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Nature, Woman, Labor, Capital: living the deepest contradiction

Ariel Salleh

1. Women's Resistance: An Embodied Materialism

In the 1960s a social movement began to emerge around actions as diverse as women's legal challenges to giant nuclear corporations in the United States and tree-hugging protests against loggers in northern India. These actions signaled a new politics, grounded materially in understandings that come from women's everyday work to meet life needs. Despite cultural differences between the various actors, such actions reflected a common intuition that somehow the struggle for a "feminine voice" to be heard is connected with struggle for a nurturant attitude toward the living environment. The fractured term "eco-feminism"—occurring spontaneously across several continents during the 1970s—encapsulated this double-edged political concern. By the late 1980s ecofeminism was expressing an explicit challenge to the transnational structure of capitalist oppression, that is, to a global economy in which so-called advanced societies are rapaciously dependent on the resources and labor of an "undeveloped other."

This chapter draws together ecofeminist diagnoses of capitalism, looking at the way in which women's labor experiences house both "grounds" for an ecopolitical critique and actual "models" of sustain-

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able practice. Section 2 discusses the low *value* accorded to "nature" and to "women" under capitalism, and how the exploitation of each intensifies with economic globalization. The *nature-woman-labor nexus* is examined more closely in sections 3 and 4, where it is proposed that this should be considered a *primary contradiction* of capitalism. Section 5 introduces a depth analysis to show how living within this contradiction activates resistance—historical *agency*.

My argument highlights distinctive structural issues that women face under a capitalist mode of production. While economic "growth" appears to have brought material benefits to some men and some women in the North, in another sense it can be said that almost all women inhabit the South. The annexation of women's work is reinforced with industrialization and consumerism, whether by computers, labor-saving gadgets, or new reproductive technologies. Meanwhile, in "developing" regions expropriation of farmlands for commodity markets, technocratic "green revolutions," and now corporate gene patenting undercut the very means of women's labor for subsistence.

Continued capital accumulation and the expanding hegemony of transnational operations deepens nature's and women's subjection. This is not to say that capitalism has been the only source of such oppression, nor to argue that capital does not also exploit men. Rather, it is to make visible something largely unspoken in existing theoretical analyses by pointing to what is unique about women's environmental responses. For the fact is that in at least four ways women's relation to "nature," and therefore to "capital" and "labor," is constructed differently from men's.¹

The first such difference involves experiences mediated by female body organs in the hard but sensuous interplay of birthing and suckling labors. The second difference follows from women's historically assigned caring and maintenance chores that serve to "bridge" men and nature. A third difference involves women's manual work in making goods as farmers, weavers, herbalists, potters, and so on. The fourth difference involves creating symbolic representations of "feminine" relations to "nature"—in poetry, in painting, in philosophy, in everyday talk, and so on. Through this constellation of labors, women are organically and discursively implicated in life-affirming activities, and they develop gender-specific knowledges grounded in this material base. As a result, women across cultures have begun to express insights that are quite removed from most men's approaches to global crisis—whether these be corporate greenwash, ecological ethics, or socialism.

Far from being premised on simple polarities of masculine and feminine, culture and nature—as some critics of ecofeminism have implied—this standpoint actually rests on a dialectical deconstruction

of these received dualisms. It is a political commitment grounded in women's economic marginalization and the painful awareness of contradiction or nonidentity that their place in the *nature-woman-labor nexus* gives them. The strategic privileging of the marginal voice here is thus justified empirically, rather than by some trans-historical or "essentialist" claim. Formulated as an embodied materialism, ecofeminist politics gets at the lowest common denominator of oppressions. As such, it opens up new possibilities for dialogue between classes and social movements resistant to capital.²

2. Value

My mother used to say that the black woman is the white man's mule and the white woman is his dog.³

For ecofeminists, capitalism appears as a modern form of patriarchal relations, in which most women experience a social reality very different from their brothers in capital or labor. Relatively few women possess assets in their own right, and the majority of women are "not quite labor" either. Even U.N. figures cannot hide the global scandal of feminine marginalization, for women own less than 1% of all property and do two-thirds of the world's work for 5% of all wages paid.⁴ In fact, women's place in this predatory system is notionally somewhere between a "natural resource" and a "condition of production."⁵ Either way, women are treated as an economic "externality," just as they have been a historical externality in bourgeois liberal political institutions.⁶

A glance at the post-World War II conjuncture gives substance to these claims. In her classic statement *The Global Kitchen*, activist Selma James points out that

in the United States in 1979, only 51% of adult women were "in the [paid] labor force," 48% in China and France; in Latin America only 14% of the total female population was counted as workers in 1975. In Britain, 40% of women are in the paid labor force now.⁷

New Zealander Marilyn Waring updates the indicators in *Counting for Nothing*. But while a burgeoning service sector in the North, and an explosion of free trade zones in the South, shifts the statistics around a little, the basic character of this female exploitation remains unchanged by globalization and the workplace restructuring that comes with it. Women swell the ranks of part-time, contract, and

seasonal positions, without security, advancement opportunities, or retirement benefits. Maternity leave and work-based childcare programs are a rarity. This entrenched gender division of labor is so fundamental to the fabric of capitalist society that, 20 years after a "sexual revolution" and installation of affirmative employment schemes, even salaried women in the industrialized nations typically receive only two-thirds of an average man's wage. More significantly, the greater portion of women's labor is left out of gross national product (GNP) calculations altogether.

