

## MOVEMENTS OF ECOFEMINISM

Yrestra King, one of the founders of U.S. ecofeminism, has called it the "third wave of the women's movement," indicating her sense, at one time, that this most recent manifestation of feminist activity was large and vital enough to parallel the first-wave nineteenth-century women's movement and the second-wave women's liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>1</sup> I agree with this assessment, understood as describing a potentiality rather than an actuality, and this book is an attempt to analyze what prevents the closing of the gap between the vision and the practice. The task here is to seek out guides for radical political action from ecofeminism while at the same time fully recognizing its limitations. But first, I want to attempt some descriptions and definitions of ecofeminism as a movement<sup>2</sup> and as a set of theories.

Most simply put, ecofeminism is a movement that makes connections between environmentalisms and feminisms; more precisely, it articulates the theory that the ideologies that authorize injustices based on gender, race, and class are related to the ideologies that sanction the exploitation and degradation of the environment.<sup>3</sup> In one version of its origins, the one I will privilege throughout the book, ecofeminism in the United States arises from the antimilitarist direct action movement of the late seventies and eighties, and develops its multivalent politics from that movement's analysis of the con-

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nections between militarism, racism, classism, sexism, speciesism, and environmental destruction. But, as I will also show, ecofeminism has multiple origins and is reproduced in different inflections and deployed in many different contexts. In particular, in this book I will argue that ecofeminism has roots in both feminism and environmentalism.

Given both its attempt to bridge different radical political positions and its historical location as at least one of many third-wave women's movements, U.S. ecofeminism aims to be a multi-issue, globally oriented movement with a more diverse constituency than either of its environmentalist or feminist predecessors. Ecofeminism is thus a movement with large ambitions and with a significant, if at the moment largely unorganized, constituency. Many people are interested in the scope of ecofeminism, its drawing together of environmentalism and feminism. Environmentalism is one of the most popular and significant locations for radical politics today; it attracts people because of the seemingly apocalyptic nature of our ecological crises and the many ways in which environmental problems affect people's daily lives, as well as the sense of its global relevance. As a feminist movement, ecofeminism reworks a longstanding feminist critique of the naturalization of an inferior social and political status for women so as to include the effects on the environment of feminizing nature. Coupled with environmentalism, this version of feminism gains a political cachet not easily matched by other radical political locations, particularly for young U. S. feminists who already think of themselves as environmentalists, having been more or less socialized as such. Ecofeminism is a significant and complex political phenomenon, a contemporary political movement that has far-reaching goals, a popular following, and a poor reputation among many academic feminists, mainstream environmentalists, and some environmental activists of color. Part of what I want to do in this book is to understand the sources of that poor reputation and to explore the reasons for the failure of ecofeminism to live up to its potential.

#### ECOFEMINIST GENEALOGIES

A name that can usefully if partially describe the work of Donna Haraway and Mary Daly, Alice Walker and Rachel Carson, Starhawk and Vandana Shiva,<sup>4</sup> ecofeminism is a shifting theoretical and political location that can be defined to serve various intentions. The present chaotic context of the relatively new and diverse political positionings that go under the name of "ecofeminism" allows me to construct within this book a series of definitions and historical trajectories of the movement, ones I recognize as always interested and certainly contestable.<sup>5</sup> In this chapter, I will piece together stories about ecofeminist beginnings and evolution by tracing the use of the word "ecofeminism" as it appears in political actions, organizations, conferences, publications, and university courses. Not a history so much as a genealogy, imbedded

in this tracing is an effort to tease out the label's shifting meanings and political investments in order to delineate the construction of ecofeminism as an object of knowledge, as a political identity, and as a set of political strategies within the convergence of local and global environmentalisms, academic and activist feminisms, and anticolonialist and antiracist movements.<sup>6</sup> In this chapter, I will focus on ecofeminism as a manifestation of feminism within environmentalisms; in the last chapter, I will focus on ecofeminism within feminist movement and theory.

