Ecofeminism and Global Environmental Politics

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Summary and Keywords

Ecofeminism can be described as both an ecological philosophy and a social movement that draws on environmental studies, critiques of modernity and science, and feminist critical analyses and activism to explicate connections between women and nature, and the implications of these relationships for environmental politics. Feminist writer Françoise d'Eaubonne is widely credited to be the founder of ecofeminism in the early 1970s. Ecofeminists embrace a wide range of views concerning the causal role of Western dualistic thinking, patriarchal structures of power, and capitalism in ecological degradation, and the oppression of women and other subjugated peoples. Collectively, they find value in extending feminist analyses to the simultaneous interrogation of the domination of both nature and women. The history of ecofeminism may be divided into four decade-long periods. Ecofeminism emerged in the early 1970s, coincident with a significant upturn in the contemporary women's and environmental movements. In the 1980s, ecofeminism entered the academy as ecofeminist activists and scholars focused their attention on the exploitation of natural resources and women, particularly in the developing world. They criticized government and cultural institutions that constrained women's reproductive and productive roles in society, and argued that environmental protection ultimately depends on increasing women's socioeconomic and political power. In the current postfeminist and postenvironmentalist world, ecofeminists are less concerned with theoretical labels than with effective women's activism to achieve ecological sustainability.

Keywords: ecofeminism, social movement, ecofeminists, women, environmental politics, ecological philosophy

Introduction

Ecofeminism is both an ecological philosophy and a social movement that draws on environmental studies, critiques of modernity and science, and feminist critical analyses and activism to explicate connections between women and nature, and the implications of these relationships for environmental politics. Ecofeminists themselves embrace a wide range of views concerning the causal role of Western dualistic thinking, patriarchal structures of power, and capitalism in ecological degradation and the oppression of women and other subjugated peoples. Collectively, they find value in extending feminist analyses to the simultaneous interrogation of the domination of both nature and women. For most

ecofeminists, ecological sustainability ultimately depends on elevating the economic and political roles that women play in society at all levels of organization.

This essay proceeds with an intellectual history of ecofeminism that briefly summarizes key ecofeminist texts and actions that have contributed to the development of this interdisciplinary subdiscipline and social movement. On the basis of this introductory history, the essay provides a more detailed discussion of major divisions within ecofeminism – liberal, cultural, socialist, and postmodern – as a basis for understanding the utility of gender analyses for global environmental politics (GEP). Specifically, ecofeminism has made critical and significant contributions to the discourses on environmental ethics and the interrelationships among gender, environment, and development. Hence the essay continues with a discussion of environmental ethics that distinguishes ecofeminist approaches in terms of their appreciation for including care, connection, and responsibility as justifiable foundations for moral action. The essay's final section considers the shift in authority concerning sustainable practices from north to global south that characterizes ecofeminism in the twenty-first century. Contemporary international and transnational institutions concerned with environment and development increasingly regard the daily practices of Third World women – many of whom maintain close, respectful, if not caring, relationships with the land – as beacons for sustainable, ecologically sound, economic development. This veritable transfer of power sheds light on the value of the moral commitments underlying relationships between women's socioeconomic political engagement and the ecological sustainability of their communities.

Ecofeminism: An Intellectual History

The development of ecofeminism as an intellectual strand within feminism as well as many ecological fields of study is closely tied to its history as a transnational social movement that increasingly seeks to improve women's socioeconomic and political opportunities as bases for environmental protection and overall better living conditions. Ecofeminist history may be divided, roughly, into four decade-long periods. Ecofeminism emerged in the early 1970s, coincident with a significant upturn in the contemporary women's and environmental movements. Ecofeminists initially recognized that women have historically – if not also naturally – been more interested in environmental issues than men, and women's activism has been a critical basis for environmental protection since, at least, the Industrial Revolution (Norwood 1993; Caiazza and Barrett 2003). Ecofeminism entered the academy in the 1980s. Ecofeminist activists and scholars focused their attention on the common exploitation of natural resources and women, particularly in the developing world (Collard and Contrucci 1988; Mies and Shiva 1993; Salleh 1997;). They criticized governmental and cultural institutions that constrain women's reproductive and productive roles in society, and argued that environmental protection ultimately depends on increasing women's socioeconomic and political power. This moment of ecofeminist unity culminated in the Women's Action Agenda 21, presented at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in 1992. Ecofeminists in the current postfeminist (Clark-Flory 2009) and postenvironmentalist (Shellenberger and Nordhaus

2004; Stein 2008) world are less concerned with theoretical labels than with effective women's activism to achieve ecological sustainability.

The 1970s: Establishing Women's Relationship with Nature

Feminist writer Françoise d'Eaubonne is widely credited as the founder of ecofeminism as both an ecological philosophy and a social movement in the early 1970s. In 1972, d'Eaubonne established the Ecologie-Feminisme (Ecology-Feminism) Center in Paris; 2 years later, she coined the term *ecofeminisme* ("ecofeminism") in *Feminism or Death* (d'Eaubonne 1974), which blames masculinist culture for excessive population growth, pollution, and other sources of environmental degradation. D'Eaubonne cites the existence of a unique and significant relationship between women and nature and, on that basis, advocates specifically women's environmental activism to save the Earth.

