

Mother Earth and Mother Activist

Kebbi Wedeking

The University of Iowa

Colloquium for History Majors (American)

Subtitle: The US Women's Movement, 1960-1990

Taught by: Landon Storrs

By the late 1960s the second wave of feminism had changed the outlooks many women had on the world around them. Women were beginning to question roles handed to them by previous generations; many wondered if their place was really limited to the home, taking care of children and performing their wifely duties. These women were not only questioning the roles they played as mothers and the relationships they had with their families, but the roles they played as humans and the relationship they had with Mother Earth. Women began to look outside the four walls of their homes and began to realize that the patriarchal system of unsustainable farming and capitalism had left the earth in decay.

For centuries men had discussed nature in feminine terms and used terms like “Mother Earth”, tying women together with nature throughout history. Nature and the women of the time were perceived as unpredictable, full of wrath and vengeance, and often beautiful and mysterious. Women of the feminist movement knew that if the earth was to be repaired they would have to use this perception of closeness to nature for ecological change. Feminists of the second wave movement became inspired to change the ecological practices of the past, and came together to fight for the earth and the cause of environmentalism.

The connection with nature that women had shared for centuries was often damaging to both women and nature. If one looks solely at the United States, it becomes clear that the patriarchal system of private property (and who is the head of the household) has had a direct correlation to women, nature, and the advantage taken of them. When the Puritans landed on the virgin land of the Americas, they thought this land was radically different from the one they had left. They felt it was free to the first person to claim it. Puritan men brought their families and belongings with them on the boats from England, but more importantly they brought the belief of

private property. They began to gain titles for land, build houses for their families, and most importantly, build fences to protect their private property. Unlike the Native Americans from whom the land was taken, Puritans believed they had the right to own property that was solely theirs and they had control over what the land was used for. The landscape of America was quickly changed from a land of untouched landscapes, rivers, and wildlife; to a land of fields, fences, and domesticated animals. Nature had been controlled by men who ignored the rights of nature and shaped it to benefit them. Trees were cut down to build houses, fences were put up to protect their land, and ecosystems were destroyed in the process. While this ravaging of nature was occurring, the same beliefs were applied to women. Women were taken as prized virgins that men could shape and change to fit their needs, not there for companionship but to serve them and comply with their demands. This correlation between the views of nature and the views of women were not imagined by housewives stuck with the daily tasks of a household, but were painted vividly in the works by men of that time.

Men of the nineteenth century, when writing about the progress that had been made and the hope that came with westward expansion, often used feminine language to describe the land. Henry Colman wrote in 1833 that “Here men exercises the dominion over nature...commands the earth on which he treads to waken the mysterious energies...to impart sustenance and power, health and happiness to the countless multitudes who hang on her breast and are dependent on her bounty.”¹ Nature, like women, as the language suggests, only existed to multiply and produce offspring. As the frontier expanded so did this belief: nature and women were continually taken advantage of in the name of destiny, human (male) rights, and a capitalistic society. As Carolyn Merchant writes, “The narrative of frontier expansion is a story of male energy subduing female

¹Merchant, Carolyn. *Earthcare*. New York, New York: Routledge, 1996.

nature, taming the wild, plowing the land, recreating the garden lost by Eve...Once tamed by men the land was safe for women.”² In the 19th century, men in the fields allegedly tamed the land and in the process made it more civilized and desirable, while men in their houses tamed their women to have the same characteristics.

The twentieth century brought not only change to how nature was viewed and treated, but also how women were viewed. Preservationists like Aldo Muir and Gifford Pinchot began to see nature less as a place to control and more of a place in which to find refuge in. Nature was impossible to control, and by trying, Americans were destroying the natural beauty and power it held. These romantic preservationists believed that the beauty of the wild lands had to be preserved and appreciated for what it was: a place of refuge and peace. The view of nature slowly began to change from a place that only existed to provide food and shelter, to a place that was beautiful and necessary in its own right. Men of the Sierra Club began fighting to preserve national parks and areas like Hetch Hetchy in the San Francisco area. While men in the Sierra Club were fighting for the appreciation of nature, women in the Suffrage Movement were fighting for equality and some of the same rights men had. Women believed it was their right to vote, to have a voice in politics and policies that affected them and their families. With the granting of female suffrage in 1920 came the recognition that much like nature women had the right to be appreciated for who they were and the rights they had.³ Women and nature had a voice, but it was still meek and almost impossible to hear when speaking out against the patriarchal way of life and the system of capitalism it employed. Change was brewing, but it would take a monumental event to enforce changes in the way both nature and women were treated.

