

**Varieties of Feminist Environmentalisms:
Women Environmental Writers and
the Literature of Empowerment**

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A Few Basic Definitions of Ecocriticism (ecological literary criticism)
Cheryll Glotfelty, Introduction, *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996):

... the study of the relationship between literature and the physical world.
(xviii)

David Mazel, *American Literary Environmentalism* (2000):

... the study of literature "as if the earth mattered." (1)

My Own Broad Definition

Scott Slovic, "Ecocriticism: Containing Multitudes, Practising Doctrine," *The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism*. Ed. Laurence Coupe. London: Routledge, 2000.

[Ecocriticism is] the study of **explicitly environmental texts from any scholarly approach** or, conversely, **the scrutiny of ecological implications and human-nature relationships in any literary text [or other artistic text]**, even texts that seem, at first glance, oblivious of the nonhuman world. (160)

Methodology or Movement?

Altogether, the story of literary ecocriticism's relation to critical models has been unfolding less as a story of dogged recalcitrance--though there has been some of that--than as a quest *for* adequate models of inquiry from the plethora of possible alternatives that offer themselves from whatever disciplinary quarter. Cybernetics, evolutionary biology, landscape ecology, risk theory, phenomenology, environmental ethics, feminist theory, ecocriticism, anthropology, psychology, science studies, critical race studies, postcolonial theory--all these and more.... **The environmental turn in literary studies is best understood, then, less as a monolith than as a concourse of discrepant practices. (11)**

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Lawrence Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism* (2005)
The First and Second Waves

First Wave (1980-present)

Nonfiction (“nature writing”)

Focus on non-human nature/wilderness

American and British focus

“Discursive” ecofeminism

Second Wave (mid-1990s-present)

Multiple genres (and green cultural studies)

Multicultural

Focus on local literatures around the world

Environmental justice ecocriticism

Urban and suburban

Proposing a “new *third wave*”

Joni Adamson and Scott Slovic, “Guest Editors’ Introduction: The Shoulders We Stand On: An Introduction to Ethnicity and Ecocriticism.” *MELUS* 34.2 (Summer 2009): 5-24.

Literary expression of environmental experience is as diverse as any other body of writing, of course. Yet until recently the community of ecocritics has been relatively non-diverse and also has been constrained by a perhaps overly narrow construing of “white” and “non-white” as the primary categories of ethnicity. Therefore, **this issue will explore what seems to be a new *third wave* of ecocriticism, which *recognizes* ethnic and national *particularities* and yet *transcends* ethnic and national *boundaries*; this third wave explores all facets of human experience from an environmental viewpoint.** (6-7)

Third Wave (2000-present)

Global concepts of place melding with neo-bioregionalism (“eco-cosmopolitanism,” “rooted cosmopolitanism,” “the global soul,” or simply “translocality”?)

Comparatist (post-national and post-ethnic?)

“Material” feminism and multiple gendered approaches (eco-masculinism, green queer theory)

Animality (evolutionary ecocriticism, animal subjectivity and agency, vegetarianism, and justice for nonhuman species)

Critiques from within (relationship with theory, representationality, celebratory tone, “literature” too limited a focus, forgotten role of activist feminism, lack of a precise definition, subfields seeking to break away)

Polymorphously activist

The History of “*ecoféminisme*”

Barbara T. Gates, “A Root of Ecofeminism: *Ecoféminisme*,” *ISLE* 3.1 (Summer 1996): 7-16.

“Practically everybody,” [Françoise] d’Eaubonne claimed, “knows that today the two most immediate threats to survival are overpopulation and the destruction of our resources; fewer recognize the responsibility of

the male System, in so far as it is male (and not capitalist or socialist) in these two dangers; but even fewer still have discovered that each of the two threats is the logical outcome of one of the two parallel discoveries which gave men their power over fifty centuries ago: their ability to plant the seed in the earth as in women, and their participation in the act of reproduction.” This excerpt, the one most quoted from d’Eaubonne, directly joins women and the environment, in this case through reproduction. D’Eaubonne, as all acknowledge, also coined the word *ecoféminisme* (in *Le féminisme ou la mort*, 1974).