A multidisciplinary collection of scholars echoed d'Eaubonne's recognition of the historical associations between women and nature. In 1974, cultural anthropologist Sherry Ortner (1974) published "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?" which argues that women's subordination to men is rooted in their symbolic connection to nature. A year later, Christian theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether was among the first ecofeminists to explore connections between sexism, racism, anti-Semitism, environmental destruction, and other forms of domination in *New Woman, New Earth* (Ruether 1975). Susan Griffin, a poet, essayist, playwright, and screenwriter, completed the widely acclaimed *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Insider Her* (1978) – an extended prose poem that pits scientific logic against women and life generally in 1978. Environmental historian and philosopher Carolyn Merchant followed this intellectual assault on scientism with a more academic treatise – *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (1980) – about how modern science's mechanistic worldview has enabled the simultaneous exploitation of nature and subordination of women.

This development of ecofeminism in scholarly and literary circles during the late 1970s occurred within a context of ecofeminism's expanding intellectual and social influence in diverse fora throughout the world. According to Noel Sturgeon's (1997) history of the origins of ecofeminism, the first academic conference on the topic occurred in 1974: the Women and the Environment conference at UC Berkeley. Later in the 1970s, Ynestra King taught the first ecofeminist courses at the Institute for Social Ecology, an educational and activist institution (granting BA degrees) dedicated to the construction of a "humane, ecological, and liberatory society" (www.social-ecology.org). Yet it was the 1980 Women and Life on Earth: Ecofeminism in the 1980s conference, organized by King and others following the meltdown at the Three Mile Island nuclear power plant, that has come to characterize an intense period of protests and demonstrations by women against environmental destruction. More than 650 women attended the conference, which featured 80 panels and workshops on a wide range of topics, including alternative technology, organizing, feminist theory, health, militarism, racism, urban ecology, and theater. The event engendered a Woman and Life on Earth (WLOE) conference in London in 1981 as well as the or-

ganization of 26 WLOE groups in England and nine additional WLOE groups worldwide (Sturgeon 1997).

The 1980s: Gendering Sustainable Development

These early years of the expanding ecofeminism movement also coincided with the establishment of the United Nation's Decade for Women, (1975–85) during which UN-sponsored meetings brought hundreds of international and nongovernmental organizations and tens of thousands of women – including some ecofeminists – together to consider issues associated with the status of women (Zinsser 1990). Notably, the relationship between women and the natural environment was among the "critical issues" discussed. Participants concluded that environmental degradation and pollution are destroying fragile ecosystems worldwide and displacing communities, which increasingly threatens the sustainability of safe and healthy environments, especially for (poor) women and their children. Women's actions are consequently essential to the institution of sustainable, ecologically sound patterns of production and consumption and approaches to natural resource management (United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women 1995).

Ecofeminist scholarship and activism had generated sufficient interest and discourse by the early 1980s to support the publication of a number of anthologies now regarded as central to the subfield, and indicative of ecofemimists' efforts to encourage inclusivity and celebrate difference. The first of these was *Reclaim the Earth: Women Speak out for Life on Earth*, edited by activists Stephanie Leland and Leonie Caldecott (1983). Perhaps more characteristic of ecofeminism's second decade, which included both the movement of "global warming" to center stage internationally and the end of the Cold War, was *Healing the Wounds: The Promise of Ecofeminism*, edited by activist, writer, and ecologically conscious publisher Judith Plant (1989). Petra Kelly, the environmental and peace activist credited as a founder of West Germany's Green Party in 1979, sets the tone in her foreword to the volume, addressed to her "Dear Sisters":

> To eliminate war and its tools, to eliminate racism and repression, we must eliminate its causes. Our call to action, our call for nonviolent transformation of society is based on the belief that the struggle for disarmament, peace, social justice, protection of the planet Earth, and the fulfillment of basic human needs and human rights are *one* and indivisible
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> (Plant 1989:x).

Healing the Wounds includes 25 chapters by women activists, athletes, journalists, performance artists, scholars, theorists, therapists, writers, a mediator, and a scientist that collectively describe ecofeminist philosophy and locate it as a movement in terms of contemporary politics, spirituality, and community-building efforts. *Reweaving the World: The Emergence of Ecofeminism*, edited by Irene Diamond and Gloria Orenstein (1990), includes chapters by many of the same contributors, yet provides a more academic treat-

ment of ecofeminism that differentiates it from Deep Ecology and delineates ecofeminist approaches for responding to the ongoing environmental crisis.

When considered in rough chronological order, these texts support Sturgeon's (1997) argument that the virulent women's peace activism associated with the 1980s did not transform ecofeminism; rather, ecofeminism strongly influenced peace politics during this period. The 1980 Women's Pentagon Action, in which 2,000 women surrounded the Pentagon to protest nuclear war and weapons development, in particular, was arguably a WLOE phenomenon (Sturgeon 1997; Merchant 2005). Likewise, ecofeminists' support for, and participation in, the Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp grew out of the WLOE. It originated when a group of predominantly women protesters under the WLOE banner marched 125 miles, from Cardiff in South Wales to the Royal Air Force base at Berkshire, England, seeking to meet with John Nott, who was then minister of defense (Jones 1989; Liddington 1991). When Nott refused, the marchers protested by creating a camp that remained there until September 2000, when the last of the protestors left the site. These ecofeminist actions occurred simultaneously with an increase in significant scholarly meetings, from a relatively small conference on ecofeminism held at California State University, Sonoma, in 1981, to a major conference at the University of Southern California, organized by Irene Diamond (a political scientist) and Gloria Orenstein (a scholar of literature and gender studies) – Ecofeminist Perspectives: Culture, Nature, Theory – to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the publication of *Silent Spring*, by Rachel Carson (1962).

