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Articles

Ecogender: Locating Gender in Environmental Social Science

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Ecofeminism contends that there are important interconnections between the domination of women and the domination of the environment, a perspective that might be expected to attract the interest of environmental social scientists. However, environmental social scientists have largely ignored ecofeminism, despite feminism's increasing incorporation in general social science. This may be attributed to the common contention that ecofeminism suffers from a tendency to become more an ideological construct than an academic perspective. But despite a recent surge in cross-disciplinary research, especially in critical geography, political ecology, and poststructuralism, questions of gender remain rarely addressed within mainstream environmental social sciences. Given this neglect, we present an alternative conception, what we term "ecogender studies." "Ecogender studies" draws on those strands of ecofeminism that embrace a relational and dialogic conception of gender and its intersection with other inequalities, and departs from those ecofeminist strands that sacralize an essentialist "nature" and romanticize non-Western traditions.

Keywords domination, ecofeminism, ecogender studies, environment, political ecology

Just as Monsieur Jourdain was astounded to find that he had been speaking prose all his life, women and men have been interacting with the environment for ages, *qua* women and men, without consciously attempting to do so. Ecofeminism, which emerged in the mid-1970s, was the first attempt to theorize these interactions. It borrows from the green movement a concern about the human transformation of the environment. It borrows from feminism a concern that society typically subordinates

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women, and thereby oppresses both women and men. And it contends that these two forms of domination are interconnected (Mellor 1997).

Yet ecofeminism has been given surprisingly little emphasis in environmental social science, despite feminism's increasing incorporation into the social science project. Indeed, gender more broadly has been given little attention by researchers in the field. A citation index search of five top journals in environmental social science that we conducted in April 2005 turned up references to the terms "sex," "gender," or "feminism" in just 3.9% of citations since 1980. Note that this was not a keyword search: It was a search of "words anywhere" in the Cambridge Scientific Abstracts Illumina (CSAI) citation database (which includes Sociological Abstracts and EconLit). Even a passing mention of sex, gender, or feminism in an abstract devoted mainly to other topics would be flagged by this method. We also included mentions in entries of all kinds: articles, book reviews, and the usually small "other" category in the CSAI database. Even with this broad method, we turned up just 98 entries that used any of these 3 terms, or about 4 per year in the 1980 to 2005 period—less than 1 per year per environmental social science journal (see Figure 1).

This is, in our view, a shockingly low figure, given the salience gender has now attained as a research topic in the broader social sciences. At the very least, it cannot be said to constitute a concerted investigation of gender by environmental social scientists. To put these numbers in context, we conducted the same search in clusters of general journals in sociology, social geography, social anthropology, and economics. As Figure 1 shows, our "words anywhere" search of the sociology journal cluster turned up references to "sex," "gender," or "feminism" in 15.2% of the sociology entries, 14.9% of the social geography entries, and 9.2% of the social anthropology entries since 1980—two to three times the rate of the environmental social science cluster.¹ The rate for the general economics cluster, however, was quite a bit lower than it was for the environmental social science cluster: just 1.5%. But if one believes, as we do, that the social science project needs to take gender seriously, this low percentage says more about the state of economics today than it gives environmental social science anything to crow about.

Plus, editorializing aside, it gives us a puzzle in need of explanation: Why are references to gender so much less frequent in environmental social science, in comparison to general sociology, social geography, and social anthropology? It certainly isn't because environmental economists dominate the environmental journals we sampled—*Environment and Behavior*, *Environmental Politics*, *Environmental Values*, *Organization and Environment*, and *Society & Natural Resources*—as a quick perusal of almost any issue of any of them would quickly show. Environmental economists contribute relatively little to the general environmental social science literature, publishing mainly in their own venues, such as the *Journal of Environmental Economics and Management*, or in general economic journals.

We argue in this article that much of the reason for environmental social science's frosty reception to issues of gender and feminism is that ecofeminism has sometimes suffered from a tendency to present itself as an ideological construct rather than a social scientific perspective. For example, some early ecofeminist writers celebrated the identification of women with nature as an ontological reality (Daly 1978; Griffin 1978; Shiva 1988). Seeking to upend the negative association of women with nature, they speciously accepted the biologizing of the personality traits that patriarchal society assigns to women, claiming these connections to be positive with such constructs as Shiva's "feminine principle" (Shiva 1988; Biehl 1991).

