Feminism, Nature, and Discursive Ecologies

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Earthcare: Women and the Environment
Carolyn Merchant

Feminism and the Mastery of Nature
Val Plumwood

At a recent conference, I attended a performance on ecofeminism that presented a convincing barrage of slides, mainly from advertisements, depicting women and the earth in similarly degrading ways. Sympathetic to the environmentalist and feminist politics, I was nonetheless dismayed by the finale, which baldly celebrated a slide of a naked, pregnant woman, implicitly evoking that old connection between the fertile female and the fecund earth. Within the context of the presentation, the spherical belly functioned as a maternal disciplining of the sexual “bad girls” exhibited in the advertisements, thus retreating to a Madonna/whore dualism that denigrates female sexuality even while naturalizing the female body as primarily procreative. I begin with this example to suggest that “woman” and “nature” converge upon a perilous terrain that solidifies the very representations of “woman” that feminism, especially poststructuralist or postmodern feminism, has worked to dislodge. — link to the 1996 (post)feminism essays

Poststructuralist or postmodern feminisms “denaturalize” the concept of “woman” itself, often disassociating it from the system of hierarchies (including body/mind, object/subject, etc.) that bind woman to an abject nature. Centuries of misogynist thought that has justified the oppression of women by casting women as “closer” to nature and that has made nature synonymous with essentialism has produced a discursive landscape which makes it nearly impossible to forge productive alliances between environmentalism and feminism without raising the doubly baneful double-entendre of a “female nature.” If, as Judith Butler argues, the fixed, “immobilized,” “paralyzed” referent of the category “woman” hampers feminist agency, and the “constant rifting” over the term “woman” is itself the “ungrounded ground of feminist theory” (“Contingent Foundations” 16), invoking nature or the natural risks further congealing the signification of “woman,” thus foreclosing possibilities for feminist agency.

Yet, it would be difficult to imagine an environmental feminist politics that did not, in some way, affirm nature, especially since “nature” and the “natural” are such potent discursive nodes. As much cultural studies work demonstrates, cultural struggles often gain more ground by articulating their aims with already potent ideological elements, rather than attempting to create an entirely original vision. As Paula Treichler puts it, “Counter-discourse does not arise as a
pure autonomous radical language embodying the purity of a new politics. Rather it arises from within the dominant discourse and learns to inhabit it from the inside out” (132). Susan Griffin’s poetic Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her is probably the best example of dwelling within - but subverting - the tenacious associations between woman and nature. Notwithstanding Griffin’s work, one of the most vexing questions for feminisms that would also be environmentalist is the extent to which the deeply entrenched discourses that link women and nature can be productively inhabited from the inside out or whether these associations are so negatively charged, so tightly interwoven with threads that denigrate woman, nature, and the body that nothing short of completely dismantling and radically reconfiguring the concepts themselves will allow for positions that are hostile to neither nature nor feminism.

Several feminists, including, most notably, Donna Haraway, Carolyn Merchant, and Val Plumwood, forge environmental-feminist theories while denaturalizing nature’s “gender” and dislodging woman from any sedimented “nature” (see my essay, “Cyborg and Ecofeminist Interventions”). All three theorists radically redefine nature, roughly along a “postmodern” (that is, in this case, anti-Enlightenment) trajectory: reconceiving nature allows these writers to articulate feminist environmentalisms that do not reentrench traditional significations of “woman.” Redefining the human, via poststructuralist and postmodern models of agency, subjectivity, and discourse can work toward a similar end, by collapsing and complicating the nature/culture divide, as I will argue near the end of this piece. To begin, however, I’d like to discuss the work of Carolyn Merchant and Val Plumwood.