Gender, Environment, and Development on the International Agenda: the 1990s

Diamond and Orenstein later published *Reweaving the World: The Emergence of Ecofeminism* (1990), an anthology that, consistent with ecofeminist collections to date, included scholarly articles as well as essays and poetry and served as a major resource on the theory, philosophy, politics, and activism of practicing ecofeminists. In contrast, *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* published a special issue on ecological feminism a year later, solidifying a place in the academe for ecofeminism; it was reprinted in 1996 as *Ecological Feminist Philosophies*, edited by Karen Warren. Warren also published the anthology *Ecological Feminism* (1994), which seeks to provide a specifically philosophical explanation for why we must understand the natural environment as a feminist issue. Warren (1994:2) explains that what makes ecofeminism *feminist* is simply its inherent "commitment to the recognition and elimination of male-gender bias wherever and whenever it occurs, and to the development of practices, policies, and theories which are not male-gender biased" (Warren 1994:1). Ecofeminism's "understanding of and commitment to the importance of valuing and preserving ecosystems" (Warren 1994:2) renders it *ecological*.

While this conceptual shift away from emphasizing women's essential connection to earth appears to signal a breach between ecofeminist philosophy and ecological feminist activism, it more accurately illuminates heightened awareness of heretofore inadequately

examined aspects of ecofeminism. Mark Soma and Sue Tolleson-Rinehart (1997) in particular address a fundamental question inherent in much scholarly ecofeminist literature: is it women's biology, or feminine inculturation, that explains their environmentalism in the United States and Europe? Their analysis suggests that the "feminist orientations" of men as well as women can explain political support for environmental protection. This conclusion supports Ariel Salleh's (1997) argument that men as well as women should be regarded as being "close to nature"; however, "attaining the prize of masculine identity [typically] depends on men distancing themselves from that fact" (Salleh 1997:13). While Salleh seeks to combat environmental degradation by strengthening women's identification with nature via alliance between women's and indigenous movements, Sturgeon's (1997) interrogation of gender and other essentialisms positions ecofeminism as a basis for creating "an anti-essentialist coalition politics while deploying a strategic politics of identity" (Sturgeon 1997:5). In contrast, Catriona Sandilands's *The Good-Natured Feminist* (1999) suggests that the most constructive way through the gender-identity minefield of environmental activism is to provide nature a voice by privileging democracy over identity in a radical, democratic politics of nature.

Scholarly movement away from explaining what ecofeminism is in inclusive terms to critiquing and contextualizing ecofeminist philosophy and women's environmental activism mirrors the substance of ecofeminists' political engagements through much of the post-Cold War period. With the threat of imminent nuclear annihilation dampened, ecofeminist activists returned to an engagement with women – poor women and members of indigenous societies, in particular – and their actual interactions with the natural environment. Indeed, the worldwide range of plausibly ecofeminist actions had become so extensive by the mid-1990s that Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva opened *Ecofeminism* (1993) with the admission that "perhaps it was wiser to accept these differences, instead of trying to contain them within such a universalistic term as ecofeminism" (Mies and Shiva 1993:1). In addition to oft-referenced instances of ecofeminist activism, such as Lois Gibb's establishing the Citizen's Clearing House for Hazardous Waste and the Chipko women's resistance to logging in the Himalaya mountains, women had, by then, become prominent in protests against nuclear power in the United States and Europe, deforestation in Ecuador (Ress 2006), desertification in Kenya, and chemically and genetically modified food on four continents. Throughout much of the global south, women were also increasingly visible on the front lines of campaigns: for access to fresh water, to conserve soil in the interest of sustainable agriculture, for universal health care, and to establish schools.

During this period of accelerating globalization, scholars and activists alike focused on the interrelationship between the effects of uneven patterns of economic growth and development, such as scarcity, environmental degradation, and conflict, and women's empowerment and human rights. Perhaps most importantly, in 1991, Bella Abzug, an American legislator and champion of women's rights, and Mim Kelber, a feminist writer and journalist, established the Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO). Although WEDO is not an ecofeminist organization in name, its advocacy for women's leadership as a means to "achieve economic, social and gender justice, a healthy, peaceful planet and human rights for all" (www.wedo.org/aboutus.aspx) clearly

reflects ecofeminists' vision. By the end of that year, WEDO had organized and held the World Women's Conference for a Healthy Planet in Miami, Florida, which was attended by ecofeminist scholars representing a range of academic disciplines and a wide range of environmental and women's activists. The goals of the event were: (1) to produce a Women's Action Agenda for delivery and discussion at the then upcoming 1992 UNCED, or "Earth Summit" to be held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil; (2) to initiate action to ensure that all Earth Summit delegations would be gender-balanced; and (3) to facilitate the growth of an international network of women acting in solidarity to ensure a strong women's voice on all issues pertaining to the environment and development. The Miami conference yielded the Women's Action Agenda 21, a policy document that relates the experiences of diverse groups of women in localized environmental actions to a critique of mainstream liberal–democratic economic and military processes and which was discussed widely during the Earth Summit (Leach 2003).