² Merchant, Carolyn. *Earthcare*. New York, New York: Routledge, 1996

³ Ibid

On September 27, 1962 Rachel Carson published her famous novel Silent Spring. In her novel Carson urged people to stop the wasteful and destructive use of pesticides like DDT and other chlorinated hydrocarbons. Through an eloquent writing style and the use of comprehensible science, Carson was able to inspire a generation to question the status quo of environmental policy. In particular, Carson was able to inspire women. She forced women to look at the food they were ingesting and feeding their children, food that had been slathered in dangerous quantities of pesticides. In her biographical article Eliza Griswold shows the reader that "Carson knew that her target audience of popular readers included scores of housewives. She relied upon this army of concerned citizens both as sources who discovered robins and squirrels poisoned by pesticides outside their back doors and as readers to whom she had to appeal."⁴ She used an imaginary spring where nature had been silenced, aimed at the suburbs and at the women who ran the families that inhabited them; women were critical to her success because they could relate to the issues. To Carson it was not about protecting the patriarchal uses of nature like hunting and camping; the use of pesticides had to be stopped because women were passing chemicals to their newborn children through their breast milk.

Women were becoming empowered through the feminist movement of the 1960's and began to speak out and protest against social injustice and often taboo topics that affected their daily lives. The environmental movement collided with the feminist movement to form a symbiotic relationship between the movements. As feminists gained a voice and became more socially prevalent in their communities, the environmental issues came to light. Conversely, environmentalism gave many housewives a topic they could relate to and led them into the feminist movement. As Eliza Griswold discusses in her article covering the life of Rachel Carson,

⁴ Eliza, Griswold. "The Wild Life of 'Silent Spring'." The New York Times Magazine, September 23, 2012.

“Carson believed women were necessary for change.”⁵ Rachel Carson’s Silent Spring served as the catalyst the second wave of feminism needed to undertake the grass roots movement of environmentalism. Much like Feminine Mystique by Betty Friedan, Carson challenged the male-dominated status quo and made women realize they could work together for change. Both of these works showed other women that although their place might historically have been in the home, they did not have to be there anymore and they could even use this to their advantage. While Friedan claimed women that the model of female fulfillment was not fulfilling and encouraged women to strive for more than just the menial everyday tasks that fell to housewives, Carson encouraged women to take their knowledge of the inner workings of a household and use that to fight for environmental protection and end of use of pesticides.⁶ Women had long been tied to nature and to the home, and in the second wave of feminism these two stereotypes were used to change the rights that both women and the earth were given.

Feminists who were involved in the fight for environmental protection were often not stereotypical feminists, those who primarily cared about issues like gender inequality and women’s rights. While most cared about women’s issues and women’s equality, many had no desire to work outside of the home. They were not angry that they had forced into the home, instead they were angry that the role they played as housewives had an adverse effect on the earth. These issues were close to these women’s hearts, as Adam Rome observes, “The suburbs were domestic places-and women traditionally were caretakers of the domestic threats to environmental quality in suburbia were threats to the women’s sphere. The stakes were the sanctity of the home and the well-being of the family. For many middle class women, therefore, the environmental cause seemed a natural extension of their concerns as housewives and

⁵ Vera Norwood, *Made from This Earth: American Women and Nature*. Chapel Hill, 1993

⁶ Merchant, Carolyn. *Earthcare*. New York, New York: Routledge, 1996

mothers.”⁷ Women took action, because they saw the earth being abused and knew they were the only voice that would speak up for it. Women had known for centuries that the way men treated the earth was just a reflection of the way men were treating them. When these women began to realize that they were valuable not just as wives and mothers but as humans, this belief quickly transferred to the way they viewed nature.

This was not the first time women had spoken out in defense of the environment. Many women in the progressive movement made it clear that they agreed with the beliefs of preservationist Pinchot and Muir.⁸ These women were not as vocal as the women in the second wave of feminism and did not make the impact that feminists made. It took the combination of women being empowered by the feminists around them demanding change and an environment that was quickly and obviously deteriorating. Most of these women did not even consider themselves feminists, but the work they did contributed to the feminist movement. More importantly it allowed these women to see what feminists around the country were crying out, realizing they could be politically active citizens who could enact change outside their homes.