Carolyn Merchant’s recent collection, Earthcare: Women and the Environment, presents an impressive wealth of research that incisively critiques the feminized representations of nature and their supporting roles in historical narratives and scientific, colonialist, and capitalist exploitations - spanning such figures as Eve, Isis, and Gaia. Earthcare also details, while paying tribute to, women’s environmental practices - including the “earthcare” of Native and Colonialist women in New England from the 17th through the 19th centuries and the environmental activism of the Progressive Women Conservationists, contemporary U. S. women, Australian women, and Swedish women. The essays in the “Theory” section of the book are particularly strong, grounded solidly within their historical contexts but also synthesizing theoretical insights from feminist epistemology, the Frankfurt School, postmodernism, and chaos theory. With such an abundance and diversity of material, it is not surprising that various clashes would emerge, most notably around that ever-perplexing issue of gender.

The “partnership ethic” that Merchant proposes severs the ties between “woman” and “nature” that have been deleterious to them both, while envisioning a nature that is neither passive matter nor readily controllable resource. The “partnership ethic,” emphasizes relations between humans and nature and “recognizes both continuities and differences between humans and nonhuman nature” (217). It also stresses that while nature is always a representation and social construction it is also always more than that. It is, in its own right, a “real, material, autonomous agent” (221). How to conceive of nature’s agency (in ways that are neither anthropomorphic, nor reductive, nor silly-seeming) has been a central problem for the dismantling of discourses that define nature as an empty ground, evacuated of all that culture would colonize for its own self-definition. Haraway, for example, populates her work with figures - such as cyborgs, trickster coyotes, “material- semiotic actors,” and “artifactual” natures - that transgress the nature/culture divide
and dramatize the agency and unpredictability of “nature.” Here Merchant offers us the lenses of chaos theory, which sees nature as “disorderly order,” and “postclassical, postmodern science,” which is a “science of limited knowledge, or the primacy of process over parts, and of imbedded contexts within complex, open ecological systems” (221), to urge us to envision nature as a “free autonomous actor” (221) that we should respect as an equal partner. Reconceptualizing nature as an active, not entirely knowable nor controllable force is not only crucial for environmental philosophy and politics but also, less obviously, for feminism, since such reconceptions of nature can wrench apart the system of associations that cast woman and nature as passive matter, as resources available for scrutiny, domination, and consumption.

The partnership ethic avoids “gendering nature as a mother or goddess” and “endowing either males or females with a special relationship to nature or to each other” (216). The partnership ethic, along with other theoretical sections of the book, stands, however, in an odd relationship to the chapters which detail women’s environmental activism, which is often attributed to women’s domestic and reproductive roles. A disturbing theory/practice split emerges, as the notion that women are “closer” to or more responsible for nature is rejected in theory but accepted in practice. For example, one chapter ends with the insight that “Unless the home is liberated from its status as “women’s sphere” to that of “human habitat,” the feminist movement cannot succeed” (166), but the next chapter begins with a quote from Elin Wagner: “it is beginning to dawn on women that they must assume the responsibility for housekeeping nature” (167). It is refreshing that Merchant’s own views do not prevent her from celebrating the environmental activism of a wide range of women - especially since ecofeminism has long been reviled in feminist quarters for its essentialist transgressions. But the activists that Merchant discusses are not the only ones who attribute women’s environmental activism to their domestic and reproductive capacities: this attitude can be found in Merchant’s own analyses and conclusions. For example, Merchant argues that bringing men “into the sphere of reproduction through increasing their participation in nurturing and household work” - a laudable feminist goal - would somehow benefit nature: “As men learn and absorb these values, nature will also be nurtured” (184). Within a capitalist system, especially, there is no immediate connection between household work, or, even nurturing humans, and “nurturing” nature. To assume that such a connection exists is to conjure the specter of women as “angels in the ecosystem” (as Val Plumwood puts it). The undeniable connection between most capitalist households and nature is simply that of consumption. Even the Progressive Women Conservationists - despite their significant work - were motivated by utterly utilitarian motives. Many of these women cared not about protecting nature in or for itself, but only in order to ensure its ready availability as a resource for the home.