Yet a housewife in the "developed" world often puts in at least 70 unsalaried hours a week—almost twice the standard Australian working week of 40 hours. Using subsistence skills, she produces "use value" by cooking, sewing clothes, cleaning, house maintenance, gardening, and so on. Nonmetropolitan women in the South grow the bulk of their community's food. Then there are the intangible obligations of women's open-ended labor role: tending children, comforting the aged and sick, providing ego repairs and sexual relief for the man in their lives, and possibly the labor of childbearing consequent to that. Mary Mellor from the United Kingdom describes all this as putting in "biological time."⁹ In addition, many middle-class women take on a heavy round of voluntary commitments, for example, PTA, Amnesty International work, or resident action campaigning. Migrant and refugee women use extra energy absorbing new strains on the family and rebuilding community, often after a full day in the fields or on the assembly line.

The unpaid services—"labors of love"—that women give out under capitalism can, in principle, be remunerated: examples are prostitution, fast lunch counters, professional laundry. This shows that there is no natural necessity to organizing the economic system in this way, only capitalist patriarchal convenience. As Selma James notes,

The woman who cleans a house is not "working," but the military man who bombs it, is. Further, . . . the work of the same woman, if hired by her husband . . . would pop into GNP.¹⁰

The paternalism of capitalist economic arrangements is such that even when women's domestic labors are recompensed in the form of supporting mothers' pensions or benefits for elderly care, these payments are perceived as "a gift" of the state, charity, or welfare, and never as an "economic exchange" transacted between free citizens, as in the contract between "labor" as such and capital.

Using standard economic criteria, one can easily demonstrate the significance of women's contribution to the capitalist economy. James,

Waring, and others including Hilka Pietila, an ecofeminist from Finland, all substantiate that if we were to allocate domestic hours to standard job categories, apply the going wage, and then total everything up, we would find housework constitutes around one-third to one-half of GNP. The Australian Bureau of Statistics estimates household labor as equivalent to 52–62% of GNP.¹¹ But if domestic labor were to come in from the cold like this, giving “women’s work” a place in “the formal economy”—with the massive redistributions in incomes and patterns of economic opportunity this would entail—would it mean that women themselves were more highly valued by society? Most feminists doubt it, for women’s oppression is not simply economic. In any case, to advocate such reform is to presume that the capitalist system at large and the patriarchal family as a microcosm within it are institutions worth preserving.

In sum, women’s work makes accumulation possible for all kinds of men, and the “surplus” women generate is quite crucial to the operation of capitalist patriarchy. This statement is relatively uncontroversial, at least among women. During the 1970s and 1980s an extended exchange was carried on among socialist feminists concerning the interaction of capitalist and patriarchal systems.¹² Agreement over the precise scholastic formulation covering women’s subordination was not reached. The overlap of female exploitation with ethnicity, race, and the North–South axis was barely touched. However, by broaching the “the nature question,” ecofeminists are now reframing the entire debate.

By introducing the nature–woman–labor nexus as a fundamental contradiction, ecofeminism affirms the primacy of an exploitative, gender-based division of labor, and simultaneously shifts the analysis of all oppressions toward an ecological problematic. While liberal feminists may be content with receiving nothing more than equality alongside men in the existing system, ecofeminists are concerned about global sustainability as much as gender justice: in fact, they see the two as intrinsically interlinked. For example, Berit As from Norway argues that economic growth in a male-oriented economy only adds new burdens to women’s lives.¹³ Money that might sustain women breadwinners goes instead into armaments, six-digit executive salaries, and a paper whirlwind of speculation. Under capitalist patriarchy, it is men in government, business, unions, academia, and international agencies who hold most decision-making positions, and who set priorities that are comfortable for them. The presence of a few female executives in the corporate hierarchy will have little impact as long as masculinist priorities remain unchallenged. One may consider the uncritical contribution of women economic advisers to national governments or

the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development in promoting the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, heedless of the intensified exploitation that deregulated markets bring.