General Sociology Cluster

American Journal of Sociology: 534 out of 6217—8.6%
American Sociological Review: 271 out of 1660—16.3%
Social Forces: 431 out of 3896—11.1%
Social Problems: 217 out of 1235—17.6%
Sociological Quarterly: 225 out of 1000—22.5%

Average: 15.2%

General Social Geography Cluster

Antipode: 41 out of 293—14.0%
Political Geography: 56 out of 773—7.2%
Progress in Human Geography: 55 out of 749—7.3%
Social and Cultural Geography: 25 out of 72—34.7%

Average: 14.9%

General Social Anthropology Cluster

Critique of Anthropology: 33 out of 332—9.9%
Cultural Anthropology: 23 out of 232—9.9%
Human Organization: 75 out 959—7.8%
Social Anthropology: 17 out of 197—8.6%
Urban Anthropology: 33 out of 330—10.0%

Average: 9.2%

General Environmental Social Science Cluster

Environment and Behavior: 41 out of 821—5.0%
Environmental Politics: 23 out of 1045—2.2%
Environmental Values: 7 out of 332—2.1%
Organization and Environment: 8 out of 180—4.4%
Society and Natural Resources: 19 out of 333—5.7%

Average: 3.9%

General Economics Cluster

American Economic Review: 95 out of 4631—2.1%
Econometrica: 3 out of 1781—0.2%
Economic History Review: 20 out of 1316—1.5%
Journal of Economic Literature: 40 out of 2242—1.8%
Journal of Economic Perspectives: 20 out of 996—2.0%

Average: 1.5%

Figure 1. Gender scholarship yield rates in academic journals (1980–2005).

Moreover, some ecofeminists have adopted an ecospiritualist orientation that does not fit well with the social science project (Starhawk 1989; Christ 1990; Spretnak 1990). Consequently, even feminists within social science have long distanced themselves from ecofeminism. In light of this distancing, it is unsurprising that mainstream environmental social scientists have paid ecofeminism little heed.

Some environmental social scientists have worked to overcome this impasse, particularly scholars working from a critical or poststructural position (for example, Agarwal 1992; 2001; Fortmann 1996; Gupte 2004; Haraway 1988; Rangan 2000; Rocheleau et al. 1996; Seager 2003; Schroeder 1993). These scholars treat gender as a critical social variable in securing access to natural resources, and as interacting with other moments of inequities, such as race, caste, and class, in the shaping of ecological change. Yet, as Figure 1 shows, mainstream environmental social scientists have evidently paid this work no more heed than it has classical ecofeminism—perhaps because the differences have not registered with them.

Further, ecofeminism has itself come a long way since its inception, and there is now enormous diversity within the field. Recent writings by many ecofeminists specifically distance their work from essentialism. For example, Sturgeon (1997) considers ecofeminism to be an “oppositional political discourse and set of practices embedded in particular historical, material, and political contexts,” and seeks to understand ecofeminist spiritualism and essentialism as social facts not in the physicist’s sense but in Durkheim’s sense—as expressions of that oppositional discourse. Other scholars are working on bringing ecofeminism into engagement with the intersection of race, class, gender, and other patterns of social domination. Karen Warren (2000), another prominent ecofeminist scholar, stresses the diversity within ecofeminism. She postulates that theory-building in ecofeminism is similar to a “philosophical quilt . . . made up of different ‘patches,’ constructed by quilters in particular social, historical, and material contexts” (Warren 2000, 67). King (1990) and Plumwood (1993) present similar arguments in defense of a discursive and nonessentialist ecofeminism. But this new ecofeminist work has also yet to register much with environmental social scientists.

Given the central role of feminism in jolting the academe out of its blindness with regard to gender, the continued marginalization of gender in environmental social science is likely linked to the continued stigmatization of ecofeminism. Our contention, however, is that whatever an investigator’s stance on the diverse strands of ecofeminism, gender should have a central place in environmental social science, just as it does in the wider social scientific project (other than in economics). Our goal is to find an acceptable theoretical language for environmental social scientists to embrace this centrality.

Some might scoff that we are merely trying to domesticate ecofeminism for the more staid confines of the social scientific worldview. And there would be some truth in such a reaction. But as will emerge, such “domestication” requires selectiveness in the reading of ecofeminist literature, as well as filling in some lacunae in that literature. In doing so, we draw upon the existing work in feminist social science, particularly feminist political ecology, which has explicitly begun to address the relational aspect of gender and environment. We wish thereby to examine the power relationships that shape the environment, using gender analysis.

Hence, in this article we propose a synthetic theoretical framework, what we term “ecogender studies.” As we conceive it, ecogender studies encompasses those versions of ecofeminism that envision a dialogic interplay of ideas across gender, class, race, and caste; that focus on women’s and men’s experiences equally; and that avoid essentialism, the sacralization of nature, and the romanticization of non-Western traditions. It also draws on feminist political ecology’s understanding of gender as a critical variable in exploring ecological change. Ecogender studies thus can be defined as social scientific research on the gendered and relational quality

of embodied environmental experience. And while ecogender studies enters the dialogue of social difference at a gendered moment, it immediately seeks to make connections with other moments of social difference, such as class, caste, and race, and investigates the forms and processes of these intersections.