While it is important to consider, as Merchant does, that the “connection between the Earth and the house has historically been mediated by women” (139) and to focus on such things as indoor hazardous chemicals, a focus which rightly insist that environmentalism is not only about saving remote “wilderness” areas but about ensuring that our own bodies and habitats are not riddled with toxins, I am wary of all the attention to “the home.” I think it is important to break down divisions between an environment supposedly “out there” and the places most of us humans inhabit, which Merchant’s contention that “the earth is a home” does by paralleling human and nonhuman habitats. Yet just as female images of nature are so weighed down with destructive cultural baggage as to make them unusable, so, I would contend, is the discourse of the home.
Can the home be invoked in a progressive way, during this time of rampant “family values” rhetoric when, after watching the Democratic convention one would imagine that America was comprised of families, families, families - and mere couples, not to mention single people or gays and lesbians, are rendered nonexistent? Moreover, the home, saturated with gender roles, ethereal ideals of motherhood, and hardly ethereal household chores, has long been a space of oppression and claustrophobia for many women. In my own work, I’ve discovered many women’s fictions that invoke nature as a space of feminist possibility precisely because it is a space disconnected from the constricted domestic realm. Even some of the activists that Merchant cites may conceive of their activism as a decisive break from their domestic roles, even when their environmentalist struggles happen to have been motivated by a desire to protect their families. Lois Gibbs said of the women of Love Canal, for example, that they are “no longer at home tending their homes and gardens… Women who at one time looked down at people picketing, being arrested and acting somewhat radical are now doing those very things. Now in many households dinner is not ready at 5 o’clock, laundry is not quite done, and the neighbor is taxiing the children around” (cited in Merchant 157).

Merchant also argues that women’s role in reproduction has motivated their environmental work. She is careful to insist upon a non-essentialist “politics of reproduction” that “has its theoretical basis in the societal division of labor between the sexes” (174). Yet, in the chapter on the Swedish women’s environmental movement the link between women’s role in reproduction and their environmental consciousness is not convincingly forged from the social division of labor, but rather, assumed in such a way that universalizes and naturalizes their political struggles. Merchant asserts that “Women’s shared experiences of, and potential for, childbirth unify women in their concern for the quality of life for future generations and for the survival of humankind” (175). I doubt that “women” exist anywhere as such a seamless category, nor that many women would seek their self-definition via the experience of childbirth - let alone the mere “potential for childbirth.” But the evidence for this assertion follows, in the form of statistics showing that Swedish women have been more concerned about pollution and more opposed to nuclear power, nuclear waste, and nuclear technology than have men. These statistics indicate Swedish women’s strong environmental consciousness, but hardly suggest that the experience of (or potential for) childbirth generates their convictions. It would not be difficult to theorize less reductive forces that contribute to this gender gap, such as: in many capitalist patriarchies men are socialized to be more comfortable with and more excited by big technology than women, or that women, by virtue of their position in a culture that usually works to their disadvantage may be more skeptical of the predominant scientific, technological, and political systems and the assurances of safety and progress that they proffer.

Despite its dependence on women’s domestic and reproductive capacities as explanatory frames for women’s environmental activism, Earthcare is a valuable and thought-provoking volume that enriches our understanding not only of the myriad detrimental ways that nature has been constructed as feminine but also of the strength and diversity of women’s environmental activism. The abundant material on women’s environmental activism that Merchant has so skillfully and carefully compiled made me wonder why some women activists see their environmentalism as feminist and why others resolutely do not; why some see it as emerging from their domestic and reproductive roles, and why others resist any gendered explanations for their environmental work. What discursive landscapes were these women immersed in and how
did they work with and against them? Within their local ideological economies and discursive ecologies how did they forge spaces for their identities as activists (feminist or not, tied to the domestic or not, due to reproductive capacities or not)? Which identities played most effectively for their political aims and to what extent were identities and gendered or nongendered tropes adopted or rejected out of the sense that they “worked” or didn’t? To what extent were identities or tropes deployed strategically, ironically, or parodically? I would like to see a cultural studies analysis that explored how women environmental activists negotiated and attempted to transform the discursive ecologies - especially the highly vexed connections between “woman” and “nature” - in which they were immersed.