Yet it is not just women’s livelihood at stake here; the natural environment is equally externalized and decimated by these priorities. The structural intertwining of women’s exploitation with the degradation of nature is illustrated at “development’s” every turn. Ethiopia suffers desertification and famine as land is taken out of women’s hands by men who would “render it profitable.” In the United States, women working for electronics corporations are exposed to toxic contaminants of skin, lungs, and nervous system, and they suffer fetal damage. Import of tractors to Sri Lanka degrades soil and water, and forces women to pick cotton twice as fast, in order to keep their wages at the same level. Following engineering failure at Chernobyl in the Ukraine, mothers across Europe pick up the community health costs of nuclear radiation. Sex tourism, a male-organized and male-oriented skin-trade, balances “foreign exchange” in the South, as debt accumulates from the rush for ecologically disastrous masculinist status symbols like weapons, hydroelectric dams, and oil. Living things are expendable for capitalist patriarchy, which does not value what it does not itself produce.¹⁴

Sisters North and South have more in common than many think; and that commonality increases as the so-called “level playing field” of the economists expands across North and South. The gender rule applies cross-culturally, and for women it reads “Maximum responsibilities, minimum rights.” Hence, while technology transfer from core industrial powers—in particular the United States, Germany, and Japan—introduces an era of neocolonialism to the periphery, “development” also heightens the subsumption of women’s work. Vandana Shiva portrays this trend as the result of an implicit pact between advisers from the North and local elite men, the upshot being “modernization” projects and structural adjustment programs passing the costs of “economic” growth down the line to women, and then to nature.¹⁵ Village girls become silicon slaves, while the erosion of traditional land use rights with cash-cropping strips their mothers of cultural autonomy and economic control over their means of production.

In India, a culturally sustainable woman–nature metabolism has been undermined by imported scientific techniques that impose an inappropriate linear reductionist “logic” on the cyclic flows of nature. Shiva writes:

The forest is separated from the river, the field is separated from the forest, the animals are separated from the crops. Each is then

separately developed and the delicate balance which ensures sustainability . . . is destroyed. The visibility of dramatic breaks and ruptures is posited as "progress."¹⁶

Indigenous women's expertise developed over thousands of years—knowledge of seed stocks, the water-conserving properties of root systems, transfer of fertility from herds to forest, home grown medicines and methods of contraception—are lost. Nature is broken; human needs go unfulfilled; societies and cultures disintegrate as rural men leave families for the city lights and promise of a wage. Meanwhile, men of the *comprador* class and their World Bank role models publish annual trajectories of "manpower" requirements: engineers, accountants, chemists, whose very skills exacerbate the entropy.

Ecofeminists have long argued that an identification of women with nature defines women's work in the North as well as the South. Take the complex of tasks that housewives perform under capitalist patriarchy: providing sexual satisfaction, birthing and suckling children, carrying the young about, protecting their bodies and socializing them, growing and cooking food, maintaining shelter, sweeping floors, washing and mending clothes, dealing with garbage—and these days recycling it. The common denominator of these activities is a labor "mediation of nature" on behalf of men, which function continues despite legal recognition of "female equality" by nation-states. Such formalities are incidental to the underlying "accord" between governments, capital, and labor, guaranteeing each man his own piece of "the second sex."

3. Contradiction

Women's traditional positioning between men and nature is a primary contradiction of capitalism, and may well be the deepest, most fundamental contradiction of all. In anthropological terms—shaped by androcentric interests—women's bodies are treated first as if they were a "natural resource," with the uterus as organ of birthing labor being the material origin of "formal labor" as such. The time-honored European imagery of Mother Nature and the ancient Indian notion of Prakriti are certainly more than metaphor. But under the scientific hegemony of capitalism, their celebration of women's potency is greatly diminished in favor of a celebration of men's productivity aided by technology.

In European mythology, discourses on produced wealth, nature, and labor take their distinctively modern shapes from around the 17th century, as medieval religious thought is transposed into a secular

view of nature. Land is seen as the mother of wealth, and labor as its father.¹⁷ The entire world is a vast pool of resources, available to men in common as a matter of Divine Providence. But wealth properly speaking is a product of men's labor. Every man, says John Locke, "has a *property* in his own *person*," and so "the *labor* of his body and the *work* of his hands, we may say, are properly his." If, in the providential sense, Nature is "the common mother of all," conversely it is through labor that an individual appropriates the fruits of Nature to himself, "so they became his private right."¹⁸ As far as labor is concerned, it is a man's world. One infers that women's domestic and reproductive labors are furnished as "gifts" to men, in return for personal protection in the private sphere.

While women's bodies under capitalism have never come to obtain a rent as land does, they are nonetheless "resourced" for free by capital to provide ever new generations of exploitable labor. Consequently, given that women are really human beings, a profound antagonism is set up between "woman" as objectified reproductive matrix and women as subjects of history in their own right. Currently, this tension is expressed in the form of a reproductive rights debate over abortion, for example, and in the form of arguments concerning the issue of paid surrogacy and the possibility of an "industrial contract" for childbearing in a "value-added" world. How the line may be drawn between woman as "natural resource" and woman as "not quite labor" appears to be infinitely flexible.