Both an activist and an academic movement, ecofeminism has grown rapidly since the early eighties and continues to do so in the nineties. As activists, ecofeminists have been involved in environmental and feminist lobbying efforts, in demonstrations and direct actions, in forming a political platform for a U.S. Green party, and in building various kinds of ecofeminist cultural projects (such as ecofeminist art, literature, and spirituality). They have taken up a wide variety of issues, such as toxic waste, deforestation, military and nuclear weapons policies, reproductive rights and technologies, animal liberation, and domestic and international agricultural development. In academic arenas, scholars who are either identified with or interested in ecofeminism have been active in creating and critiquing ecofeminist theories. A wave of publications in the area, including several special issues of journals, indicates research activity on ecofeminism in religious studies, philosophy, political science, art, geography, women's studies, and many other disciplines.<sup>7</sup>

In this chapter, I concentrate on the way in which ecofeminism can be seen primarily as a feminist rebellion within male-dominated radical environmentalisms, where I have found it popping up in almost every arena, often without communication between these slightly or greatly different versions of ecofeminism. Thus, one can find ecofeminists appearing within the anti-nuclear movement, social ecology, bioregionalism, Earth First!, the U.S. Greens, animal liberation, sustainable development, and, to a lesser extent, the environmental justice movement. In chapter 4, I take up the issue of why the last, which is an environmental movement primarily of people of color and working-class people, should be a place where ecofeminism has had difficulty making a sustained appearance.

The origins of this varied activity called "ecofeminism" have been described in different ways.<sup>8</sup> Certainly, an ecological critique was an important part of women's movements worldwide from the mid-1970s, particularly those concerned with nuclear technology, neocolonialist development practices, and women's health and reproductive rights. In my reading of these developments, ecofeminism in the U.S. arose in close connection with the non-violent direct action movement against nuclear power and nuclear weapons. Until the Women's Pentagon Actions in 1980, however, there were numerous events and groups connected with ecofeminism that were concerned with a number of issues, militarism being only one of many.

The earliest event I've seen described as making the connection between women and the environment was in 1974, at the Women and the Environment conference at UC Berkeley organized by Sandra Maburg and Lisa Watson. An ecofeminist newsletter, *W.F.B.: Wimmen of the Earth Bonding*, published four issues from 1981 to 1983, concerned with feminist and lesbian back-to-the-land communities, health, appropriate technology, and political action.<sup>9</sup>

Most influentially, however, U.S. ecofeminism's initiating event was the Women and Life on Earth: Ecofeminism in the 1980s conference at Amherst in 1980, organized by Ynestra King (then of the Institute for Social Ecology), Anna Gyorgy (an organizer in the antinuclear Clamshell Alliance), Grace Paley (a feminist writer and pacifist activist), and other women from the anti-nuclear, environmental, and lesbian-feminist movements.<sup>10</sup>

The Women and Life on Earth conference organized panels and workshops on the alternative technology movement (staffed by the group Women in Solar Energy, or WISE), organizing, feminist theory, art, health, militarism, racism, urban ecology, theater, as well as other topics: eighty workshops in all. Over 650 women attended, far beyond the expected hundred or so.<sup>11</sup> Speakers included Patricia Hynes of WISE; Lois Gibbs, then of the Love Canal Homeowners Association and later of the Citizen's Clearinghouse for Hazardous Waste (COCHW);<sup>12</sup> and Amy Swerdlow, feminist activist and historian.<sup>13</sup> The conference generated an ongoing Women and Life on Earth (WLOE) group in Northampton, Massachusetts, which published a newsletter entitled *Tidings*, as well as several other WLOE groups in New York, Cape Cod, and other areas in the Northeastern United States.<sup>14</sup>

Several other ecofeminism conferences and organizations were either inspired by Women and Life on Earth or assisted by WLOE organizers. A conference already in the planning stages in 1980, Women and the Environment: The First West Coast Eco-Feminist Conference drew 500 women, who listened to talks by Angela Davis, Anna Gyorgy, China Galland, and Peggy Taylor. Workshops were offered on "alternative energy, global view, planning, health, organizing media, no nukes, and peace."<sup>15</sup> In London, a Women For Life on Earth (WFLOE) group formed, inspired by the Amherst conference, and organized a conference in 1981. Energy from that conference spawned numerous WFLOE groups, twenty-six in the United Kingdom and nine in other countries, including Australia, Canada, France, Japan, and West Germany.<sup>16</sup> WFLOE put out a newsletter at least until Winter 1984, organized a number of gatherings, and supported the Greenham Common peace camp. Organizers of WFLOE, Stephanie Leland and Leonie Caldecott, edited the first ecofeminist anthology, *Reclaim the Earth: Women Speak Out for Life on Earth*, in 1983.

