thought to be earned by American economic and technological strength. These shocks to the national self-image were reenforced by the rhetoric of anti-imperialism as former Western colonies threw off European domination and criticized the idealized qualities of the white European male as masking an underlying greed and insecurity behind ostensible commitments to the "white man's burden" and "civilizing mission."

The internal crisis within the United States posed by profound divisions over the country's role in Vietnam virtually silenced proponents of the old masculine values, while the ecological damage wrought in Vietnam by the nation's use of chemical warfare appeared to lend substance to the ecofeminist claims of an essential linkage between environmental damage and the masculinity of militarism.

It was at this moment that environmental thinkers began to question whether improved management of resources and technological problem solving could avert a seemingly irresistible progression toward environmental disaster. Lynn White's famous essay of 1967, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," marks a fundamental redefinition of environmental problems, with White arguing that the origin of modern technological society's devastating environmental impacts lay within Western society's overarching cultural orientation and was not, as previously argued, the result of simply technical mishaps within a basically sound and progressive enterprise. Later writers such as Paul Shepard (1967), Edward Abbey (1968), and Arne Naess (1973) reenforced the message.<sup>12</sup>

Thus by the late 1970s there was a shift in environmental thought toward framing environmental problems as evidence of a systemic tendency to dominate and exploit nature, a tendency shaped by the fundamental assumptions of western European culture, even while feminist analysis emphasized the importance of women's capacity as social nurturer and traced environmental destructiveness to a patriarchal society not guided by feminine values. The convergence of these two points of view produced ecofeminist claims that environmental problems are universal symptoms of patriarchal domination of nature and that women, because of their essential maternalism, are uniquely equipped to speak out against environmental degradation.

## Ecofeminism

From the mid-1970s, ecofeminists applied themes in radical feminist thought the long-standing maternalist tradition, the critique of domination in critical theory, and feminist psychoanalytic perspectives to explain the special bond of women to nature and its counterpart of male alienation from nature. Ecofeminist writing, ranging from popular to academic, located the feminine bond to nature within a spectrum of ideas that had as its central component the following claims: the uniqueness of the female body and its association with reproduction and nurturance; a heightened sense of continuity with the natural world arising from the experience of reproduction; the maternalist claim that women's maternal role engenders in them nurturant capacities that extend to a concern for the environment; and the assertion that women's long history of oppression has produced a viewpoint of "critical otherness" and a capacity to identify with victims of domination, including nature. The ability to perceive and speak for nature has been designated feminine because, according to ecofeminists, women are less prone to dualistic structures of thought, a superstructural correlate of patriarchal domination, which alienates people from natural processes, and because of the psychological dynamics of the early-childhood mother/daughter relation, in which women develop a personality structure different from men's, one with more easily permeable boundaries between self and other and thus less of a drive to dominate, control, and objectify.

Such ecofeminist claims were sometimes combined with attempts to describe the historical roots and key points of consolidation of a European worldview that was both hostile to nature and founded on the values of patriarchy. In particular, the archaeological writings of Marija Gimbutas and the work of science historian Carolyn Merchant were adapted, often uncritically, to support an account of early turning points in gender and environmental relations at which patriarchal antinature attitudes were strengthened. Gimbutas's work, an updating of Bachofen's theories of a primordial matriarchy, synthesized archeological findings from across Old Europe into an account of the conquest by warlike Kurgan hordes of a peaceful Neolithic matriarchy that, prior to the domination of both women and nature by men, had revered the Great Earth Mother and celebrated the sanctity of immanence rather than transcendence.<sup>13</sup> Merchant's *Death of Nature* examined shifts in gender relations and gendered imagery of natural process accompanying the rise of the seventeenth-century New Philosophy.<sup>14</sup> Her portrait of how an increasingly mechanical worldview went hand in hand with environmental arrogance and misogyny was used to support ecofeminist claims about the masculinist origin and assumptions of science and technology.