Twenty-First Century Ecofeminism

With a keen awareness of activists' efforts to address current ecological crises from a women-and-development perspective, contemporary ecofeminist scholars have increasingly emphasized women's global citizenship and participation in democratic processes of economic, environmental, and security policy making. Following Sturgeon's (1997) call for a more inclusive ecofeminist politics – even though, in practice, any given women's standpoint might be used strategically – Sandilands (1999) locates ecofeminism squarely in the context of contemporary democratic theory. In its efforts to establish a genuinely global environmental politics founded on the particular standpoint of some women, ecofeminism has paradoxically increased the number and diversity of actual women's voices its philosophies and practices seek to include. She argues that the resulting

> proliferation of discourses around nature […] is a crucial part of democratic ecological politics; opening up nature to multiple interpretation means that experiences of nature can be democratized and offers up the possibility of thinking of nature as an actor in the process of co-constructing the world
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> (Sandilands 1999:196).

Sandilands's early recognition of the democratic potential inherent in ecofeminists' contending standpoints has become more prevalent among ecofeminist scholars. Joni Seager (2003) urges feminist environmentalists to transcend ecofeminist debates surrounding women's essential nature, historically caring practices, and ecological responsibilities in the interest of confronting the current environmental crisis quickly and appropriately. Most recently, in *Beyond Mothering Earth: Ecological Citizenship and the Politics of Care* (2006), Sherilyn MacGregor seeks to elevate women's citizenship and civic action without jeopardizing the centrality of interpersonal relationships and care work to many women's motivations for environmental activism.

Gender and Global Environmental Politics: Ecofeminist Contributions

As both an ecological philosophy and a social movement, ecofeminism embodies a multi-faceted critique of global environmental politics. In contrast to mainstream approaches to global environmental politics, which focus on the role of the nation state or institutions in global, collective efforts to protect and manage the natural environment, feminist critiques emphasize the contextualized experiences of women in politics. Ecofeminism examines these experiences specifically as they pertain to nature and the natural environment, especially the daily practices and environmental activism of women living in industrializing nations. The major strands of ecofeminist thought and action may be distinguished on the basis of both their conceptualizations of nature and our relationship to it, and their epistemological orientations. Each of these strands – liberal, cultural, socialist, and postmodern – corresponds to an (eco)feminist perspective on environmental ethics, and suggests a particular gender-sensitive approach to sustained environmental protection (Lahar 1991). Figure 1 identifies these theoretical connections by updating Merchant's (1990:104) "feminism and the environment" table.

Liberal Ecofeminism

Liberal ecofeminism has become practically mainstream. Liberal ecofeminists attribute current environmental problems to economic growth, which has accelerated and diffused from Europe and North America to the industrializing south with insufficient attention to its myriad ecological impacts. Furthermore, and consistent with conventional, social scientific studies, liberal ecofeminists distinguish between human and nonhuman nature and recognize that individuals working within existing domestic political and intergovernmental systems have the capacity to manage, if not control, the natural environment. They argue that as women gain political influence as a consequence of their greater access to education and participation in the economy throughout much of the world, their contributions to environmental politics and policy will increase in number and significance. Liberal ecofeminists, furthermore, trust empirical studies of women and environmental politics to document women's efforts to develop and implement ecologically conscious, gender-sensitive policy both within and between nations.

Figure 1 Ecofemisim, theory, and political action

Liberal ecofeminists are frequently criticized for their optimistic reliance on government to ensure a level of environmental protection that reflects how women experience and value nature. To date, women continue to lack political power relative to men so that, arguably, any efforts by ecofeminists to reform existing patriarchal, naturist political institutions would ultimately be counterproductive. Ecofeminists and their political representatives are as likely to be transformed by the system they seek to affect as they are to change ecologically regressive government institutions. Merchant (2005) explains that although women do have many and varied opportunities to participate in environmental politics and policy making – internationally, if not also within their own nations – they rarely consider themselves to be feminists or regard the natural environment as a feminist issue. Those who do are frequently indistinguishable from their male counterparts in terms of their support for social equality, horizontally organized institutions, and networking with like-minded members of other environmental agencies and organizations.

Cultural Ecofeminism

In contrast to their liberal sisters, cultural ecofeminists argue that women's personal and spiritual connections to nature follow from the ways in which the are biologically and culturally different from men. They are the standard-bearers of the ecofeminist movement, which, since its formal emergence in the early 1970s, has been widely understood as a direct and potent response to the mutual association and devaluation of women and nature, particularly in contemporary Western culture. They argue that, historically, women have been viewed as closer to nature by virtue of their physiology, social roles, and psychological makeup. According to Merchant,

> Physiologically, women bring forth life from their bodies, undergoing the pleasures, pain, and stigmas attached to menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, and nursing, while men's physiology leave them freer to travel, hunt, conduct warfare, and engage in public affairs. Socially, childrearing and domestic caretaking have kept married women close to the hearth and out of the workplace. Psychologically, women have been assigned greater emotional capacities with great ties to the par-

> ticular, personal, and present than men who are viewed as more rational and objective with a greater capacity for abstract thinking
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> (Merchant 2005:202).

Cultural feminists blame patriarchal culture and associated economic and political systems for the current state of environmental degradation, and maintain that women's experiences with and connection to nature provide more valid bases for environmental policy. Consequently, they call for direct social action to establish new systems of exchange and governance consistent with a justly higher regard for both women and nature.