Feminism and Eco-feminism: Some Background

Val Plumwood, “Feminism and Ecofeminism,” *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (1993):

[B]oth the dominant tradition of men as reason and women as nature, and the more recent one of men as forceful and wild and women as tamed and domestic, have had the effect of confirming masculine power.

[M]any feminists regard with [...] suspicion the view expressed by [...] “ecofeminists”: [...] there may be something to be said in favour of women’s connectedness to nature. The very idea of a feminine connection with nature seems to many to be regressive and insulting, summoning up images of women as earth mothers, as passive, reproductive animals, contented cows immersed in the body [...].

The inferiorization of human qualities and aspects of life associated with necessity, nature and women [...] continues to operate to the disadvantage of women, nature and the quality of human life. (20-21)

**Looking for new concepts of
feminist environmentalism:**

doctoral student Tang Jiannan, Beijing Foreign Studies University

Which sort of feminism?

Which sort of environmentalism?

Stacy Alaimo, e-mail to Tang Jiannan (4 February 2010):

I am both a feminist and an environmentalist but I don't categorize myself an "ecofeminist" because, as someone deeply influenced by the cultural studies idea that cultural struggles are contingent and historically-specific, I think it is more productive to leave the question of the relationship between environmentalism and feminism open. I think it remains an open question as to exactly, when, why, and in what particular contexts feminism and environmentalism are allied, separate, or opposing. In *Undomesticated Ground* I found that each of the "feminisms" and "environmentalisms" I wrote about were quite distinctive. I think it is important to examine the specific ethical and political implications of bringing the two terms together. The figure of "Mother Earth" sounds feminist to gender-maximizing, maternalist, or cultural feminists, but seems quite counter-productive--even dangerous--to queer, or poststructuralist, or gender-

minimizing feminisms.

I never call myself an "ecofeminist," though I do, rarely, say "environmentalist feminist," but for the most part I think the two movements should not be collapsed onto one. I would always ask: "which sort of feminism?," "which sort of environmentalism?," and what relation is being posited, assumed, or promoted and for what ends?

Critiquing resistance to the word "ecofeminism"

Noël Sturgeon, *Ecofeminist Natures: Race, Gender, Feminist Theory and Political Action* (1997):

All three of these authors [Joni Seager, Stacy Alaimo, and Bina Abarwal] provide insightful, interesting, and wide-ranging arguments for the effectiveness and importance of engaging in both a feminist and environmentalist theoretical endeavor. **Why insist on another name [aside from "ecofeminism"] for an analysis that combines and connects feminism and environmentalism? Essentialisms of various kinds, as Ferguson has so carefully pointed out, are not avoided by changing the names of your theoretical positions.** They are avoided by paying close attention to the exclusionary effects generated by the (inevitable, or at least very difficult to avoid) construction of unitary categories for the purposes of an analysis. **Or does avoiding "ecofeminism" have to do with the U.S. genesis of the term within activism, which displayed "essentialist" rhetoric in the course of political mobilization and actions? If so, anti-essentialist feminist theory will find itself continually cut off from activist efforts.** (189)

What is the relationship between "feminist environmentalism" and "ecofeminism"?

Greta Gaard, e-mail to Tang Jiannan (8 February 2010):

Your question is an important one, and in fact **these very topics of naming are being hotly debated in the feminist community. I believe that the framework of "feminist environmentalism" is larger than ecofeminism and is thus a more inclusive term; ecofeminism is a specific branch of feminist environmentalism, with specific commitments, analyses, and theoretical frameworks.** Ecofeminist scholars include Carol Adams, Marti Kheel, Ariel Salleh, Noël Sturgeon, Cate Mortimer-Sandilands, Karen Warren, Val Plumwood, Lori Gruen, and many others.

Greta Gaard's new article on
feminist ecocriticism

Greta Gaard, "New Directions for Ecofeminism: Toward a More Feminist Ecocriticism," *ISLE* 17.4 (Autumn 2010): 643-65.