From the Women and Life on Earth conference at Amherst also grew the organizing efforts for the Women's Pentagon Actions (WPA) of 1980 and

1981, in which large numbers of women demonstrated and engaged in civil disobedience. As defined by the Unity Statement of the WPA,<sup>17</sup> the politics behind these early ecofeminist actions were based on making connections between militarism, sexism, racism, classism, and environmental destruction (however unevenly the action may have addressed these issues).<sup>18</sup> Influenced by the writings of Susan Griffin,<sup>19</sup> Charlene Spretnak,<sup>20</sup> Ynestra King,<sup>21</sup> and Starhawk, a set of political positions that began to be called ecofeminism developed among women sympathetic to the politics of the WPA and other antimilitarist and environmental actions. Many women involved in later antimilitarist direct actions thus began to call themselves ecofeminists in the middle eighties as a way of describing their interlocking political concerns.<sup>22</sup> In fact, an article in the 1981 issue of *Tidings*, the newsletter of WLOE and the WPA, states that organizers decided not to get involved with a Mother's Day Coalition for Disarmament March in Washington, DC, because "The Mother's Day action is a single issue action and not explicitly feminist." Furthermore, the march was not organized using a "participatory feminist process."<sup>23</sup> Thus, even after the WPA, "ecofeminism" referred not to antimilitarism alone but to a particular kind of feminist, radically democratic antimilitarism that made connections to other political issues. Rather than arising from "the peace movement," ecofeminists deeply influenced the nature of feminist peace politics in the 1980s.

As the label became more common among feminist antimilitarist activists, a concomitant interest in ecofeminism was emerging in the academy. The two arenas were intertwined at the Ecofeminist Perspectives: Culture, Nature, Theory conference in March 1987 at the University of Southern California (USC), organized by Irene Diamond and Gloria Orenstein. This well-attended conference was the beginning of a rapid flowering of ecofeminist art, political action, and theory that continues today.<sup>24</sup> This conference also marked the point where the word ecofeminism began to be used outside the antimilitarist movement to describe a politics that attempted to combine feminism, environmentalism, antiracism, animal liberation, anticolonialism, antimilitarism, and nontraditional spiritualities.

During the years following the USC conference, U.S. ecofeminists became active in the international arena, intervening in the process of the globalization of environmentalism. In 1991, a World Women's Conference for a Healthy Planet in Miami, Florida, was organized by the Women's Environmental Development Organization, or WEDO. For political reasons, which I will discuss later, WEDO did not explicitly identify as "ecofeminist," but its rhetoric and vision were clearly in the ecofeminist tradition. This conference brought together women from all over the world to discuss environmental issues in the context of women's knowledge, women's needs, and women's activism. It served as a springboard for an ecofeminist presence at the UN Conference on Environment and Development at Rio de Janeiro in 1992, which had some

influence on the international deliberations about solutions to worldwide environmental problems. Besides this activity in an international arena, there have been other important ecofeminist conferences, such as the Eco-visions: Women, Animals, the Earth, and the Future conference in Alexandria, Virginia, in March 1994 (which emphasized connections between feminism, environmentalism, and animal liberation), and the Ecofeminist Perspectives conference at University of Dayton, Ohio, in March 1994 (which emphasized ecofeminist interventions into environmental philosophy). In all these events, organizers stressed ecofeminism's ability to make connections between various radical politics. Which part of this multivalent politics is emphasized or even included varies widely and remains deeply contested among those that identify as ecofeminists. In particular, until the late eighties, antispeciesist theories were underdeveloped portions of the ecofeminist tool kit. Theories of the connections between heterosexism and naturism remain underdeveloped within ecofeminism as of this writing.<sup>25</sup>

#### WOMEN AND NATURE, FEMINISM AND ENVIRONMENTALISM

Within this multivoiced and vibrant set of political positions were very different theorizations of the connections between the unequal status of women and the life-threatening destruction of the environment. A constant and ongoing focus of ecofeminist theorizing, as well as critiques of ecofeminism, has been how to conceptualize the "special connection" between women and nature often presumed by the designation *ecofeminism*. Very briefly and generally, I will outline five ways this relationship is described. Though I isolate these analyses as positions, in operation they are often combined and intertwined.

One position involves an argument that patriarchy equates women and nature, so that a feminist analysis is required to understand fully the genesis of environmental problems. In other words, where women are degraded, nature will be degraded, and where women are thought to be eternally giving and nurturing, nature will be thought of as endlessly fertile and exploitable.

Another position, which is really the other side of the position just described, argues that an effective understanding of women's subordination in Western cultures requires an environmentalist analysis. In a culture that is in many ways antinature, which constructs meanings using a hierarchical binarism dependent on assumptions of culture's superiority to nature, understanding women as more "natural" or closer to nature dooms them to an inferior position. Furthermore, in a political economy dependent on the freedom to exploit the environment, a moral and ethical relation to nature is suspect. If women are equated with nature, their struggle for freedom represents a challenge to the idea of a passive, disembodied, and objectified nature.