At minimum, cultural ecofeminists differentiate women from men with respect to their closer relationships to nature, and question men's simultaneous domination of women and nature. They argue that this "relation of separation and domination" (Plumwood 1993 :47), or dualism, involves an unjustifiable value hierarchy that also elevates subject/mind/reason over object/body/emotion (Mies and Shiva 1993). Some go further to embrace and valorize women and all that would be considered culturally feminine – from women's biological capacity to bear children, to their socialization as caretakers, to their relationship-oriented habits of mind. Such cultural ecofeminists draw on archeological evidence from Neolithic Europe to argue that prehistorical agrarian societies were characteristically peaceful and identified by goddess worship (Gimbutas 1982; see Eller 2001 for a key counterargument). They blame invasion from Eurasian tribes – perhaps in combination with significant population growth, the development of highly diversified economies, and the establishment of more complex systems of governance – for patriarchy and associated cultural domination and religious demonization of women (Christ 1979; Spretnak 1981; 1986; Lerner 1986; Eisler 1988; 2003; Plaskow and Christ 1989; Daly 1990; Ruether 1991). Thus their positive reevaluation of cultural associations between women's biology and primary reproductive role in society provides a compelling basis for personal empowerment, collective identity, and environmental activism.

Cultural feminism has been terrifically effective as a source of women's ecological concern and resulting social action. Both Sturgeon (1997) and Merchant (2005) explicitly cite women's identification with their roles as (prospective) life-givers, in contrast to men's roles as destroyers of life through support for weapons and other harmful technologies, as the chief motivation for their environmentalism. In this sense, cultural ecofeminism easily accounts for women's opposition to nuclear weapons and war as well as chemically dependent factory farming and hazardous waste dumping. However, from the start, this strand of ecofeminism has faced sharp criticism for being essentialist – in terms of both biological determinism and universalism.

Essentialism is immediately problematic because it supports the dominant patriarchal view of women as nurturers whose attention and activity is necessarily focused on the private world of home and family. By maintaining that biology is a more important determinant of moral political action than is socialization, cultural ecofeminists absolve men of responsibility for environmental protection (unless or until preserving nature becomes sufficiently profitable). This situation is particularly disturbing insofar as men remain so-

cioeconomically and politically more powerful than women. The conflation of traditional female physiology and psychology in negative, feminine stereotypes arguably inhibits women – and so also any wisdom born of their experiences – from impacting environmental politics and policy (Gaard 1993; see also Okin 1989).

Essentialism is also troubling because it justifies cultural ecofeminists' claims that all women are similarly inclined to home-making and caretaking, and more likely than men to assume some level of ecological responsibility. Although this tack arguably provides a "common ground" for women's feminist and ecological activism (Mies and Shiva 1993; Sturgeon 1997), such a simple characterization of women is not only contradictory to liberal feminists' and social liberals' gender-equality ideals, but also antithetical to their progressively stronger recognition and tolerance of individual and collective differences. Variations on this critique have been leveled by feminist women of color and Third World feminists, who often do not share the experiences and interests of more mainstream white, middle class feminist theorists and activists (Davenport 1981; Yamada 1981; Fuss 1989; Narayan 2000; Anzaldúa and Keating 2002). Simply put, a single ecofeminist standpoint cannot possibly be the basis for emancipating all women, let alone all people, and all of nature.

Perhaps fortunately, then, cultural ecofeminists are wrong with respect to any wholesale triumph of "nature over nurture." While current research in evolutionary biology, psychology, and sociology suggests that whether or not women actually are closer to nature is, at best, a hotly contested question (Angier 1999; Hrdy 1999; Allen 2001), it is manifestly clear that identification with nonhuman nature (Wilson 1986; Roach 1991; Milton 2002), as well as the capacity to establish and maintain relationships, including that involved in raising children, is not necessarily constrained by gender – or race or class, for that matter (Manning 1992; Tronto 1993; Buege 1994; Allport 1998; Hrdy 1999). Young people, grandparents, society's economically disadvantaged and disenfranchised members, and others in positions of submission and servility are often more likely than others to engage in the day-to-day caretaking practices that arguably prompt ecological awareness and environmental activism.

Socialist Ecofeminism

Socialist ecofeminism is the most recent iteration of social versions of ecofeminism. Early, Marxist ecofeminists argued that humans, socially constructed in terms of economic production, engaged with a scientifically and technically transformed nature. They envisioned a socialist society in which the natural environment would be only minimally subjugated as the necessary side effect of providing adequate – never excessive – resources for all people, regardless of social class or gender. Later, social ecofeminists developed a feminist variation of social ecology. They distinguished themselves from cultural ecofeminists by recognizing a materialist connection between nature and *all* humans, in spite of obvious biological and significant cultural differences between men and women. Social ecofeminists followed suit, arguing that the devastating environmental harm associated with contemporary capitalist society could be remedied only by eliminating all systems of

domination, not just the current and specific form of patriarchal domination of women by men that concerns cultural ecofeminists (Biehl 1988; King 1991; Plumwood 1993). Thus men and women alike are made responsible for establishing the institutional and behavioral changes necessary to ensure ecological sustainability.