Theoretical Antecedents: Ecofeminism

Ecofeminism first emerged in response to the nature/culture dualism embedded in the philosophy of Western rationality. All ecofeminists identify important connections between the unjustified domination of women and nature, although they differ in the elaboration of the nature of these connections. In order to explore the theoretical framework of ecogender studies, we present the following brief review of this increasingly vast literature. By way of providing some (inevitably overdrawn) coherence to this discussion, we group the divergent positions of ecofeminist scholars as follows: (a) historical ecofeminism, (b) spiritualist religious ecofeminism, and (c) social scientific ecofeminism.

Historical Positions

A brief perusal of works by Merchant (1980; 2003), Salleh (1984), Mies (1986), Shiva (1988; 2001), Mies and Shiva (1993), and Mellor (1997) shows the diverse range of historical analyses of the connections between gender and environment. Merchant (1980) is one of the earliest ecofeminist thinkers to investigate the historical lineage of the women–nature linkage. She contends that pre-16th-century societies in the West were built around integrated and closely knit social ties based on an embodied connection between nature and humans. However, the period of enlightenment that followed was characterized by a changing dynamic between nature and science. The imagery of nature became presented as wild and uncontrollable, something that needed to be “tamed” and “controlled” by scientific progress. This, in turn, contributed to a mechanistic worldview and created a disjuncture in the nature–society connection. In her more recent work, Merchant recommends an alternative to the post-Edenic (scientific) determination to dominate nature, and suggests an “environmental ethic based on a partnership between humans and the nonhuman world” (Merchant 2003, 8).

Vandana Shiva similarly attempts to explore the historical origins of modern “reductionist science” (Shiva 1988). Shiva draws linkages between western scientific control of natural resources and the history of British colonialism in India and argues that traditional agriculture in India had been a sustainable one and functioned in harmony with nature until it was destroyed by the violence of scientific agriculture and forestry of patriarchal Western society. For Shiva, the violation of indigenous knowledge systems in the name of the western form of development has contributed to a disjuncture between women and environment.

Val Plumwood (1993) also argues along similar lines. Coming from a postcolonial intellectual position, she begins by acknowledging the checkered history of colonialism, especially for people of color, women, and the environment. Plumwood identifies at the core of this history of domination a Western rationalist “logic of domination,” based on a parallel set of morally charged dualisms, such as culture–nature, male–female, reason–emotion, self–other, and human–nature. The central dualism, she argues, is “the control of reason over nature,” which identifies

the male, the self, and culture with the reason side of the “logic” (Plumwood 1993, 74). Plumwood also argues that this logic needs to be replaced by a relational understanding of self, promoting what she calls an “ethic of care,” in order to overcome Western rationalist alienation from nature.

Alienation is a central concern of historical perspectives in ecofeminism. Maria Mies (1986) uses a Marxist–feminist perspective to argue that capitalist patriarchy has colonized women’s bodies and labor by alienating women from their immediate biophysical environment. For her, women and environment are exploited for the creation and sustenance of patriarchal domination, which in turn produces the necessary ideological superstructure for the alienation of women from nature.

In presenting her case for ecofeminism, Ariel Salleh (1984) also draws on Marxist theory, suggesting that alienation from nature cannot be comprehended in isolation from the sexist nature of this alienation. Salleh argues that the common separation, both in theory and in practice, of productive and reproductive labor is part and parcel of these joint commodifications. Salleh further postulates that the assumption of biological egalitarianism in most environmentalism fails to account for what she describes as the deep connection between the commodification of nature and commodification of women.

Mellor (1997) presents what she calls “a realist and a materialist connection” between feminism and ecology. According to her, even though both men and women share a dialectical relationship with the environment, their interactive experiences are materially unequal. Moreover, since women are culturally understood to have a more intimate knowledge of nature, they “can be seen as playing a socially constructed mediating role between hu(man)ity and non-human nature” (Mellor 1997, 13). Thus for Mellor, ecofeminism should study the structures of mediation (not particular social contexts) that have contributed to these forms of domination.

The positions just described have produced some new and important ways of conceptualizing nature–gender relations. First, historical ecofeminism presents a systematically developed historical analysis of how human–nature relations evolved over time and ways in which scientific enlightenment discourse shaped the dialectics. Second, these scholars underscore the politics of science—that science is not a mere objectivity, but rather is embedded in power relations. Finally, this position also explores ways in which the Marxist notion of alienation helps in conceptualizing the commodification of gender relations.

However, there is much in this literature that borders on—and sometimes crosses over into—essentialism, romanticization, and West-bashing. For example, Merchant’s view of precapitalist society passes easily over the brutality of feudal hierarchies. Similarly, Indian society before the British certainly was highly transformative of the South Asian landscape, and was equally capable of striking social hierarchies. Patterns of domination of women and nature can be found in more societies than in the West, but Plumwood does not identify the logic of domination outside of the West. Mellor’s vision of women as environmental mediators homogenizes women’s experience and unnecessarily excludes men as potential mediators. And Salleh does not confront the question of the commodification of men and male labor.