As with many feminist causes environmentalism was fought for on a grass-roots level.⁹ Women wrote to other women attempting to show the harmful effects the current policies were having on the earth and urging them to fight for the cause. These articles focused on ways that women could effect change in their homes and around their community. Women were encouraged to think globally but act locally, focusing on where they could have the biggest impact on environmental change. In an article published in *The Argonaut* in 1970, women wrote to one another about practical ideas to act out this change. Women were encouraged to look

⁷ Rome, Adam. "'Give Earth a Chance': The Environmental Movement and the sixties." *The Journal of American History*. 90. no. 2 (2003).

⁸ Merchant, Carolyn. *Earthcare*. New York, New York: Routledge, 1996

⁹ Ibid

around their own homes and find products that could either be thrown out or replaced by more sustainable products. The author makes women think about these things by asking “do you really need an electric toothbrush- or an electric can opener for that matter.”¹⁰ She then continues by informing the reader that these are unnecessary and should be taken out of the home because “conserving electricity reduces home and office operating costs and reduces thermal water pollution at generating plants.”¹¹ Women were also encouraged to look at the neighborhoods they lived in and instead of complaining to “do something about it” by cleaning vacant lots and letting their yards go “natural” to conserve water and prevent the spraying of chemicals.¹² The second part of this article, published separately, encouraged women to look at the household chemicals they were using, specifically laundry detergent. The author of the articles discusses how environmentally and humanly damaging the phosphates in these soaps can be and encourages women to simply use soap and soda.¹³ Women were encouraging one another to stop acting solely out of convenience, but to become conscious of their surroundings and the actions they take on a daily basis. The environmental feminists knew that if change was going to occur, it would first take place in the home, with issues women dealt with every day. Protests brought awareness to issues, but everyday modifications to the way women lived caused the biggest change.

Air and water pollution was an important issue for feminists fighting for environmental change. While the pollution could not often be seen, except in large cities where smog was an obvious problem, the effects of this pollution were evident in the problems people were

¹⁰ DO YOU REALLY NEED AN ELECTRIC TOOTHBRUSH?, by Lynnette Knaack. In The Argonaut, Vol. 20 no. 4. (New York, NY: Sierra Club, Atlantic Chapter, 1970).

¹¹ *ibid*

¹² *ibid*

¹³ DO YOU REALLY NEED AN ELECTRIC TOOTHBRUSH? (Part II), by Lynnette Knaack. In The Argonaut, Vol. 20 no. 5. (New York, NY: Sierra Club, Atlantic Chapter, 1970).

experiencing. People who lived near factories, who usually had low incomes, were getting sicker and sicker and scientists were quickly finding their proximity to factories as the correlation. Feminists encouraged other women to pay attention to the air quality in their area and how it was affecting their health and the health of their family. They posed questions like “will you continue to pay these externalities with your body and the bodies of the people you love, or will you work to the end the attitudes that make excess production unnecessary and more immediately to make those who use our air and water pay for what they use and cleaning it up.”¹⁴ Women were angry that this pollution was happening to their families and this language was apparent in the questions they asked and the texts they wrote. Their work with the feminist movement had taught them not to stand idly by and watch the air they breathed and the water they drank become more and more toxic. When united they had a strong voice that made it possible for change to be accomplished and they were going to use it.

Women writers became more prevalent in ecological journals and other scholarly works during the 1930's and 1970's. As demonstrated previously, they wrote in order to not only present the facts on an understandable level to other women, but to encourage these women to fight for change in their towns and cities. Kathleen Wood Laurilla, an Iowa resident during the second wave of feminism, encouraged women on college campuses to get involved for the environment.¹⁵ In her letter to these college women Laurilla showed how important it was for these young women to get involved on a local level, and to show the impact they could make. The grassroots level is what drove this movement, and women talking to other women made the largest gains for the movement. Women in California were able to pass one of the first state laws regulating land use. Women in New York were able to form a group against air pollution with

¹⁴ THIS LAND IS YOUR LAND: ECOLOGICS: THE EXTERNALITIES OF POLLUTION, By Maureen Haight and Keith Haight. In Alternative Features Service, Vol. 2, Packet 68, October 13, 1972 (Berkeley, CA: Privately Published, 1972). 1pp.