In addition to being a "natural resource," women using hands and brain in caring labor become subsumed under capitalist patriarchy as "conditions of existence," in the sense of *oikos* or habitat, necessary for creative human productivity to take place. Women's bodies are utilized by working men to provide a taken-for-granted daily infrastructure, enabling performance of the male work role. The fact that men are bothered rather more by the loss of a wife than by the level of their wage demonstrates a wife's value as a "condition of production"—sexual, psychological, and economic. At the same time, since women are "not quite labor," they find themselves existing in contradiction with "labor as such," and this is so even when they become paid workers themselves. The tensions between women and "formal labor" erupt within the family and at the workplace, with formal labor backed up by a masculinist trade union movement.

Women are doubly objectified by these two forms of structural violence. Like nature, they are readily available and disposable; and like nature under capitalist patriarchy, they have no subjectivity to speak of. Meantime, as Naomi Scheman observes, men are free to imagine themselves as self-defining—but only because women hold

the intimate social world together.¹⁹ Women, really “objects,” in a so-called division of labor, have customarily been exchanged between men, father to husband, pimp to client, from one entrepreneur to another. This exchange of female resources may well have constituted the earliest form of “commodity” trade.

Likewise, the children women produce are appropriated and named by men. Moreover, even as women begin to take back control of their fertility from the patriarchal family, so men use new reproductive technologies to wrest control of that “resource” back from them. The latest move on this front is corporate patenting of DNA, whereby the basic building blocks of life itself are formulated as “property rights.” And this will cover not just “genetic” interventions in human reproduction such as purported remedies for inherited ailments, but transgenic combinations between animal and plant life as well.

Women also “make goods,” for use in domestic shadow labor, and for exchange in peasant agriculture, or as commodities in piecework or factories. Yet these commodities too are usually taken away by men—husbands, middlemen, or transnational management. In her *Patriarchy and Accumulation*, German ecofeminist Maria Mies documents this process of dispossession, and observes that violence pervades every facet of male–female interaction under capitalism. By this means, men are simultaneously agents for capital and for themselves as workers, keeping women intimidated and pliable.²⁰

Although the oppression of men by men along class and racial lines is well documented, the extraction from nature and from women’s complex of productive capacities long predates the theft of value from a working class. Moreover, nature and gender exploitation subsists through and beneath capitalist abuse of waged workers, and this process is being deepened with global expansion, despite the modern rhetoric of female emancipation. Socialism until now has tended to place too much emphasis on a theory of the proletariat and backgrounded different forms of social exploitation.²¹

An ecofeminist analysis asserts that the enclosure and privatization of women—the subsumption of women’s time, energies, and powers—through patriarchal family and public employment alike, parallels the class exploitation of labor by capital, and at the same time it makes the latter possible. Women’s position as “mediator of nature” constitutes a prior condition for the transaction that takes place between capitalist and laboring men—big men and small. In the androcentric discourse of economics, the material contribution of women remains largely unspoken in much the same way that the material contribution of nature is attributed zero value. Women’s labor is “freely given,” or hidden behind the curtains of domestic

decorum. What women do “gratis,” whether birthing labor or sustaining labor, is called “reproduction” as opposed to production. Yet, the word *reproduce* here connotes a secondary or diminutive activity, as distinct from the primary “historical act” of production itself. And since reproduction is not recognized as “primary,” it cannot be seen to generate “value.”

By a symbolic sleight of hand sometimes called “reason,” women’s work is cheated of a place in a system of accumulation resting on the “surplus” they create. The following poem by Paul Eluard conveys something of the innocence and plausibility of patriarchal naturalism and its deletion of women. In the late 20th century, “Sound Justice” can only be read with irony.

It is the warm law of men
From grapes they make wine
From coal they make fire
From kisses they make men
.....
A law old and new
Self perfecting always
From the depth of a child’s heart
To supreme reason.²²

4. Deconstructing Woman/Nature

To understand how such “reason” works, an ecofeminist analysis of the ontology of capitalist patriarchy is useful. The latter hangs on a classical “logic” of dualisms that penetrates philosophy just as much as everyday talk. The symbolism of these time-honored pairs reiterates the morphology of sex, erases women’s humanity, and functions to keep men superordinate to women and to “nature.” The domain assumptions of capital’s discursive armor are as follows:

- An artificial distinction between “history” and “nature.”
- An assumption that men are active historical “subjects” and women passive “objects.”
- An assumption that historical action is necessarily “progressive” and activities grounded in nature necessarily “regressive.”
- An association of masculinity with the historical order through “production” and association of femininity with the order of nature through “re-production.”
- “Valorization” of productive activity and “devalorization” of reproductivity.²³

Obviously, it makes no sense to speak as if nature is somehow prior to history, for time is a condition of all existents. But what is also missing in these discursive formations is any reflexivity in understanding the grounds for these constructed categories. In epistemological terms, capitalist-patriarchal thinking simply floats on thin air. The "natural order" can be known only through history, that is, by subjects living within a medium of socially generated languages and practices. Capitalism manages to obscure this historical dimension by the sheer force of its ideological machine—such that people actually do come to believe reality is striated in this way, and universally so. Religion, ethics, economics, and even sociobiology hang on these essentialist dualisms. Some leftist critical thought, and even varieties of feminism, are infected by them too, taking the content of these paired assumptions as given.