Suggesting many "new directions, or continued developments, for ecofeminist and feminist ecocritics":

Feminist, Ecofeminist, and Environmental Justice Criticism

Ecofeminism and Sexual Justice
Interspecies Eco/Feminist Ecocriticism
Cross-Cultural Ecofeminist and Feminist Ecocriticisms
Feminist Ecopsychology
Place Studies and Ecofeminist Ecoregionalism

Poetry of Marginalization,
Poetry of Empowerment

Ofelia Zepeda, "It Is Going to Rain," *Jewed 'I-Hoi / Earth Movements*. Tucson, AZ: Kore Press, 1997. Reprinted in Terre Satterfield and Scott Slovic, eds., *What's Nature Worth? Narrative Expressions of Environmental Values*. Salt Lake City: U of Utah P, 2004. 143-44.

"It Is Going to Rain"

Someone said it is going to rain.

I think it is not so.

Because I have not yet felt the earth and the way it holds still in anticipation.

I think it is not so.

Because I have not yet felt the sky become heavy with moisture of preparation.

I think it is not so.

Because I have not yet felt the winds move with their coolness.

I think it is not so.

Because I have not yet inhaled the sweet, wet dirt the winds bring.

So, there is no truth that it will rain. (143-44)

Trans-Corporeality and the Development of a new *material* feminism

Stacy Alaimo, "Trans-corporeal Feminisms and the Ethical Space of Nature." *Material Feminisms*. Ed. Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 2008. 237-64.

Imagining human corporeality as trans-corporeality, in which the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world, underlines the extent to which the corporeal substance of the human is ultimately inseparable from "the environment." [...] Emphasizing the material interconnections of human corporeality with the more-than-human world [...] allows us to forge ethical and political positions that can contend with numerous late-twentieth-century/early-twenty-first-century realities in which "human" and "environment" can by no means be considered as separate: environmental health, environmental justice, the traffic in toxins, and genetic engineering, to name a few. (238-39)

Our animal appetites and animal joy

Mary Oliver, "The Honey Tree" (1983).

And so at last I climbed
the honey tree, **ate**
chunks of pure light, ate
the bodies of bees that could not
get out of my way, **ate**

the dark hair of the leaves,
the rippling bark,
the heartwood. Such
frenzy! But **joy** does that,
I'm told, in the beginning.
Later, maybe,
I'll come here only
sometimes and with a
middling hunger. But now
I climb like a snake,
I clamber like a bear to
the nuzzling place, to the light
salvaged by the thighs
of bees and racked up
in the **body of the tree.**

Marveling at the Human Animal—the Body
Gretel Ehrlich, *A Match to the Heart*. New York: Pantheon, 1994.

We are elaborate biochemical, electrical, emotional organisms with message systems so intricate no computer could begin to track what happens to the body when even a single thought registers there. [...] Cells are constantly sending messages and reacting to messages from neurotransmitters. The mind-body split is a meaningless, laughable idea. Neurons are strung along electrical paths like Christmas tree lights, dancing and blinking, tiny intelligent beings that illuminate the dark continent of flesh. Neuropeptides and hormones are released, chi flows, surfacing in points of electrical resistance, where needles are inserted and vibrated to unlock obstructions. Each nuance of emotion makes its mark and every physical shift is met with a homeostatic adjustment. **We sweat, change our heart rates, urinate, vomit; we mend bones, keep our kidneys working, alter heart rate and blood pressure, pursue enemy viruses, change our blood-sugar levels, and respiratory rates.** (88-89)

Not only a feminist project—revivifying human *materiality*
Gretel Ehrlich, *A Match to the Heart*:

Stepping up on the stool, I was a traveler, a Marco Polo who had arrived in a place so exotic, few had seen it before. I peered over the blue towel, clipped between two IV stands, that served as a curtain to protect the patient's head. The surgeons were watching. Would I faint, they wondered? But **what I saw was so abstract, so colorful and jewel-like, I wanted only to see more.** [...]