In the early 1980s, Western ecofeminists increasingly drew on the experience of Third World peasant women in their accounts of the relationship between patriarchy and environmental degradation. The women of the Chipko (tree-hugging) movement of northern India and the work of Wangari Mathai of Kenya became popular case studies of women's heightened awareness of and vulnerability to environmental degradation and their greater commitment to environmental conservation. These ecological sensibilities were often presented, whether explicitly or by implication, as intrinsic to women's nature rather than as a product of material and social circumstance of the women activists involved.<sup>15</sup> A series of Western women, Ellen Swallow Richards and other Progressive Era domestic scientists,

Rachel Carson, the whistle-blower Karen Silkwood, and Lois Gibbs and other antitoxics activists were similarly framed as exemplars of ecofeminist values.

Over time, "ecofeminism" began to refer loosely to a range of studies and movements dealing with women and environment, not just those that explicitly shared early ecofeminist premises. At the same time, some of the more unabashedly essentialist ecofeminist claims that had been influential in academic and feminist reform circles and in development studies until the mid-1980s began to be qualified. Widespread criticism of essentialism by feminist theorists led to a move to a more complex (historical, cross-culturally sensitive, and philosophically nuanced) basis for ecofeminist claims. After the first flush of ecofeminist enthusiasm, more attention was now paid to the political usefulness and hazards of essentialist claims.

Today, therefore, essentialist couplings of gender to environmental behavior are only part of the heterogeneous category referred to as "ecofeminism" within contemporary feminist thought. They remain influential, however, and have become embodied in some influential locations, such as the development policies of large foreign aid institutions (e.g., World Bank and USAID). The counterpart of this essentialist form of essentialism interpreting stereotypical Western male qualities as leading to behaviors that endanger the natural environment is also prevalent, and, not surprisingly, this view of maleness has been challenged.

### **Gender and Nature in the 1990s**

Theodore Roosevelt's conservationism and 1890s-style social feminism were based upon complementary assumptions about maleness and femaleness and about men's and women's differing connection to nature as desirable expressions of gendered sensibilities. We can discern, through examining the relations between ideals of maleness and femaleness in the 1890s and the popular understanding of nature (i.e., the nonhuman setting for human activities) that gender roles and "nature" are systemically related, varying in response to political, economic, and demographic change. The important question for the student of gender and environmental thought and action in the 1990s is whether that systemic relationship still holds for contemporary America.

Before we can consider whether or not ecofeminism is part of a general remapping of gender categories and of our understanding of "essential" nature, it is important to reemphasize the mutability and variety within "masculinity" and "femininity" as categories. The ideologies of maleness and femaleness we have described have been held by white, heterosexual, middle-class males or white, educated, middle-class women. To the extent that these groups represent the "mainstream" of American culture they are relevant groups to study, although it may be argued that with the high value placed on cultural diversity in contemporary America, the mainstream is becoming more a varied pattern of channels than a single river.

Even with these qualifications, we can usefully speak about contemporary events that have unsettled hitherto accepted definitions of masculinity. Women's continued movement into the ranks of management and the professions has triggered

hostility in men, who see decreasing opportunity for themselves in restructured corporate management or in efforts to regulate fee-for-service professions, such as medicine. The lightning rod for such feelings has been the role of women in the military and the currently popular attack on affirmative action.

In the 1980's, American economic supremacy, once unchallenged, was called in question by the growth and achievement of other industrial societies like Japan and Germany, so that the (male) American entrepreneur no longer seemed the model for the world. Middle-class white males, once the idealized type of the country; saw their cultural position challenged by immigrant, gay, foreign, and nonwhite leaders and celebrities.

Even though the objectives of feminist leaders of the 1970s and 1980s remain to be secured politically, and even though the U.S. economy of the 1990s is now preeminent, the concerns of feminists occupy considerable ideological ground across the political spectrum. The feminist critique of the stereotypical masculine character, whether stridently rejected or apologetically accepted, has achieved wide cultural currency. Secular liberals, the religious right, and left radicals must all deal with feminist claims, even if only to denounce them and inveigh against their dangers. Because of feminism's place in the ideological foreground, many of the overlapping idioms of masculinity now available to the middle-class male can be seen, at least in part, as responses to feminism. The liberal male apologetically knows he should be sharing child care and chores and be freer about voicing his feelings even if he does none of these things. Even the hypermasculinity of Rambo and Terminator type heroes is shaped in almost deliberate opposition to the feminist criticism of masculine destructiveness.