Val Plumwood’s Feminism and the Mastery of Nature undertakes an entirely different project, a thorough philosophical examination of the systems of dualism in Western thought that undergird the “complex cultural identity of the master” (5). Plumwood insists upon a “master” rather than merely masculine identity in order to argue that this figure is not only responsible for gender domination but the dominations of race, class, and species as well. Plumwood presents an impressive, cogent synthesis of a wide expanse of feminist theory and environmental philosophy, while incisively criticizing Plato, Descartes, mechanistic and instrumentalized conceptions of nature, Earth-Goddess worship, particular ecofeminist camps that herald “the angel in the ecosystem,” process theology, and deep ecology. Even though she discusses a vast array of philosophical traditions, her analyses are always careful and remarkably precise; moreover, many of her critiques and conceptions are striking and original. For example, on goddesses, and other deifications of nature she pointedly asserts: “Such deity is theft,” as it robs “the great plurality of particular beings in nature” of their “own autonomy, agency, and ecological or spiritual meaning” (128). While more postmodernist-influenced theorists have debated how to conceive of ” wilderness ” while realizing that nature untouched by human culture is a mythical notion (but a politically useful concept for environmentalism, nonetheless), Plumwood commensensically argues that wilderness “does not designate an excluded place defined negatively, apart from self, alien and separate” but is a “domain where earth others are autonomous or sovereign, free to work things out according to self-determined patterns” (163).

The central project of Feminism and the Mastery of Nature, however, is to analyze the workings of the system of dualisms in Western thought (such as, culture/nature, reason/nature, male/female, mind/body, master/slave, etc.) and to propose an alternative way to conceive of difference. Plumwood analyzes how dualisms function to construct difference “in terms of an inferior and alien realm” (42) by “backgrounding,” “radical exclusion,” “incorporation,” “instrumentalism,” and “homogenisation.” In order to break down these structures of dominance Plumwood advocates a “non- reductionist basis for recognizing continuity and reclaiming the ground of overlap between nature, the body, and the human,” in which, as other postmodern philosophers have done, we “discover the body in the mind, the mind in the animal, the body as the site of cultural inscription, nature as creative other” (123, 124). But Plumwood also insists that a non-hierarchical notion of difference be affirmed so that the “Ocean of Continuity” will not collapse, incorporate, or wash away all difference. On the one hand, “radical exclusion corresponds to the conception of self as self-contained and of other as alien which denies relationship and continuity,” on the other, incorporation corresponds to the totalising denial which denies the other by denying difference, treating the other as a form of the same or self”
By insisting upon both continuity and difference, Plumwood offers a philosophical frame to counter the system of dualisms that have undergirded a network of oppressions.

Though Plumwood’s schema is fittingly as broad as the system it counters, it raises many questions about local demarcations of difference and continuity. I agree that an “adequate account of an ecological self must be able to recognise both the otherness of nature and its continuity with the human self” (160) but that recognition alone does not assist us in making ethical or political decisions about what constitutes continuity and where the lines of difference (albeit nonhierarchical lines) should be drawn. Should scuba divers, for example, feed and caress eels, since doing so affirms human/nature continuities and relationship via a mutually pleasurable encounter? Or should divers refrain from petting eels for fear that they are making them underwater “pets” and thus not respecting their difference and sovereignty? Not only do “difference” and “continuity” fail as localized maps, but they can be invoked to justify practices most environmentalists deplore. For example, one could make (the rather appalling) argument that circuses stage, celebrate, and applaud the difference of animals such as elephants and chimps while revealing their continuity with humans by dressing them up like people and teaching them to dance or ride bicycles. Although this may be an extreme example, it does indicate that “difference” and “continuity,” may, as overarching principles, counter dualism as it is broadly mapped, but how difference and continuity are constituted and played out within specific discursive sites, is, in and of itself, a cultural struggle that determines the valences and the ethical/political significance of these terms.