While a careful deconstruction of conventional essentialist thought categories is needed, what is undeniably given is the fact that women and men do have existentially different relationships to "nature" because they have different kinds of body organs. But to say this is not to say that women are any "closer" to nature than men in some ontological sense. Rather, it is to recall Marx's teaching that human consciousness develops in a dialectical way through sensuous bodily interaction with the material environment. Just as someone who has no organ of sight may develop a unique awareness, so men and women, differently abled, come to think and feel differently about being in the world as a result of how they can act on it, and how they experience it acting on them, in turn. Here we are talking about a kind of knowledge that is shaped by body potentials.

However, people never know this potential in any pure sense, since bodily activities including labor are mediated by language and the ideological constructions embedded in it. Accordingly, women's sensuous interchange with habitat gets to be shaped in a second-order sense, by assigned roles that force them to "mediate nature for men." Historically trapped in the logic of masculinist reason, women's sensual enjoyment and creative reciprocity with their environment is denigrated as regressive by an artificial and compulsory association with nature. In such labors, women give up the substance of their bodies, experiencing entropy like that which nature suffers in the process of accumulation. Curiously, while the value of their work does not register in national accounts, their deterioration does. So the capitalist state provides a plethora of clean-up programs—for example, battered women's refuges, addiction counseling—that parallel environmental efforts at resource recycling and restoration of toxic lands.

In the discursive construction of gendered labor, mining or engineering by men is also a hands-on transaction with the environment. But such work is typified by the positive side of the symbolic grid, endorsing masculine identity as separate from nature, productive and progressive. By contrast, the language that typifies women's work—"re-production"—degrades her along with nature itself. This pseudo-ontology is legitimated by all the institutions of capitalist patriarchy: church and state, market and trade union, technology and science. Consequently, when women challenge this status quo for a share of male privilege as "labor," they meet ideological weapons like harassment and rough handling in order to "reinstate" their properly feminine status as part of nature. This dynamic is inevitable, since "formal labor" can purchase progress under capitalism only by trading off further exploitation onto women and thence nature, down the line.

Of course, male workers are also abused as "conditions of production" under capitalism, but this is not sufficient reason to neglect the distinctive constellation of women's exploitation. What ecofeminism demands is a fully amplified critique of capital's degradation of "conditions of production," based on a recognition of the *nature-woman-labor nexus* as a fundamental contradiction. The treatment of women becomes abusive when, in the analysis of capitalism, the complex of distinctively feminine labors is seen as somehow auxiliary and sidelined in favor of a historically privileged proletariat. As Giovanna Ricoveri expresses it, only by being open to "difference" can one hope for

An alliance—or set of alliances—that would not involve merely merging the various political components, nor the standardization of cultures, nor limits on the freedom for every group or tendency to experiment freely, but would rather be a Hegelian "sublation," the creation of a new politics that would contain strong elements of the green, the red, feminism, and so on, but would look like none of these well-established tendencies.²⁴

Until the problem of gender blindness in politics is overcome, however, women need to be on constant guard against premature theoretical closure in any new totalization. This is part of why it makes sense to strategically prioritize ecofeminist voices at this point in time.

5. Nonidentity and Dialectics

As an emerging consensus among women, ecofeminism is overdetermined in the structuralist sense. But in order to understand what

drives the individual agent behind this new movement, the particular sensibilities brought into play, a deeper materialist analysis is useful—one that overcomes the patriarchal divide between nature and history, an embodied materialism that affirms labor as sensuous practice and also moves beyond this to consideration of an interior dialectic between bodily energies and discourse.

This implies a recognition that somatic states make and unmake subjectivity, and indeed, knowledge. After all, what is the individual subject but a body that carries intention? Abrased by contradictory meanings, this subjectivity becomes an active field. Julia Kristeva, in what she calls *semanalysis*, posits a special state of apprehension where, under stress, body drives and their ideations disintegrate and reassemble. This matrix of apprehensions—or “*chora*”—is the very kernel of historical consciousness, and is renewed again and again through a multiplicity of cathexes that feed the link between signifier and signified.²⁵

Under capitalist patriarchy, women find themselves lodged inside/outside relations of production in a way that is contradictory and unlivable. Daily they are broken on the contradiction that has them “closer to nature.” Women are human, but they are still treated by the social system as simple reproductive sites, or as commodities, made use of and exchanged like any other “natural resource.” Being “not quite labor,” they achieve neither financial nor ideological equality in the work force. Having “no subjectivity to speak of,” their voices remain unheard, unless to chorus the masculinist discourse with its dogmatic dualisms, thereby affirming their own diminutive role.