Spiritualist–Religious Positions

A second group of scholars explore the spiritual and religious interconnections in ecofeminist thinking. This is assuredly the most controversial strand in ecofeminism.

As many have observed, such writers have often promoted the mystification and romanticization of nature and the traditions of indigenous peoples, conceptually associating these traditions with nature and the natural. The spiritualist tradition in ecofeminism is also commonly associated with Wicca and neo-paganism, and typically emphasizes the earth-based symbolism associated with goddess worship. The works of Starhawk (1989), Charlene Spretnak (1990), and Carol Christ (1990), among others, fall within the arena of spiritual ecofeminism.

Starhawk sums up the central philosophical argument of this brand of ecofeminism when she points out that “to say that ecofeminism is a spiritual movement, in an earth-rooted sense, means that it encompasses a dimension that profoundly challenges our ordinary sense of value, that counters the root stories of our culture and attempts to shift them” (Starhawk 1989, 174–189). Thus in Starhawk’s view, ecofeminism is not new but rather has its origin in the prepatriarchal biocentric religious perspective she and other writers associate with ancient peoples.

A similar picture of ecofeminism is presented in the writings of Charlene Spretnak. According to her, the most intriguing thing about ecofeminism is its awareness about the relationship between women (as goddesses) and animals, plants, and nature at large (Spretnak 1990). Ecofeminism from this perspective finds an underlying mystical communion between women and nature that connects women’s bodies with the cosmic world. For her, the worship of the Goddess involves a cognitive shift from the atomistic self-interested self of humans to an ecological “natural” self. Scholars like Carol Christ (1990) and Max Oelschlaeger (1991) espouse similar positions.

The spiritualization of the women–nature relationship that defines scholarship within this tradition has been extensively critiqued elsewhere (Agarwal 1992; 2001; Biehl 1991; Guha 1990; Jackson 1993). These critics almost uniformly argue that spiritual accounts of the nature–women relationship commonly have an essentialist dimension to them. Also, ecofeminist spiritualism does not often stop to interrogate whether its embrace of the spiritual practices of indigenous peoples might represent the co-optation and colonization of the very traditions it romanticizes. Moreover, such positions sideline questions of inequality and the social organization of oppression. Plus, social science has long had a distaste for spiritual language, which by itself explains much of the dismissal of the entire gamut of ecofeminist scholarship.

But ecofeminism has a much broader frame of analysis. In addition to historical and the spiritual schools of thought, ecofeminism has attempted a social scientific understanding of gender–environment relations.

Social Scientific Positions

Much of the social scientific writing within ecofeminism positions itself in part as a critique of historical and spiritualist approaches. Central to its perspective is the diversity of contexts and varied nature of oppression along class, race, and gender lines, rejecting the homogenizing tendency we discussed earlier. As Warren points out, social scientific ecofeminism is primarily “transformative feminism” (Warren 2000). This brand of ecofeminism makes connections between and among various systems of oppression, and is well aware of the diversity of women’s and men’s experiences (Sturgeon 1997).

But in adopting a social scientific view, this work does not avoid taking a moral and political perspective, in common with the broader tradition of feminist scholarship. While situating ecofeminism within a social scientific framework, this group of

scholars seeks to create critical consciousness concerning postindustrial technological society, based on analyses of capitalism, militarism, and commodification of culture (Haraway 1988).

Thus, Karen Warren (2000), one of the most prominent ecofeminist scholars within this tradition, defines ecofeminism as a field of possibilities—of connections that broadly deal with the intersection of the oppression of women and the oppression of nature. For Warren, ecofeminism is transformative in character and helps in building conceptual links between liberal, Marxist, socialist, and radical feminisms. One important point that separates Warren's scholarship from historical and spiritual ecofeminist positions is her definition of patriarchy. Warren identifies patriarchal patterns of domination in a sociological way and defines these as operative in situations where men have greater access to important resources in a society. This domination, for Warren, is not just based on individual access to resources but is also dependent on institutional access to power and privilege. Warren (2000) goes on to argue that ecofeminism involves a critique of institutional power and the ways in which it is shaped by race/ethnic/gender/class identities.