Plumwood also proposes the principles of continuity and difference as a way to transcend the false choices of affirming or denying all that has been defined as female. Rejecting both cultural feminism and poststructuralist feminism, Plumwood proposes a feminism of “critical affirmation” that treats “woman’s identity as an important if problematic tradition which requires critical reconstruction” (64). She criticizes the “dissolution of gender identity through destabilization and the definitive act of parody recommended by poststructuralists” because it “amounts to the formation of anti-identities which become further identities. But these identities are not independent. They are still defined essentially in relation to the objects of parody which originate in the problematic of colonisation” (63). In a footnote, Plumwood misreads Butler’s concept of performative identity as assuming a great deal of choice, but her critique of feminist poststructuralism itself demands a high degree of choice since it assumes that it is possible to transcend and become independent of the discursive networks in which one is immersed. Ironically, the poststructuralism that Plumwood contests can actually help to dislodge the master subject, since it does not rely upon dualistic notions of free will or autonomy that are undergirded by determinism and dependence. By immersing human subjects in “discursive ecologies,” poststructuralism can allow us to envision a rich ground of continuity between humans and nature, as I will argue in the remaining paragraphs.

Merchant and Plumwood both conceptualize nature in, broadly speaking, anti-Enlightenment, “postmodern” terms, that refuse to sever and distance nature from the human realm. Working from the other side of the equation, postmodern and poststructuralist theories of language, agency, and (human) subjectivity can also help close the chasm between “nature” and “culture” by contesting the “master” subject that Plumwood defines. Despite the fact that most postmodern and poststructuralist theorists, with the notable exceptions of Donna Haraway and Deleuze and
Guattari, often implicitly or explicitly pose “nature” as the background for or limit to the properly discursive, discursive theories of human subjectivity reveal parallels between cultural and natural systems. Whereas humanist or instrumental models of human agency, in which the subject is self-conscious, utterly autonomous, and severed from his context render attempts to conceive of the agency of nature as unthinkable or comic (grass, frogs, and jellyfish hardly seem to qualify as masters of their domains), discursive models of agency allow for nature/culture parallels and intersections to flourish. For example, the subject Butler describes in “Contingent Foundations,” who is most assuredly not “its own point of departure,” gains its subjectivity and agency not by transcending its context but instead through its very constitution by “matrices of power and discourse” (9). This discursively constituted subject bears no small resemblance to the various “actors” populating the natural world, who, though not constituted by “discourse” per se, act within, never apart from, the material and semiotic systems in which they find themselves. Nature - hardly the mute background that culture would paint it - is itself a complex, mobile text of semiotic actions, be they sights, tastes, sounds, smells, or biochemical interactions. Just as various nonhuman creatures are constituted by and constitute their ecosystems, human subjects dwell within, are constituted by, and resist and rework the discursive ecologies in which they are immersed.

Though “nature” has long served to stabilize and contain the signification of “woman,” Butler argues that the term “nature” itself has also been “‘fixed,’ normalized, immobilized, paralyzed in positions of subordination” (Butler 16). If the “constant rifting” over the term “woman” “ought to be affirmed as the ungrounded ground of feminist theory,” so should environmentalist philosophy embrace not only the broad rifting over the term “nature,” but the localized struggles waged within specific discursive ecologies over the constitution, valence, and articulations of such abstract concepts as “continuity” and “difference” and the more highly charged, ideologically saturated associations between “woman” and “nature.” Moreover, poststructuralist and postmodern philosophies, by denaturalizing the category of the transcendent human (for which nature, as terra nullius, was constructed), can help to decalcify fossilized significations of nature that render it distant, empty, and mute.

Works Cited

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