Certainly, the men's movement is self-consciously a response to feminist ideas about males. Robert Bly's best-selling *Iron John* is a case in point. The book proudly celebrates masculine difference in terms that are reactive to maternalist feminist claims and are as profoundly essentialist. A major theme of the men's movement is that men are as deeply damaged by prevailing gender roles as women. Moreover, just as maternalist feminists lauded the qualities of the female, the men's movement has tried to rework the much denigrated imagery of masculinity to emphasize the positive aspects of the male role. The monarch was not simply a patriarchal tyrant but a model of noble action and the exercise of legitimate authority. The Old Testament patriarch was not simply indulging his ego but evinced deep concern for the well-being of his tribe. The warrior could display qualities of fierceness that were needed in the battle for social justice. While Bly was one of the early celebrants of the Great Earth Mother that was to become the central motif of some forms of ecofeminism, his interests mutated so that his early devotion to fertility goddesses was countered by the cult of the wild-man, the green man, and a pantheon of other male gods represented by the men's movement as embodying socially valuable qualities. The maternalist feminist emphasis on the psychological centrality of mother/daughter bonds found a counterpart in the quest for the lost father and renewed attention to the tribal bonds between males. Thus the feminist critique of male rationality was opposed by a deliberate quest for male myths and by cults designed to revitalize male emotional experiences of nature. The quest was eclectic in the extreme, drawing on Greek mythology, African and Native American symbolism and ritual (especially through

sweat lodges, ritual drumming, and vision quests), as well as the more recent languages of addiction and recovery, therapy, and New Age religiosity.

The questions posed most vividly by the men's movement are whether, absent the feminist attack on accepted forms of masculinity in the 1970s and 1980s, maleness would have continued to be viewed implicitly as the neutral ground of the public sphere of life and whether this forced redefinition of masculinity affected the mapping of gender categories on the nonhuman "natural" environment.

Whatever the interactive social, economic, and cultural forces requiring the remapping of gender on nature in the 1980s and 1990s, we can generalize about some of the continuities and changes shaping current environmental thought. Clearly, new modes of being male or female are stabilized and made to seem natural or essential through reference to nature. In this process, nature is both a philosophical concept and a physical space for certain kinds of human activity. Today, as in the nineteenth century, the mutability or fixedness of many gendered phenomena (mathematical ability, aggression, and infidelity) is being charted through locating them in "nature" now appearing in its newest dress in the human genetic material. And, of course, the outdoors is still a setting for inducting boys into manhood, whether via off-road vehicles and hunting or wilderness vision quests.

As in the 1890s, stands taken on wilderness preservation or the conservation of natural resources are still articulated in gendered terms. Hindsight makes it clear that Theodore Roosevelt was successful in offering his contemporaries a new mode of masculinity and an accompanying stance toward the natural environment, even though both were constructs that kept inherent contradictions in uneasy balance. We may need the perspective of another century to decipher the nature/gender matrix in the style of Reagan/Bush and Clinton/Gore, but we can already discern a strongly essentialist and strikingly convergent coupling of masculinity and nature in the macho gender balancing of both "wise use" anti-environmentalists and their Earth First! opponents.

At the turn of the century, what we would now call "environmental" concern, whether for the preservation of wilderness or for the protection of worker and family health in cities, was inseparable from gender. All aspects of both forms of concern including the fact that they were separate enterprises were shaped by gendered differences in the access to political power, the separate social settings inhabited by men and women, differences in the natural landscapes and environmental settings they encountered, and differences in the idioms of caring allowed to men and women. Is gender an equally pervasive and influential factor in contemporary environmentalism, or have less polarized gender roles made environmentalism, and other spheres, a more gender-neutral enterprise? Does gender, in other words, still shape environmental concern and action, and if so, how?