Sturgeon (1997) argues against those strands of ecofeminism that have portrayed "cultures" and "cultural values" as idealized constructions, in an uncritical effort to understand diversity. For example, some ecofeminist writings present an idealized construction of Third World women as ecologically and socially virtuous. The problem here is twofold. On the one hand, such a view indigenizes "nonindustrial" knowledge systems by conflating nonindustrialized culture with being ecological and egalitarian. Sturgeon presents an example of Chinese culture, which has witnessed the coexistence of a patriarchal social system with an ecological and nondualistic understanding of nature (Sturgeon 1997). On the other hand, this position naturalizes "indigenous" knowledge by appointing certain Southern women as authorized "experts" on Third World conditions, without paying due credit to the material dimension of dominance based on economic advantage and political power. The construction of some women in the Third World as representatives of "difference" in ecofeminist movements and providing these movements a talismanic stature results in essentializing and dehistoricizing Third World activism (Gaard 1998).

One example of this essentialism can be seen in some ecofeminist portrayals of the Chipko movement of India, in which local villagers have organized to prevent the felling of communal woodlands for timber, sometimes by literally hugging trees (Chipko means "to hug" in Hindi) in the face of advancing loggers. Much of the leadership in the Chipko movement has been female, and in a few notable hugging incidents, mainly female. The role of women in the leadership of Chipko, along with the resonance of the metaphor of "hug" with an ethic of care, has led some writers to proclaim Chipko to be an ecofeminist movement (cf. Bandopadhyay and Shiva 1987). As Priya Rangan (2000) points out, once it was transformed into a shining symbol of grass-roots activism, Chipko became a myth, tenuously linked to an imagined space of the Himalayas that represents an ahistorical pristine nature inhabited by simple peasants.

However, a number of scholars have noted that that the social dynamics of Chipko are far more complex (Agarwal 1992; Guha 1990; Sturgeon 1997). The majority of Chipko's leadership has in fact been male, and the gender dimensions of the movement also need to be relationally understood within the context of class and caste and the developmentalist forest policies of the Indian state. While women have played a key role in Chipko organizations, the movement is as much about the

role of state and capital in the lives of India's poor as it is about anything else. As Rangan aptly suggests, Chipko needs to be seen in the context of its "geographical history" as emerging through its colonial and postcolonial experiences and as shaped by existing democratic processes (Rangan 2000).

It is not necessary, helpful, or accurate to reify women's lives in order to make a case for the importance of a focus on gender and inequality in socioenvironmental relations. For example, in charting out what she calls "feminist environmentalism," Agarwal does not deny the unequal burden on rural women in countries like India, stemming from the intersection of environmental and gender oppressions. But Agarwal also stresses the need for paying "due attention to the historically variable, gendered, classed, and socially complex relationships between household forms, property relations, technology, marital customs, and environmental specificities" (Agarwal 1992, 119).

Cecile Jackson (1993) and Brinda Rao (1991) argue along similar lines. Both these scholars argue that the failure of ecofeminism to be a serious threat to established order lies in its inability to pay close attention to the political economy of social relations that intimately affects relations between women and environment. More recently, Goldman and Schurman (2000) present the multifaceted understanding of society/nature interaction under the rubric of "environmental feminism." They define "environmental feminism" as a tool used by ecofeminists for theorizing society/nature relations in terms of ecological embeddedness and biological embodiment (Goldman and Schurman 2000, 572).

Similarly, Seager (2003) stresses the need to work on the social scientific dimensions of ecofeminism, without reducing feminist environmentalism to charges of essentialism, biologism, and spirituality. For her, debates on ecofeminism are well past their intellectual and political returns. Instead she suggests that feminist scholarship on environment needs to reaffirm its commitment to explore how categories of gender, class, and race mediate the lived experiences of communities, and how perceptions of human-environment relationships can be examined through gendered lenses (Seager 2003, 6).

In these ways, social scientific visions of ecofeminism are coming to a more relational understanding of gender, environment, and society that seeks to understand complexity and diversity, to not assert homogeneity, and to view its practical and political task as tracing the social organization of inequality. Ecogender studies draws on this social scientific version of ecofeminism. It also draws upon a second strand of research: feminist political ecology.

Theoretical Antecedents: Feminist Political Ecology

Feminist political ecology, as Rocheleau et al. suggest, treats gender as a critical variable in shaping resource access and control, interacting with class, caste, race, culture, and ethnicity to shape environmental change (Rocheleau et al. 1996, 4). This approach also helps us explore the causes of struggle of women and men to attain ecologically variable livelihoods for a more sustainable world.

Feminist political ecology treats women as both participants and partners in environmental preservation. Toward this end, it borrows from existing research in feminist cultural ecology (Fortmann 1988; Hoskins 1988; Leach 1994), political ecology (Blaikie and Brookefield 1987; Peet and Watts 1993; Schroeder 1993), and feminist political economy (Agarwal 1992; Jackson 1993; Seager 2003). Drawing

on the political ecologist's concern with the contextualized and situated nature of knowledge, feminist political ecologists argue not only that environmental knowledge is shaped by social, political, and economic contexts, but that the contexts themselves are gendered (Leach 1994; Rocheleau et al. 1996).