Like their materialist compatriots, Socialist ecofeminists seek to distance themselves from cultural ecofeminists' essentialist stigma, yet attempt to acknowledge and include any number of women's particular lived experiences. As such, socialist ecofeminism provides an alternative, antiessentialist or conceptual, ecofeminist standpoint emphasizing the social construction of human and nonhuman nature (King 1996; Sturgeon 1997; Merchant 2005). This strand of ecofeminism regards nature – whether experienced or consumed directly or as the result of scientific and/or technological transformation – as the basis for all human life. Socialist ecofeminists critique modern capitalist, patriarchal institutions and culture for valuing production, which is associated with capital accumulation by working men, over reproduction, which is solidly within the domain of the world's women. They argue that nature, like women, has been devalued, exploited, and even destroyed by the entwined forces of capitalism and patriarchy. Yet the manner and extent to which this generalization is true varies historically and geographically, making it theoretically possible for socialist ecofeminists to include the values and viewpoints of women of color and Third World women in critical analyses of specific environmental problems and related social conflicts.

The politics of managing population growth is often cited as an illustrative case for the critical and explanatory power of socialist ecofeminism. Since the publication of Paul Erlich's *The Population Bomb* in 1968, which restated Thomas Malthus's (1798) fears of social breakdown from overpopulation, environmentalists have regarded population control as essential to the planet's ecological health. Whether or not they are card-carrying members of Zero Population Growth (ZPG), many environmentalists continue to adhere to a two-child cap on family size, if they choose to reproduce at all. The adoption of such ethical restrictions on human reproduction has coincided with the development of "the pill" and other means of family planning during a period of tremendous economic growth and related social mobility for women and minorities in the world's most industrialized nations. Consequently, populations have remained steady or declined throughout Europe and North America, as well as parts of Latin American, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East (Central Intelligence Agency 2009; United Nations Population Division 2009). Seeking to extend these successes to all Third World nations, development agencies and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) established and supported – both financially and morally – population control measures in industrializing nations (Hawthorne 2002).

Socialist ecofeminists criticize their actions, and environmentalists' more general enthusiasm for the population control project, for a handful of reasons (Diamond 1994). At the very least, universal population control strategies ignore the historical process by which family size typically declines with economic growth; thus reducing family size preemptively in agrarian societies that continue to require many hands to work the land is culturally and ecologically indefensible (Mies and Shiva 1993; Salleh 1997; Merchant 2005). Se-

cond, governments, agencies, and NGOS have little control over how family planning technologies – from birth control pills and implanted devices, to prenatal testing, to sterilization – will ultimately be used. Valerie Hudson and Andrea den Boer (2004) argue that the combined effect of limitations on family size and prenatal sex detection has been a dangerous gender imbalance. Specifically, an overabundance of men relative to women in a given society is associated with higher levels of violence (Hudson and den Boer 2004), which is ecologically negative without even touching on questions of gendered human relationships to nature. Third, under conditions of extreme poverty, in places where women, children, and body parts are saleable, enabling desperate people to produce babies for either adoption or organ harvesting is, arguably, ethically reprehensible. Fourth, to the extent that experimental family planning technologies, or those known to be harmful, are "dumped" into poorer societies, Third World women become "mindless objects" (Merchant 2005:211) for study. Finally, this whole discussion of what is good for industrializing societies borders on paternalism, even modern imperialism.

Socialist ecofeminists are on shaky ground. While their intention to interrogate ecological positions that may have been uncritically adopted by Western ecofeminists is admirable, even their empirical critiques cannot actually voice the experiences and viewpoints of "other" women. Indeed, socialist ecofeminism is not as clearly identified with any faction of the ecofeminist movement as liberal and cultural ecofeminisms are (Sturgeon 1997). Socialist ecofeminism is thus promising with respect to its theoretical capacity to engage multiple feminist, ecological positions; however, we arguably have yet to see actual ecofeminist activists who share a socialist standpoint dialogue from multiple and potentially contradictory experiential locations. According to Sturgeon (1997), Merchant's (2005) socialist ecofeminism *explains* ecofeminist action, but does not *include* it; however, relative to contemporary representations of ecofeminist postmodernism, socialist ecofeminists are the activists.

Ecofeminist Postmodernism

In contrast to recent critical analyses of ecofeminism, Figure 1 includes ecofeminist postmodernism (Sylvester 1994; Sturgeon 1997; Sandilands 1999). Feminist postmodernism is skeptical about "the self, gender, knowledge, social relations, and culture [understood by] linear, teleological, hierarchical, holistic, or binary ways of thinking and being" (Flax 1987 :622; see also Sylvester 1994; Sturgeon 1997; Sandilands 1999). In the context of ecofeminist debates concerning the most appropriate feminist standpoint for correctly responding to environmental crises, feminist postmodernism regards any coherent "women" identity to be a myth (Haraway 1996; Sandilands 1999). In a sense, this claim generalizes socialist ecofeminists' realization that a single, ecofeminist standpoint is untenable; the category "women" cannot adequately describe or possibly include white women and women of color, middle-class and working-class women, heterosexual and bisexual women and lesbians, let alone the vast array of economically, racially, and culturally distinct classes of Third World women. Hence the postmodern problem for contemporary ecofeminists: how can we simultaneously question the existence of "women" and use this social category to

create coalitions of actual women to engage effectively in domestic and international environmental politics (Salleh 1997; Sturgeon 1997; Sandilands 1999; see also Butler 1993)?