I was a voyager. How did they get inside there? The room was cold. Steam rose from the opened cavity. **I felt as if I had broken into a hidden cave and come upon rubies and sapphires. Looking past skin, red tissue, white bone, into a chest held open by a steel frame, I saw a beating heart.**

[...] Only slightly bigger than my fist, it had a covering of yellow fat near the top, but below, it was red and gray with branching arteries. [...] (170-71)

Reaching beneath/beyond the rational

Terry Tempest Williams, "Bloodlines," *Testimony* (1995):

There is a woman who is a tailor. She lives in Green River, Utah, and makes her livelihood performing alterations, taking a few inches here, letting out a few inches there, basting in hems then finishing them with a feather stitch.

While hiking in the San Rafael Swell, this woman was raped, thrown down face first in the sand. She never saw the face of her assailant. **What she knew was this, that in that act of violence she lost her voice. She was unable to cry for help.** He left her violated and raw [...].

The woman cut pieces of thread and placed them delicately on the desert. Six inches. Three inches. Twelve inches. They appeared as a loose stitched seam upon the land. She saw them as bloodlines, remembering the fetishes of the Zuni she had held that draw the heart down [...].

In the midst of the politics before us, I think of the woman in the San Rafael Swell and her spool of red thread basting memories back into the land.

Emily Dickinson writes, "Life is a spell so exquisite that everything conspires to break it."

How can we not respond? (50-52)

"The price of obedience has become too high": Speaking Truth to Power in Terry Tempest Williams's *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family & Place* (1991)

From "The Clan of One-Breasted Women," *Refuge*:

In Mormon culture, authority is respected, obedience revered, and independent thinking is not. I was taught as a young girl not to "make waves" or "rock the boat." [...]

For many years, I have done just that—listened, observed, and quietly formed my own opinions, in a culture that rarely asks questions because it has all the answers. But one by one, I have watched the women in my family die common, heroic deaths. [...] I cared for them, bathed their scarred bodies, and kept their secrets. [...]

The price of obedience has become too high.

The fear and inability to question authority that ultimately killed rural communities in Utah during atmospheric testing of atomic weapons is the same fear I saw in my mother's body. (285-86)

Refuge as a Survivor's Story

From "The Clan of One-Breasted Women," *Refuge*:

I crossed the line at the Nevada Test Site and was arrested with nine other Utahns for trespassing on military lands. They are still conducting nuclear tests in the desert. Ours was an act of civil disobedience. But as I walked toward the town of Mercury, it was more than a gesture of peace. It was a gesture on behalf of the Clan of One-Breasted Women.

As one officer cinched the handcuffs around my wrists, another

frisked my body. **She did not find my scars.** (289-90, first printing of *Refuge*, 1991)

**The Legend of Women Warriors—
the “Amazons**

From website “All About Turkey” (29 May 2010):

According to Greek mythology, Amazons were a warlike tribe of women descended from the god of war, Ares, and the naiad Harmonia. They [...] founded the town of Themiscyra [...] on the Black Sea coast of Turkey. [...]

Women entirely ruled their society [...]. Whether men were or were not included in the Amazon state, only women bore arms [...]. **In some myths, it is said female children had their right breast seared in order to draw a bow and throw javelins more efficiently as adults.**

Revising for Empowerment:

The Unusual Erasure of Victimization in the Second Printing of *Refuge*

From “The Clan of One-Breasted Women,” *Refuge*:

As one officer cinched the handcuffs around my wrists, another frisked my body. **She found a pen and a pad of paper tucked inside my left boot.**

“And these?” she asked sternly.

“Weapons,” I replied.

Our eyes met. I smiled. She pulled the leg of my trousers back over my boot.