For example, Melissa Leach studies the importance of gender in an analysis of social differentiation from a political ecological perspective. She argues that using the lens of gender helps one to move beyond an "undifferentiated" community as the level of analysis. Instead one might ask important questions about whether women's relationship with the environment is distinct from men's and how this in turn shapes women's involvement in environmental conservation (Leach 1994, 23). Much existing literature (ecofeminism, among other kinds) views the gender-environment relationship as an ideological construct, thereby misrepresenting women's natural resource-using activities, Leach writes. Instead she argues one needs to examine gender in terms of socially differentiated resource access, use, and control (Leach 1994, 37). In particular, she argues one should pay careful attention to the kinds of negotiations that occur in resource distribution and use, the different claims that women and men can make in order to press their interests, and how these negotiations are in turn embedded in wider sets of social and political contexts (Leach 1994).

Similarly, in her study of gendered knowledge in Zimbabwe, Fortmann emphasizes the need to understand both gender differentiation of natural resource use and impact of broader social relations on differential engagement with environment along gender lines (Fortmann 1996, 211). Seager also suggests a need to move beyond the scientized understanding of environmental knowledge and draws our attention to environmental activism by women whose lived experiences provide a wellspring of specialized expertise. Feminist political ecology, she argues, provides a platform for a more fruitful engagement (Seager 1996).

In an interesting study of gender and political ecology in Gambian gardens, Schroeder draws our attention to the growing social and political conflicts resulting from rising global trends of reversing environmental degradation. Drawing on Blaikie and Brookefield, he examines cases of capital-intensive natural conservation projects in Gambia using unpaid female laborers. In his effort to examine gender inequities that result from such seemingly beneficial projects, Schroeder stresses the need to critically examine the political economy of similar stabilization projects (Blaikie and Brookefield 1987; Schroeder 1993). Further, Brú-Bistuer's Spanish case study outlines women's participation in oppositional campaigns to industrial waste disposal and emphasizes women's unique understanding of the environmental issues, primarily in relation to health (Brú-Bistuer 1996). The Miller et al. West Harlem case study describes a community (with substantial female leadership) that opposed the siting of a sewage treatment plant in its area. The study goes on to describe the health risks to women and children using the park subsequently built on the roof of the plant, owing to their gendered use of space (Miller et al. 1996).

Other case studies using a political ecology framework have similarly emphasized grass-roots activism and gendered politics. Two examples include Campbell's analysis of the women's group of Xapuri and the extent and value of women's participation in the rubber tappers' union in far western Brazil, and Wastl-Walter's account of Austrian women's roles in grass-roots opposition to the destruction of the riverine forest on the Danube for hydroelectric power (Campbell 1996; Wastl-Walter 1996). In the latter case, the political campaigns led to national changes in political participation, including an increase in women's participation.

These and numerous other studies that draw on feminist political ecology provide an invitation to examine the power relationships that shape the environment through the lens of gender analysis. The array of studies using this approach invites us to chart out new ways of exploring power relations in the shaping of the environment.

The Framework of Ecogender Studies

Our theoretical framework of “ecogender studies” draws on both feminist political ecology and the social scientific version of ecofeminism. We would like to reiterate that some writers in the ecofeminist literature share most, if not all, of our theoretical orientations. Similarly, most of the principles outlined in our theorization of “ecogender studies” are foundational to feminist political ecology. We do not present “ecogender studies” as novel in this sense or as yet another tiresome academic claim for the disciplinary capital of “originality.” We do not walk alone, nor do we wish to.

But the wide variety of ecofeminist writings has obscured the existence of social scientific orientations within it, and has diverted attention from the recent development of feminist political ecology. Our goal in presenting ecogender studies is to highlight, and to some extent rearticulate, the social scientific insights of ecofeminism and feminist political ecology, while specifically distancing these insights from the problems of essentialism, romanticization, and sacralization. We do not mean to deny that the sacred, the romantic, and even the essentialistic can have moral and personal value, as long as they do not lead to invidiousness and fragmentation. But these cannot be the basis of a social scientific project. Nor do we wish to be taken as saying that all writers in the ecofeminist traditions we have labeled “historical” and “spiritual” are without ample social scientific insights. Our categories are imperfect. All categories are. But the rejection of categorization is all too often used as an easy way to ward off what is in fact the most rejuvenating of social and scientific processes: critique. And from a social scientific perspective, we do indeed mean to critique the historical and spiritual traditions within ecofeminism.

We also would not wish that a “social scientific” vision be taken as a morally neutral one. As one of us has written elsewhere, efforts to be “value free” are highly likely to be “value-less,” as they are uncritically directed with regard to human social concerns, just as they inescapably have implications for those concerns (Bell 2004a, 11). In this sense, valueneutrality is neither possible nor desirable, as social scientists everywhere increasingly recognize.