The intuition here is that there is a gap between the lives of actual women and the articulated, politicized category "women" so that all coalitions – including those consisting of ecofeminists – are performative (Butler 1993), even strategic (Sturgeon 1997). Any given ecofeminist standpoint is, therefore, partial and contingent on its social, economic, and global, political context. The ecologically uncertain future determined by even our best, most socially conscious and scientifically knowledgeable, individual and collective decisions is unsettling – even more so, when the category "nature" is also questioned. Ecofeminist postmodernism posits a socially constructed and active nature. Nature is, accordingly, "an agent […] not a deterministic force, a crude biological limit upon human activity, or even a realm out of which the social emerges" (Sandilands 1999:118). So that nature with which myriad differently constructed women, who are themselves collectively different from likewise socially constructed men, is a moving target, a perpetual unknown. Sandilands (1999) urges ecofeminists to "play" in the gap between actual women and tangible nature, on the one hand, and their representations in culture and politics, on the other. Her expectation is that such activity may just be able to demonstrate that although neither gender nor nature is conceptually solid, ecofeminists' ideal woman–nature bond remains a "performative possibility" (Sandilands 1999:120).

Clearly, such postmodern skepticism cannot easily provide a guide to action. From the vantage point of ecofeminist postmodernism, it is difficult to argue that any one category of women, however historically, culturally, economically, and/or racially defined, really understands nature or can correctly construct nature and articulate the most ecologically sustainable human–nature relationship (see Holler 1990). It follows that the generalization of any such preferred mode of human–nature interaction among societies internationally would be impracticable. For example, Mies and Shiva's (1993) proposition that all the world's societies should forego capitalist development and modernization in favor of a local "subsistence and survival" mode of social organization, economic exchange, and political participation ultimately may not produce a sustainable ecological system. That's okay, according to Sturgeon, who argues that we do not actually need to craft

> a new and more prefect ecofeminism, but rather to recognize as necessary the dance of critique and consolidation that is part of theorizing and political action; the dialectic of creating, deconstructing, and reforming political identities, new alliances, complex analyses, and creative oppositional strategies
>
> (Sturgeon 1997:195).

There is a certain playfulness in this theoretical and practical call to action that is transgressive yet may be exactly right (see Alaimo 1994).

Ecofeminist Perspectives on Environmental Ethics

Ecofeminists' most significant contributions to global environmental politics feature cogent critiques of environmental ethics. Much of the literature on ethics that is relevant to thinking about the politics of transboundary and global environmental problems is distinguished by a common effort to incorporate the moral treatment of the natural environment and nonhuman species into traditional ethical frameworks – e.g., utilitarianism or Kantian reasoning – which premise moral action on the definition of universally applicable rules. Even the most progressive of these approaches typically fail to appreciate the everyday, and often very individualized, contexts in which moral dilemmas concerning the natural environment arise and decisions are made (Stone 1993; Holland 2000; Miller and Rees 2000). Ecofeminists' demands for women's equal and explicit inclusion in global environmental politics reflect their conviction that women's particular relationships to, experiences with, and views on the natural environment matter. This appreciation for individual, even emotional, relationships with nature locates ecofeminist perspectives on environmental ethics among the so-called radical or alternative variants. Aldo Leopold's (1970) land ethic, for instance, is a matter of both cognizance of, and identity with, nature and nonhuman species as members of a common community. Likewise, Karen Warren's (2000) care-sensitive ecofeminist ethic posits that emotions, particularly those associated with our capacity to care, are central to moral reasoning.

That said, cultural ecofeminists may be considered ethical standouts on the basis of their promotion of women's physiological, social, and psychological proximity to nature. Their – admittedly essentialist and universalist – characterization of women as caretakers suggests a relatively easy affinity between cultural ecofeminists and proponents of care ethics. According to Joan Tronto (1995:2), this ethical tack "begins from a different understanding of human nature and human interaction. Rather than seeing people as rational actors pursuing their own goals and maximizing their interests, we must instead see people as constantly enmeshed in relationships of care." The care ethic ties moral goodness to meeting demands for care as they arise, and, more pointedly, to providing for the care of members of a given society (Tronto 1993:126). Although the care ethic is defined in terms of specific, personal relationships, Virginia Held (1993) and Fiona Robinson (1999) both argue that caring for others need not be limited to one's family members or proximate others. Moreover, Roger King (1996) argues that emotional and psychological capacities that accompany caring are essential to the successful preservation and protection of the natural environment.

Rather than extend care defined in terms of an interpersonal relationships to nature and the political realm of environmental politics, socialist ecofeminists' high regard for lived experience is arguably consistent with Warren's (2000) care-sensitive ethic. Warren (2000 :108) explains that this variation of the care ethic requires a basic ability to care, an appreciation for the particular contexts in which ethical principles apply, and the actual practice(s) of caring. She includes a narrative description of her first rock-climbing expe-

rience intended to sensitize the reader to the value of so contextualizing moral reasoning about the environment, and the manner in which care for nature or wildness can emerge out of an individual's experience in relationships with the natural environment. The following oft-quoted excerpt refers to Warren's second day of climbing:

> I rappelled down about 200 feet from the top of the Palisades at Lake Superior to just a few feet above the water level. I could see no one – not my belayer, not the other climbers, no one. I unhooked slowly from the rappel rope and took a deep cleansing breath. I looked all around me – really looked – and listened. I heard a cacophony of voices – birds, trickles of water on the rock before me, waves lapping against the rocks below. I closed my eyes and began to feel the rock with my hands – the cracks and crannies, the raised lichen and mosses, the almost imperceptible nubs that might provide a resting place for my fingers and toes when I began to climb […] I felt an overwhelming sense of gratitude for what it offered me – a chance to know myself and the rock differently, to appreciate the unforeseen miracles like the tiny flowers growing in the even tinier cracks in the rock's surface, and to come to know a sense of being in relationship with the natural environment […] I realized then that I had come to care about this cliff
>
> (Warren 2000:102–3).