A third position argues for a special relationship between women and nature using a historical, cross-cultural, and materialist analysis of women's work. By looking at women's predominant role in agricultural production and the managing of household economies worldwide (cooking, cleaning, food production, and purchasing of household goods, health care, and child care), this position maintains that environmental problems are more quickly noticed by women and impact women's work more seriously.<sup>26</sup>

A fourth position argues that women are biologically close to nature, in that their reproductive characteristics (menstrual cycles, lactation, birth) keep them in touch with natural rhythms, seasonal and cyclical, life- and death-giving. Ecofeminists who are comfortable with this position feel that women potentially have greater access than men do to sympathy with nature, and will benefit themselves and the environment by identifying with nature.

A fifth position is taken by feminists who are interested in constructing resources for a feminist spirituality and who have found these resources in nature-based religions: paganism, witchcraft, goddess worship, and Native American spiritual traditions. Because such nature-based religions historically contain strong images of female power and place female deities as at least equal to male deities, many persons who are searching for a feminist spirituality have felt comfortable with the appellation of "ecofeminist."

Before proceeding, I want to point to just one of the most obvious contradictions within ecofeminism: the serious lack of agreement between positions one and two and position four. The first two positions see the equation of women and nature as patriarchal; the fourth position sees this equation as empowering to women and as providing resources for a feminist environmentalism. Some variations of position five, concerned with feminist spirituality, also see the equation of women and nature as empowering. This contradiction is obscured by reductive depictions of ecofeminism as "essentialist" without noting the existence of strong constructionist positions within ecofeminism. That this contradiction—between the critique of the connection between women and nature and the desire for a positive version of that connection—is so deeply embedded illuminates the consistent recurrence to essentialist notions of women and nature that ecofeminism encounters in its attempt to construct a collective subject within a social movement. It is also what prevents me from assigning one or the other of the positions described above to one or another ecofeminist author; in most cases, these different analyses of the connections between women and nature are operating at the same time. One of my contentions here (see chapter 4) is that white ecofeminist discourses about "indigenous" women function to obscure this particular division within ecofeminism. Thus, particular ecofeminist discourses of racial difference side-step the contradictions between particular theorizations of the connection between women and nature. Other political dangers as well as advantages inhering in the essentialism of some ecofeminist formulations of the

connection between women and nature are discussed in the next chapter. But to make a more general point about these positions here, there has been a greater effort within ecofeminist theory to make connections between women and nature rather than between feminism and environmentalism as political movements, even though, as I show here, such movement connections are often at stake in the production of these theories. The subtext of movement contexts influences theoretical constructions in which essentialist connections between women and nature are more frequent than they otherwise might be.

To construct these and other variations of the theoretical connections between women and nature, or between environmentalism and feminism, ecofeminists have drawn on a number of feminist theories that, while not necessarily aimed at answering questions about the relationship between feminist and environmental politics, provided crucial analytical tools. Feminist philosophical critiques of forms of abstract rationality that reify divisions between culture and nature, mind and emotion, objectivity and subjectivity; psychoanalytic theories of the ways in which masculinist anxiety about women's reproductive capacities structures male-dominated political and economic institutions; feminist rethinkings of Christian theology; critiques of the patriarchal nature of militarism; feminist anthropological research; feminist critiques of science; feminist analyses of the sexual objectification of women and feminist poststructuralist theories of constructed subjectivities and critiques of essentialism: these are only a few of the vital feminist resources for ecofeminist theories.<sup>27</sup> Despite its reliance on central feminist theories, most strongly reflected in position two above, ecofeminist theory remains in a tenuous relation to feminist theory, a problem I'll address more directly in chapter 6.

Feminist antiracist theory was also an important resource for ecofeminists, providing a foundation from which to analyze the ways in which hierarchies were created and maintained as well as a guide to constructing a movement that attempts to be inclusive and antiracist. Antiracism was thus a political position apparent in the very beginnings of ecofeminism as theory and as practice, even though it has been a movement that is predominantly white. At the same time, there are many women of color who are either prominent in the movement or who serve as role models for white ecofeminists. To further complicate the picture, many environmental activists are women of color who do not identify as ecofeminists, given that the genealogy of the label arises from the white feminist antimilitarist movement and that U.S. ecofeminism has continued to be a movement largely of white, middle-class women.<sup>28</sup>

In the sections that follow, I examine some environmental and feminist contexts of ecofeminism's development as a political location. In doing so, I will be tracing the way in which ecofeminism developed as a process of political negotiation within various environmentalist and feminist political spaces.