So too for ecogender studies, as we conceptualize it. It has a definite moral and political vision, one that is common to most ecofeminist and feminist political ecology writings: that we cannot rid ourselves of the ideology of dominating nature until we rid ourselves of hierarchical structures in human society—including not only sexism, racism, and classism but also economic exploitation, unequal resource distribution, and the negative effects of capitalism. It is only by eliminating domination as such—both in an ideological and a material sense—that women and men will be able to fulfill themselves completely both as gendered as well as *human* beings, which in turn will promote the freedom of nonhuman nature.

Ecogender studies attempts to theorize this vision by emphasizing relationality in both human–human and human–environmental interactions. We suggest that relationality is central for at least three reasons. First, it helps in avoiding essentialism in our conceptualization of the biophysical by highlighting movement and change. Second, a relational perspective reminds us of the dialogic, or mutually constituting,

character of social and environmental interactions, thus providing further insight into the origins of that which has often been tempting to regard in an essentialistic fashion, especially the social organization of power (Bell 2004b). Finally, it creates analytical space for conceptualizing the diversity and particularity of experiences and perspectives as central to an understanding of power, without succumbing to an extreme constructivist position. In doing so, it builds on the following tenets:

- That gender oppression and the oppression of the nonhuman are interconnected in an embodied and relational fashion that has *both* ideological and material foundations.
- That gender is itself a relational construction, and that therefore women's and men's embodied environmental experience cannot be understood in isolation.
- That this embodied connection is not only gendered but is historically situated and socially complex.
- That by acknowledging the complexity of interactions between gender and environment, ecogender studies acknowledges interactions as shaped and constrained by other patterns of oppression, such as those along racial, ethnic, class, caste, and other lines.
- That while being inclusive of diverse forms of oppression, ecogender studies does not lose sight of the fact that it is an ecological position and focuses on those aspects of oppression that affect the human relationship with the environment.
- That by proclaiming an ecological position, it does not present humans as "one with nature" but as involved in a dialogic and evolving relationship with the environment that is historically situated.
- That by including diverse positions on ecofeminist activism, it does not valorize and hence essentialize the "Third World View" as the only authentic insider position (and as such not to be critiqued) but engages diversity in dialogue.
- That it is important to renew our appreciation for women's contributions to child-bearing and childrearing, both literally vital social and ecological activities, while at the same time emancipating women from the regressive dimensions of these responsibilities and encouraging men to seek their own empowerment through an equal commitment to the reproduction of human and nonhuman life.

Thus in arguing for an important link between feminism and ecology, ecogender studies does not claim that women are essentially closer to nature. Rather, our argument is that it is not possible to understand the ecologically destructive consequences of dominant trends in human development without understanding, *inter alia*, their gendered character. "Ecogender studies," then, explores the dialogic character of the relationality of gender, society, and environment—which unavoidably leads to a focus on the patterns of oppression that constrain these interactions.

Preliminary Methodological Positions

From a methodological point of view, ecogender studies as we envision it can be both quantitative and qualitative, as long as the study emphasizes the need to understand the location of the researcher(s) in generalizing to other social locations. The locationality of the researcher can be both an enriching and a limiting experience, and not just a matter of postmodern angst. For example, the locations of the authors of this piece—a woman, a man; an Indian, an American—give this article a relational and international perspective, encompassing both rich countries and poor

countries. However, both researchers are from upper-middle-class professional backgrounds in both their family history and their current class locations, which might have certain limiting effects. We have tried to take this into account as we envision what ecogender studies might be, trying to remind ourselves of what our social locations may have prevented us from seeing, just as our social locations gave us some vision that we might not otherwise have had as we tried to chalk out the terrain of ecogender studies.

Thus, we see the methodology of ecogender studies as in part a “consciousness-raising (feminist) exercise” (DeVault 1999; Fortmann 1996). This method of consciousness-raising, as DeVault points out for feminist scholarship in general, is fundamentally empirical and creates a systematic mode of inquiry that challenges received knowledge and allows women and men to learn from one another, both within and across gender lines (DeVault 1999, 27). In line with such a perspective, we propose grounding ecogender studies on four central methodological principles:

- *Locationality and reflexivity*: Here we refer to the necessity to attempt a collective and reflexive understanding of histories of omission and distortion of women’s and men’s experiences in relationship to environmental questions. Locationality and reflexivity allow us to present the multitude of gendered environmental histories within specific contexts and locations that will in turn produce a more situated appreciation of knowledge, and hence indicative of a reflexive understanding of a specific social location vis-à-vis larger society.
- *Dialogics and relationality*: DeVault argues that one of the prominent agendas of feminist methodologies is a commitment to use its tools “to ‘talk back’ to sociology in a spirited critique aimed at improving the ways we know society” (DeVault 1999, 27). Similarly, ecogender research seeks to create a set of conceptual tools for engaging in a dialogic and relational interaction with the environmental social sciences.
- *Critical and interrogable*: The open-ended and provisional character of an ecogender perspective makes the approach critical and interrogable. By shifting the focus of environmental social science to one that is inclusive of the gendered dimension of environmental concerns, ecogender studies charts a research agenda that is nonuniversal, nonhierarchical, nontalismanic, and hence more discursive.
- *Multiple methods and triangulation*: Finally, ecogender studies should be open to a wide variety of qualitative or quantitative approaches, as long as they meet the three characteristics just mentioned. Indeed, to the extent that they can be brought into conversation with each other, multiple methods become a form of critical, dialogic, and relational analysis in their own right.

Engendering Environments: Future Directions and Concluding Remarks

Ecogender studies is an attempt to provide a social scientific perspective that illuminates both the symbolic/ideational and material links between gender, society, and environment. Future research in the environmental social sciences would benefit greatly from engaging such a perspective, we believe. We next suggest some possible areas for such future engagement, some of which are already well underway, particularly in feminist political ecology. We believe that environmental social science needs to draw on these and similar exercises for a better understanding of gendered environments:

- Study of *differences in environmental experience by gender and other patterned forms of social dominance*. A very wide range of analyses would fit within this area,

such as the different environmental experiences of urban elite women from a Western nation versus rural women in a non-Western setting (Agarwal 1992; Pellow 2000). Such work should be strongly comparative in character.

- Study of the *differences in environmental experience among men and women in agricultural societies*. For example, in India, rural men are mostly employed in the paid migrant economy, while rural women engage in largely unpaid farm work in and near homes and villages, which likely leads to difference in experiential knowledge about the environment.
- Study of *differences in exposure to toxics and other environmental hazards by gender*. Such work might investigate, for example, the possibility that women in “developed” countries are exposed more to toxics in cosmetics, while men are exposed more to industrial solvents and the like. But work on the gendering of environmental risk should be contextualized with other patterns of social difference and dominance, such as the feminization of industrial work in poor countries.
- Study of *masculinity and the environment*. As masculine ideology and practice is strongly implicated in patriarchal patterns of dominance, much can be learned about the environmental lives of both men and women through an ecogender look at masculinity, such as the growing body of work on rural masculinity (Campbell and Bell 2000; Campbell, Bell, and Finney 2006). A further example is the recent scholarly debate on the “white male effect” and the finding that white men and Asian men (Palmer 2003) accept higher levels of environmental risk than do others (Finucane et al. 2000).
- Study of *food and gender*. There has been considerable research that has studied the connections between gender and food issues (DeVault 1991; Counihan and Kaplan 1998; Lappe et al. 1979), but much more needs to be done. For example, the growing “slow food movement” has seen to date little investigation of its potentially gendered and classed character, which could lead to its devolution into an upper-class conversion of (generally) women’s labor into a conspicuous display of access to leisure.
- Study of *home ecology*. Ecogender studies might take up research on social relations in the home within the context of broader patterns of social organization, and their implications for ecological practice. Shove’s pioneering studies (Shove 2003) indicate how shared understandings of normality in environmental consumption patterns in the home, such as the use of technologies like the freezer and the shower, could be furthered using the lens of ecogender, for normalization itself is gendered, and so is the use of technology.

These are only a few beginnings. But the preceding examples, we hope, can provide researchers in the environmental social sciences some ideas for tracing connections between issues of environmentalism and those of gender. For in the end it is not only ecofeminism that we seek to domesticate, but also environmental social science itself—opening its research to the full social relations of our ecological home. We present ecogender studies as a journey in this direction.

Note

1. We derived these data from searches on “sex or gender or feminism” in “words anywhere” since 1980, by journal, using the Cambridge Scientific Abstracts Illumina (CSAI) search engine, with all databases checked, to maximize coverage, and including all forms of entries listed: articles, book reviews, and the usually small “other” category. We derived counts for

“total number of articles” by searching on the first name of the journal under “words anywhere,” limited simultaneously by the journal name. While we believe this a fairly comprehensive method, we likely missed some potential entries due to the databases and procedures of CSAI—particularly in the area of human geography, which this search engine does not cover well. (For this reason, we include only 4 journals in the human geography cluster, as these were the only ones with at least 50 total entries—the figure below which we feel no confidence in the relative percentages—in the combined databases.) But we see no reason why such procedures might systematically under- or overrepresent gender-related entries in a journal-to-journal comparison. Thus, while the absolute counts may be low in some cases, we are confident that the relative percentages we report are accurate. Note that all figures are for “unique results” only, eliminating duplicate entries from the multiple databases. All searches were done in April 2005. Refer to Figure 1.

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