How does a woman ever find her way out of this double-bind, let alone come to act for social change? I have argued elsewhere that it is through crisis and moments of nonidentity that she glimpses new meanings in her situation, a hidden political potential behind what is given. This “negative dialectic” rests on a distinction between essence and appearance, where the positives of perception—immediate facts—are merely temporary manifestations, even distortions of an immanent reality or essence yet to be explored.²⁶

Sexual abuse and domestic battery, economic and cultural marginalization—these things are enough to fracture a woman’s identity. Invalidated by contradictory significations in a world that preaches love but practices exploitation, the feminine object/subject deattracts somatic energies that tie her to existing social relations. Becoming free from her historically ascribed “otherness,” as a subject-in-process she may begin to predicate an alternative relation to the totality. To paraphrase Kristeva: when the fragile equilibrium of consciousness is

destroyed by the violent heterogeneity of contradiction, the body returns to a state of difference, heavy, wandering, dissociated. However, moments of annihilation and decomposition of the sense of subjective unity, moments of raw anguish and disarray, can yield up a new productive unity, so reaffirming the subject as active signification-in-process. It is this kind of personal transmutation that usually grounds an ecofeminist epistemology, though women vary in awareness of such inner processes.

Always in the front line of environmental impacts, eroded as nature is, a woman’s dis/location may eventually shatter the taken for granted perception of capitalist patriarchy like a phenomenological laser. But the freewheeling *chora* with its insurgent energies and multiple significations offers new possibilities for dealing with masculinist erasure. *From this place of nonidentity, ecofeminists boldly reframe the nature-woman-labor nexus, revaluing what has been problematic in a one-dimensional order so as to confront its stagnant totalization.*²⁷ Some liberal feminists and even some socialists, still speaking from the unreconstructed side of the Woman/Nature contradiction, fail to see the dialectical shift here, and so they call ecofeminist thought “essentialist.” This is not surprising, since the scientific hegemony of capital cannot handle irony, the moment of tension when a signifier is suspended between two competing senses. Further, the power of bourgeois realism is such that the very term “essence” itself is captured by positivism, losing its negative, unmasking function.

Far from the complacent certainties of positivism, the negative dialectic holds to an inverse relation between power and historical consciousness. However, it is not the free-floating liberal intellectual who has privileged access to the critical perception; nor is a theory of class consciousness adequate to understand the material contradiction that positions women and nature together against men of capital and labor. Rather, ecofeminist insights are usually driven by the profound “lack” imposed on those who are neither “human” nor of “nature.” In Adorno’s words, nonidentity is “the somatic unrest that makes knowledge move;” the dialectician’s duty is to help this “fool’s truth” attain its own reasons.²⁸

6. Politics and Sustainability

By reasoning dialectically, then, ecofeminists introduce an alternative ontology to political discourse, one that cancels the frightened dualisms produced by masculinist denial of woman and nature. Ecofeminists propose that:

- Nature and history are a material unity.
- Nature, women, and men are at once active subjects and passive objects.
- The woman–nature metabolism holds the key to historical progress.
- Reproductive labors guided by care are valuable models for sustainability.

Tying political perception and motivation to suffering, the phenomenology of deconstruction that women experience results in a materially grounded “epistemology from below.” Concerned with equality for all life forms, ecofeminism is a *socialism* in the very deepest sense of that word. And it may be noted that “spiritual” ecofeminism reflects these same ontological assumptions. The contribution of this feminine voice is even more apposite to *ecology*, as men begin to regard nature itself as a subject with its own needs. Both dominated and empowered, women are well equipped at this juncture to take up the case for “other” living beings. Again, this is not to argue in a simpleminded essentialist way that women are somehow “closer to nature”—as patriarchal ideology would have it, in order to keep women in their place. Rather, it is to acknowledge a complex socially elaborated sex and gender difference, privileging women temporarily as historical agents par excellence.

The most urgent and fundamental political task is to dismantle ideological attitudes that have severed men’s sense of embeddedness in nature; and this, in turn, can only happen once nature is no longer fixated, commodified as an object, outside of and separate from humans. Reifications of this latter sort are endemic to capitalist discourse, starting with the very subject of “bourgeois right” who is supposed to participate in the democratic process with a fixed identity and status. Socialism too has traditionally attributed a permanent character to the proletariat as historical agent. But universals or essences like “humanity,” “class,” “woman,” and “nature,” are static abstractions that do violence to those living under the regime of contradiction. The alternative ecofeminist conception of subjectivity as signification-in-process, permanently forming and reforming itself in collision with the social order is based in a living and embodied materialism that defies the limits of bourgeois epistemology.