“Step forward, please,” she said as she took my arm. (290)

“‘What are these?’ ‘Weapons,’ I replied”: From *Victimization to Empowerment* [Chinese edition]

我穿越了内华达试验基地的警戒线，因非法进入军事禁区而与其他九位妇女一起被捕。他们仍然在沙漠中进行核试验。我们的行为是一次文明的抗议。可是当我走向水银城时，那不仅仅是一种和平的举动。那是一个代表了单乳女性家族的举动。

一个军官勒紧了我的手铐，另一个搜查了我的全身。她发现了塞在我左靴内侧的一支笔盒一沓纸。

“这是什么？”她严厉地问道。

“武器。”我答道。

我们的目光相遇。我笑了。她将我的裤腿塞回我的靴子。

“请向前走。”她边说边挽起我的一只胳膊。

我们在午后的阳光下等候车票，然后乘车前往内华达州的托诺帕。到那里有两小时的车程。那是一片熟悉的乡土。扎根于那片土地之中的约书亚树是由我的祖辈所命名，后者认为这些数如同先知，将手伸向西方的乐土。那里还有每年春季开花的树木，与家乡的树木相同，那些花朵如同在莫哈韦沙漠上的白色

火焰。我回忆起5月的一个满月之夜，我与母亲在这些树林中散步，惊起了哀鸽和猫头鹰。

公共汽车在城外停下。我们被释放了。

那些官员们认为将我们搁置于沙漠之中，使我们无路回家，束手无策，不失为一种残酷的玩笑。而他们没想到的是我们已经到家了，我们回到了强大的精神家园。我们是鼠尾草的芳香来滋润心灵的女人。

Using scientific knowledge as a source of empowerment: Rachel Carson's "literary daughter"

Sandra Steingraber, *Living Downstream: A Scientist's Personal Investigation of Cancer and the Environment*. New York: Vintage, 1997.

In 1995, an estimated 1.2 million people in the United States—thirty-four hundred people a day—were told they had cancer. Each of these diagnoses is a border crossing, the beginning of an unplanned and unchosen journey. **There is a story behind each one.**

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These diagnoses also form a collective, statistical story. When all the diagnoses of years past and present are tallied, an ongoing narrative emerges that tells us how the incidence of cancer has been and is changing. [...]

[...] The work of compiling statistics on cancer incidence is carried out at a network of cancer registries, which exist in the United States at both the state and the federal levels [...]. (32-33)

Narrating trans-corporeality: blood in urine tells more powerful story than "parts per million"

Sandra Steingraber, *Living Downstream*.

Gross hematuria, or noticeable blood in the urine, is the usual way bladder cancer presents itself. [...] As for myself, gross hematuria arrived as I was finishing up a morning shift at a truck-stop diner. After making my final rounds with the ketchup bottles and syrup dispensers, I stopped in the restroom. **Turning to flush, I froze. My urine looked like cherry Kool-Aid.** [...]

And then I remembered the beets—sliced red beets, which the cook had prepared for the lunch special and which I had eaten in great quantity during my break. Could beets make urine turn pink? [...] What other explanation could there be? I felt fine.

I swore off beets. Three weeks later, I returned home from a night shift at a pancake house, tore off my waitress uniform, went to the bathroom, turned to flush, and ... the toilet was full of blood. Brilliant and thick. I drove to the emergency room.

I was wrong about the beets. (132)

Imagining a new “*living democracy*” that emphasizes “inclusion, diversity, and [...] responsibility”

Vandana Shiva, “Principles of Earth Democracy.” *Earth Democracy: Justice, Sustainability, and Peace*. Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2005.

[...] In living democracies people can influence the decisions over the food we eat, the water we drink, and the health care and education we have. Living democracy grows like a tree, from the bottom up. **Earth Democracy is based on local democracy, with local communities—organized on principles of inclusion, diversity, and ecological and social responsibility—having the highest authority on decisions related to the environment and natural resources and to the sustenance and livelihoods of people.** [...] Self-rule and self-governance is the foundation of Earth Democracy. (10-11)

Some questions for third-wave ecocriticism,
including feminist ecocriticism

What are the emerging discourses of materiality (place-attachment, corporeality) and commitment (ethical awareness, political engagement) in this global era? How do today’s narratives of environmentally and socially sensitive lifestyle changes support or undermine meaningful systemic transformation? When is it useful to merge and compare texts across regions, languages, cultures, historical eras, and disciplines, and when do such comparisons offer little traction in responding to today’s pressing concerns?