While real political advances have been made since the turn of the century, the level of representation of women in political life still lags significantly behind that of men. The glass ceiling that prevails in the business world means that women exert less influence than men on the activities of the multinational and public corporations responsible for the major part of contemporary environmental destruction. And while women are more represented than men in the membership of the ten largest American

environmental groups, they are significantly underrepresented in their leadership. The hands at the helms of environmental destruction and of institutionalized resistance to it are male. Indeed, women's relative failure to achieve the sought-after political and economic success may be an important impetus behind the compensatory embrace of the more spiritually oriented forms of ecofeminism.

As in the nineteenth century, when male conservation concern drew upon the social bonds already formed in hunting and outdoors clubs; female conservation, from women's clubs; and the female urban "environmentalism" of the settlement houses from friendships formed in women's colleges, so today the milieu from which environmental movements emerge is often gender segregated. The predominantly female membership of grassroots anti-toxics movements, for example, relies on networks of acquaintance established in neighborhood friendships, PTA committees, and homeowners associations. And while the importance of the social milieu of largely male hiking and sport activities for the formation of connections among the male leadership of environmental organizations is decreasing, it remains significant.

Considerable gender differentiation also remains in the experiences of nature and of environmental hazards from which pro-environmental behavior often emerges. The motivations for pro-environmental behavior often stem from sensibilities gained in gender-polarized activities such as hunting and gardening. While such polarities remain in some spheres, however, contemporary women increasingly engage in formerly male activities, such as hiking and other outdoor sports. To the extent that wilderness activity is an antidote to the pressures of fast-track careers, its embrace and defense are likely to remain, in part, the prerogative of the males likely to occupy those stressful (and rewarding) social niches. Strenuous outdoor activities, the protection of which remains a mainstay of environmental movement support, continue to be a setting for the proving of masculinity, even though women are increasingly using the outdoors in their own gender-specific ways.

On the urban front, women are far more likely to have the kinds of experiences and knowledge that have galvanized many grassroots antitoxics activists: caring for repeatedly ill children, noticing correlations between smells and ailments, and detecting the prevalence of particular maladies within a few neighborhood blocks. Gender-differentiated response to various kinds of pollution is likely to increase in the future as more is discovered about the sexual specificity of the most prevalent industrial chemicals (o,p'-DDT, kepone, methoxychlor, and other organochlorine pesticides or their degradation products). For these chemicals act as endocrine disrupters that mimic estrogens, thus disrupting one of the few sexually specific systems of the human body. By binding to estrogen receptors they act as estrogen agonists, an action that may cause increased male reproductive problems and breast cancer in women. The rising incidence of breast cancer has already prompted new environmental concerns on the part of women.

Finally, although considerable blurring has taken place in the gender stereotyping of emotional life, certain forms and expressions of caring are still regarded as more legitimate in women than men. A calculating managerial stance toward natural resources remains more seemly for men, and a concern for future generations and the young can be more readily expressed by a woman. In this respect, Al Gore is perhaps a transitional character between traditional and emerging modes of

masculinity: he is part of a generation of postfeminist liberal men who know that expressions of tenderness and concern are called for, but who still lay their masculinity open to question in many quarters by doing so. It is probably no accident, therefore, that the most fervent and radical expressions of environmental concern that have emerged onto the contemporary scene the actions of Earth First! were associated with a swaggering machismo. Just as Theodore Roosevelt could endorse reform movement principles (and feminist planks in his Progressive party platform) precisely because his paradigmatic masculinity was so firmly established in the public eye, so the most far-reaching contemporary calls for wilderness preservation have emerged from the unambiguously male Edward Abbey and his followers. It is still easier for women to make appeals based on deformed infants and for men to talk of the need for the wild and to monkey-wrench construction site bulldozers.