Against the theoretically abbreviated notions of capitalist patriarchy, the ecofeminist consciousness is reflexively decentered. Walking the primary contradiction of capital, women activists must engage in a zigzag dialectical course between (1) their liberal feminist task of establishing the right of women to a political voice; (2) their radical and

socialist feminist task of undermining the very basis of that same validation by dismantling the capitalist–patriarchal relation of man to nature; and (3) their ecofeminist task of demonstrating how women—and thence men too in future—can live differently with nature.²⁹

Unlike capitalist patriarchy, which is geared to short-term profits, women’s lives straddling the *nature–woman–labor nexus* are embedded in a context of conservation and care. Transcending the limits of both capital and socialist ideologies,

if women’s lived experience were . . . given legitimation in our culture, it could provide an immediate “living” social basis for the alternative consciousness which [radical men are] trying to formulate as an abstract ethical construct.³⁰

Thanks to capital and its contradictions, ordinary women, a global majority, already model sustainability in their cycle of reproductive labors. The labor of Finnish housewives described by Pietila,³¹ or of Indian women farmers, instantiates this. Here, in practice, are ways of meeting community needs with low disruption to the environment and minimum reliance on a dehumanizing cash economy. Honoring the “gift” of nature, such women labor with an independence, dignity, and grace that people looking for sustainable models can learn from. For, as Shiva reminds us,

Culturally perceived poverty need not be real material poverty: subsistence economies which satisfy basic needs through self provisioning are not poor in the sense of being deprived . . . millets are nutritionally far superior to processed foods, houses built with local materials are . . . better adapted to the local climate.³²

Unlike women’s work, the market economy is disconnected from daily physical realities, its operational imperatives bear no relation to people’s needs; its exponential “growth” trajectory even kills off its own future options as it goes. As global capital becomes increasingly centralized by the transnational management of information flows, nation-states are rendered powerless and working men made marginal in a labor force segmented by practices like enterprise bargaining and subcontracting. The situation of women, as housewives in “advanced” industrialized societies, regresses to a point where they no longer control either their means of production or their own fertility. Their domestic maintenance functions continue to echo the “mediation of nature” for men, but these women lose skills and autonomy to consumerism, while the very manufacture of so-called labor-saving “products” destroys the living habitat beyond repair.

Ecofeminists reject the idea that "necessary labor" is a burden to be passed on to nature through technology. Equally, they reject a strategy of "partnership" with the union movement in an unviable economy. Maria Mies calls for a notion of labor as pleasure and challenge.³³ And most ecofeminists look forward to self-sufficient, decentralized relations of production, where men and women work together in joy and reciprocity with external nature, no longer alienated or diminished by a gendered division of labor and international accumulation. Ecofeminism is about a transvaluation of values; in particular, it is about listening differently to the voices of women who love and labor now.

Notes

1. The reified and essentialist constructions "nature," "woman," "labor," are used intentionally, representing the discursive materiality that has to be resisted in political struggle. Even so, both the universalizing patriarchal term "woman" and its empirical form "women" are social constructions. Some postmodern writers query the category "women" as well, in an attempt to avoid "essentialism." Marxists, with a universalizing concept of "class," and people of color who write about "race" risk the same charge. However, a structural analysis of domination(s) cannot be made without recourse to general categories. The present essay does not differentiate women by stratifications of class, race, age, and so forth, since the *nature-woman-labor nexus* crosses these conceptual boundaries. This is one reason for arguing that it constitutes a primary contradiction.

2. This approach in terms of a critical embodied materialism is sketched out in Ariel Salleh, "On the Dialectics of Signifying Practice," *Thesis Eleven*, 5-6, 1982, pp. 72-84. Compare Sandra Harding, *The Science Question in Feminism* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1986), for another articulation of standpoint epistemology.

3. Nancy White, quoted by Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* (Cambridge, Mass.: Unwin, 1990), p. 160.

4. International Labor Organization (ILO) statistics adopted by the U.N. in 1980. The original wage percentage estimated by the ILO was 5%. Subsequent U.N. publications raised the figure to 10%.

5. The notion "conditions of production" as used by James O'Connor in his "Capitalism, Nature, Socialism: A Theoretical Introduction," *CNS*, 1(1), no. 1, Fall 1988, brackets together physical resources, human labor, and local infrastructure. Here I suggest that these categories beg more differentiated analysis to account for the *nature-woman-labor nexus* as a primary contradiction of capitalism.

6. See, for example, Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Cambridge, U.K.: Polity Press, 1988).

7. Selma James, *The Global Kitchen* (London: Housewives in Dialogue Archive, 1985), p. 1.

8. Marilyn Waring, *Counting for Nothing* (Sydney, Australia: Allen and Unwin, 1988).

9. Mary Mellor, *Breaking the Boundaries* (London: Virago, 1992).

10. James, *The Global Kitchen*, op. cit., pp. 10-11.

11. James, *The Global Kitchen*, op. cit.; Waring, *Counting for Nothing*, op. cit.; Hilka Pietila, "Women as an Alternative Culture Here and Now," *Development*, 4, 1984; Australian Bureau of Statistics figures for 1990, quoted in the National Women's Consultative Council Report, *A Question of Balance* (Canberra: Government Printer, 1992), Appendix F.

12. See, for example, Lydia Sargent, ed., *Women and Revolution* (Boston: Southend Press, 1981).

13. Berit As, "A Five-Dimensional Model for Social Change," *Women's Studies International Quarterly*, 4, 1981.

14. See Irene Dankelman and Joan Davidson, eds., *Women and Environment in the Third World* (London: Earthscan, 1988); Lin Nelson, "Feminists Turn to Workplace, Environmental Health," *Women and Global Corporations*, 7, 1986; and Cynthia Enloe, *Bananas, Bases and Beaches* (London: Pandora, 1989).