This narrative describes Warren's deepening relationship with her nonhuman environment and her motivation to care about the cliff and the rocks as "earth others," as opposed to "sources of enjoyment or […] benefit to humans" (Warren 2000:121). In contrast to Warren's first day of climbing, which she approached as a conqueror, it is a story of transformation and growth that reveals what matters in ethical decision making.

Although this alternative, conceptual route toward care as the basis for environmental ethics does evade criticism as essentialist, reliance on experience remains problematic. Any human encounter with the natural environment is subject to cultural and personal interpretations that necessarily presuppose some manner of reconstruction of the lived experience that is not intrinsic to the experience itself. Thus it is impossible to conclude on the basis of experiences like Warren's that care is directly beneficial to the natural environment. Yet Milton (2002) maintains that such experiences are the primary bases for the individual, emotional relationships with the earth that environmental activism requires.

Ecofeminist postmodernism seeks a way around this version of the general problem of reconciling skepticism concerning the particular – in this case, individual experience and relationships with nature – with the real need for a universal claim – here, the correct moral foundation for environmental action validated in terms of individuals' experiences – by recognizing the potential inherent in "empty space." These gaps exist between individualized human–nature experiences, which are understood to be constructed, and collective desire to get these experienced relationships "right" (Sandilands 1999:180; see also Kheel 2008), which may never be fulfilled. That is where the Real resides. An ethics of the Real, according to Sandilands (1999), suggests that the right relationship with it permits nature to be veiled, unknown. An ethics of the Real acknowledges that nature is wild, and

the best ecofeminists can do is to encircle it, engaging in potentially unending debate about and with it. Both Hawthorne (2002) and Sandilands (1999) view this conclusion as the basis for a “wild” democratic politics.

Ecofeminism and Economic Development

Ecofeminists are among those social activists who are convinced that women’s social, economic, and political empowerment is essential for local, regional, and global ecological sustainability. Initially, predominantly white, Western ecofeminists positioned themselves as sources of knowledge for women of color and Third World women seeking improved standards of living, including greater environmental quality. By the end of the twentieth century, ecofeminists were increasingly looking to women in industrializing nations and indigenous communities for guidance regarding how humans can live sustainably in today’s modern and globalizing world (Salleh 1997; Merchant 2005).

Few deny that Third World women, as members of both a globally marginalized class *and* a subjugated gender, have suffered most from postcolonial maldevelopment (Mies and Shiva 1993). In response, they have organized myriad movements that challenge specific governments, agencies, and corporations, as well as local, regional, and global institutional and economic systems to adopt policies and establish programs to ensure, at least, subsistence and good health for their communities. Volumes have been written on this activism with respect to land and wilderness; farming, fishing, and forestry; globalization; and human and intellectual property rights. Foremost among recent compilations of these diverse cases is, perhaps, Susan Hawthorne’s *Wild Politics* (2002), which draws on feminist and indigenous knowledge to critique global, Western culture and develop a vision founded on the principle of biodiversity. What Hawthorne (2002:370) has in mind is a transformed global culture inspired by “the wild, biodiversity, locatedness, and knowledge of local conditions, epistemological multiversity, connection, and relationship.” Her ideal notably intersects, but is not limited to, Mies and Shiva’s (1993) popular proposal for a localized, participatory political economy that emphasizes mutual subsistence in a context of dense interpersonal relationships and reverence for humans’ reliance on the Earth.

Cultural ecofeminists argue that achieving even this admittedly minimal ecological goal of sustaining human and nonhuman life on Earth requires that we recognize the diversity of Third World women’s experiences and listen to their “previously silenced voices” (Chowdhry 1995:39). Antiessentialist critics, of course, question whether is possible to gain authentic ecological advice from “native informants” without maintaining extant international cultural, racial, and patriarchal power relationships (Chowdhry 1995; Mohanty 2002). Socialist ecofeminists contend that such a critical “view from below” (Salleh 1997:178) embodies a carnal basis for coming to understand the true identities of, and interconnections between, human and nonhuman nature. Postmodernists would counter that theorists and activists alike can instead come close to attaining that desired knowledge if they are willing to destabilize identifications between actual (men

and) women in Third World societies and environmental reality, and the representations of these phenomena in political practice.

To the extent that their firsthand experience of environmental degradation and its socioeconomic consequences arouses respect and care for, and social action to safeguard, the natural environment and those it supports, women and other environmental activists represent a potent bottom-up challenge to global environmental politics centered on nations (Di Chiro 1997; Wapner and Willoughby 2005). Collectively they are constitutive of global civil society, which includes critical social movements composed of feminist, environmental, antinuclear, consumer, labor, and human rights activists (Turner 1998). Scott Turner (1998:30) argues that the significance of this phenomenon is that such movements are "oriented more toward general transformation of public consciousness, which in turn affects the parameters of legitimacy within which traditional institutions must operate." Arguably, our human capacity to relate to, even care about, one another and nature is key to this kind of political transformation with respect specifically to global environmental politics.

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