History leads us to believe that as long as gendered divisions of power, property, and labor prevail, gender is likely to remain an important component of environmental discourse and actions, though the precise nature of gender-nature linkages is still contested. Ecofeminist claims for a female role as uniquely qualified protectress of the natural world don't occupy a stable position: they don't sit well alongside traditional male claims to nature as a key locus for the formation of masculinity on the one hand, and they are not easily accommodated to feminist wariness of essentialism on the other. Thus an easy formulation of a specifically feminine connection to nature is no longer available. The different attempts to shape a specifically masculine relationship to nature, such as those found in the men's movement and Earth First!, are likely to be similarly problematic. Perhaps as social relations become more equal, androgynous approaches to mobilizing feelings about nature will replace those based on divergent forms of essentialism.

At the same time, "nature" itself is mutating: less a dangerous force from which we must shelter ourselves, for example, and more a delicate remnant to be shielded from human activities; present in most people's lives more as territories imagined through genetics and molecular biology and less through daily contact with forests and rivers. It is unclear how these shifts will affect articulations of gender and nature and whether the tradition of basing political expressions of environmental concern on gender-polarized imagery will be maintained.

## Notes

1. See, for example, Bina Agarwal, "The Gender and Environment Debate: Lessons from India" *Feminist Studies* (1992): 119158. The most prominent and critiqued example of the ecofeminist appropriation of the experience of third world peasant women, and especially of the women of the Chipko movement, is the writing of Vandana Shiva, *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology, and Development* (London: Zed, 1986).
2. Cecile Jackson, "Women/Nature or Gender/History? A Critique of Ecofeminist Development," *Journal of Peasant Studies*.
3. Alice Hamilton, cited in Robert Gottlieb, *Forcing the Spring: The Transformation of the American Environmental Movement* (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1993).
4. On wilderness as a space for the regeneration of masculinity, see T. Christie Jespersen, *Engendering the Frontier. Men, Women and the Adventure in the United States from 1880/1925*. (Ph.D. diss., Rutgers University, 1997).
5. See, however, Gottlieb's revisionist history, *Forcing the Spring*.
6. Frederick Jackson Turner "The Frontier in American History," (Melbourne, FL, Krieger Publishing Co., 1976).
7. William James, "The Moral Equivalent of War" in *Essays on Faith and Morals*, (Longmans Green, New York, 1949, 311328.)
8. On this dilemma and for a gendered reading of Roosevelt, see Jespersen, "Engendering the Frontier."
9. By essentialism we mean the attribution of male and female characters and gender roles to natural rather than social origins. Essentialist thought conceives of gender attributes as inborn, enduring, and primary rather than acquired and of culturally constructed significance.
10. Vera L. Norwood, "The Nature of Knowing: Rachel Carson and the American Environment," *SIGNS*, 12 (4), 1929; H. Patricia Hynes, *The Recurring Silent Spring*, Elmsford, NY: Pergamon, 1989.
11. Minakshi Manon called our attention to this choice of journals, described in Paul Brooks' biography of Carson, *The House of Life*, (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1972.)
12. Lynn White, Jr. "Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis," *Science*, 155, 1967; Paul Shepard, *Man in the Landscape: A Historic View of the Esthetics of Nature*, (New York: Knopf, distributed by Random House, 1967); Edward Abbey, *Desert Solitaire: A Season in the Wilderness*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968); Arne

Naess, "Deep Ecology for the 22nd Century," *Deep Ecology for the 21st Century*, Bill Devall and George Sessions eds. (Boston: Shambhala Publishers, 1994).

13. Marija Gimbutas, *The Goddess and Gods of Old Europe, 6500-3500 BC: Myths and Cult Images*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).
14. Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution*, (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1989).
15. For an analysis of the global circulation of Chipko stories, and of how essentializing accounts of women's participation in Chipko undermine feminist goals, see Yaakov Garb, "Lost in Translations: Toward a Feminist Analysis of Chipko," edited by Joan Scott and Cora Kaplan, *Transitions, Environments, Translation: The Meanings of Feminism in Contemporary Politics*, (New York, Routledge, 1996).