15. Vandana Shiva, *Staying Alive: Women, Development and Ecology* (London: Zed, 1989).

16. *Ibid.*, p. 45.

17. See, for example, E. A. J. Johnson, *Predecessors of Adam Smith: The Growth of British Economic Thought* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1937), pp. 139-140.

18. John Locke, "An Essay Concerning the True Original, Extent and End of Civil Government" (circa 1688), in Sir Ernest Barker, ed., *The Social Contract: Essays by Locke, Hume, Rousseau* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), especially part V, paragraphs 25-51, pp. 16-30. The citations are from p. 17 and p. 18, respectively; emphasis in original.

19. Naomi Scheman, "Individualism and the Objects of Psychology," in S. Harding and M. Hintikka, eds., *Discovering Reality* (Boston: Reidel, 1983), p. 234.

20. Maria Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale* (London: Zed, 1986).

21. The need for "self-criticism" in this regard is put forward by Italian socialists Valentino Parlato and Giovanna Ricoveri, in a recent presentation on "The Second Contradiction in the Italian Experience," *CNS*, 4(4), no. 16, December 1993.

22. Paul Eluard, "Sound Justice" (1951), in Gilbert Bowen, ed. and trans., *Paul Eluard: Selected Poems* (London: Calder, 1987), p. 145.

23. Ariel Salleh, "Contribution to the Critique of Political Epistemology," *Thesis Eleven*, 8, 1984.

24. Giovanna Ricoveri, "Culture of the Left and Green Culture: The Challenge of the Environmental Revolution in Italy," *CNS*, 4(3), no. 15, September 1993, p. 119.

25. Julia Kristeva, *Polylogue* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1978). *Cathexis* is a psychoanalytic term implying an investment of nervous energy.

26. See Ariel Salleh, "On the Dialectics of Signifying Practice," op. cit. This usage of the "negative dialectic," with its *negative (nonpredicated)* "essence," comes from Theo Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, E. Ashton, trans. (London: Routledge, 1973), and *Minima Moralia*, E. Jephcott, trans. (London: New Left Books, 1969).

27. In a rather more rationalist vein, Collins also writes about the outsider/within experience of black women as a positive epistemological stimulus. "Black women's lives are a series of negotiations that aim to reconcile the contradictions separating our own internally defined images of self as African-American women with our objectification as the Other"; *Black Feminist Thought*, op. cit., p. 94. The international activist group Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era similarly advocates a feminist standpoint epistemology based on the view from below. A critique of post-modernist objections to this approach is contained in my forthcoming book on ecofeminism (London: Zed).

28. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, op. cit., p. 203; *Minima Moralia*, op. cit., p. 73.

29. See Ariel Salleh, "The Ecofeminism/Deep Ecology Debate: A Reply to Patriarchal Reason," *Environmental Ethics*, 14, 1992, for a more detailed exposition.

30. Ariel Salleh, "Deeper than Deep Ecology," *Environmental Ethics*, 6, 1984, p. 340.

31. Pietila, "Women as an Alternative Culture," op. cit.

32. Shiva, *Staying Alive*, op. cit., p. 10.

33. Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation*, op. cit.

On the Misadventures of Capitalist Nature

Martin O'Connor

The social control of air, water, etc., in the name of environmental protection evidently shows men entering the field of social control a little more deeply themselves. That nature, air, water become rare goods entering the field of value after having been simply productive forces, shows men themselves entering a little more deeply into the field of political economy. At the limit of this evolution, after natural parks, there may be an "International Foundation of Man" just as in Brazil there is a "National Indian Foundation": The National Indian Foundation is in a position to assure the preservation of the indigenous population in the best possible conditions, as well as [*sic*] the survival of the animal and vegetable species that have lived alongside them for thousands of years." (Of course this institution disguises and sanctions genocide and massacre: one liquidates and reconstitutes—same schema.) Man no longer even confronts his environment: he himself is virtually part of the environment to be protected.¹

1. Introduction

Environmental crisis has given liberal capitalist society a new lease on life. Now, through purporting to take in hand the saving of the environment, capitalism invents a new legitimation for itself: the

Lecturer in Economics, University of Auckland, New Zealand. With special thanks to Giovanna Ricoveri, Danny Faber, and other members of the Boston CNS group, to Ariel Salleh, and to James O'Connor. First published in Italian, in *Capitalismo Natura Socialismo (CNS-Italia) Anno Terzo*, no. 8, pp. 45-79; English version published in *CNS*, 4(4), no. 16, December 1993, pp. 7-40; slightly abridged for this volume. Some of the themes were laid out in my earlier sketch, "The System of Capitalized Nature," *CNS*, 3(3), no. 11, September 1992, pp. 94-99.