¹⁵ Kathleen wood Laurilla collection located in the IWA Box 30

more than twenty thousand members. These women were passing others on the street pushing baby carriages or talking to other moms at the playground, all the while spreading information about the feminist and environmental movement and showing others the impactful changes they could make. Even Ladybird Johnson became involved in 1965 with her efforts to pass the Highway Beautification Act.¹⁶ Women were becoming involved with the feminist effort to prevent environmental destruction and these grassroots organization were gaining a voice and making an impact on the world around them; almost always without the help of men.¹⁷

Shirley Briggs was another Iowa resident who, inspired by Rachel Carson, fought for the environment and helped to enact change in the way the environment was treated. Carson and Briggs spent a great deal of time together in the 1940s with the Fish and Wildlife service, learning about different ecosystems and enjoying the beauty and refuge that nature held¹⁸. These two women bonded quickly and kept a friendship that lasted until the death of Carson in 1964. Briggs continued the legacy of Carson's work by serving and helping to lead the Rachel Carson Trust from 1970 to 1992. The goal of the trust was to "help to provide the thorough and convincing materials needed [...] for conservationists striving to improve conditions."¹⁸ Through the trust, Briggs was able to carry on the legacy of Rachel Carson and continued to show younger women how a strong female could lead and accomplish change by providing the information for feminists and activists to act on.

When an ecological crisis occurred women would be there to fight for their own rights and the rights of the environment. In 1969 a large oil spill occurred off the coast of Santa

¹⁶ Rome, Adam. "'Give Earth a Chance': The Environmental Movement and the sixties." *The Journal of American History*. 90. no. 2 (2003).

¹⁷ While there were environmental groups led and participated in by men, the Sierra Club being the largest, women were often forced into clerical roles in these organizations. Women found that their voices were best heard on the grass-roots level with other women fighting beside them. The environmental movement was not lead completely by women, but for my research I focused on the impact women had in predominately female groups.

¹⁸ Ibid

Barbara.¹⁹ Women quickly came together and drove the grassroots organization Get Oil Out to stop the offshore drilling and prevent future spills. Women knew that these spills had unforeseen consequences and as subsequent spills have shown, these spills have consequences that take years to fix.

In 1973 Women in Wisconsin came together to stage a protest against the establishment of a nuclear power plant in their community. The League Against Nuclear Dangers, or LAND, worked within their community raise awareness of the dangers of nuclear power by releasing a large amount of red balloons with postcards attached to them representing different radioactive substances.²⁰ The postcard also asked for those who found the balloon to send the postcard back to the women at land to represent the distance that airborne chemicals from these plants could travel, some were returned from states as far as Ohio and West Virginia.²¹ LAND was led by women who wanted to help their community and keep it safe for their children and families, middle-class housewives, many of whom did not even have college educations. These housewives who were often mocked for their lack of education and choice of activism, educated themselves on the issue of nuclear power and attempted to appealed to more than just those in power by choosing not to use the “male-dominated efforts: petitions, graphs, and charts.”²² Through grass-roots change these women of Wisconsin were able to prevent a nuclear power plant from being built in their town, and continued to take active roles on the state and national level.

Love Canal is another example of women responding to an ecological crisis on a grassroots level. Love Canal was a quiet suburb of Niagara Falls, New York. Comprised of

¹⁹ *ibid*

²⁰ Unger, Nancy. *Beyond Nature's Housekeepers: American Women in Environmental History*. New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.

²¹ *Ibid*

²² *Ibid*

mostly blue-collar workers Love Canal was close to “a dump of more than twenty thousand tons of toxic waste.”²³ In 1978 a resident of Love Canal, Lois Gibbs, became concerned when her children both became seriously ill and she began to realize that her neighbors were having a disproportionately high rate of miscarriages and still births. This toxic dumpsite was not in a field miles from town; it was under the school where Gibbs’ children along with hundreds of others attended school every day.²⁴ Gibbs blamed the high rate of disease and infant mortality on this dump site, and worked for two years to enact change. Gibbs wanted the location of the site and the families affected by this toxic waste moved, and fought alongside other women to have the state authorities look past the fact they were women and take the issue seriously. The women of Love Canal were written off as uneducated and overly emotional, and men of the local and state level would not listen to the concerns they raised over the safety of their community. It was not until these women took extreme action and “had vandalized a construction site, burned an effigy of the mayor and been arrested in a blockade that government officials began to take notice.”²⁵ With the unconventional action taken by Gibbs and other women of Love Canal, and research supported by male scientists, over 900 families were relocated from Love Canal.²⁶ Love Canal proved that women could enact change and make an impact not only on the local level but on the national level as well. Lois Gibbs continues to fight for environmental protection and assists other women in fighting against this injustice in their communities.

The impact these women made goes beyond the second wave of feminism: environmental policies have been made into laws, and a new generation of ecofeminists continues to be inspired by the work of their predecessors. Because women took up Rachel Carson’s cause, policies like

²³ Mellor, Mary. *Feminism & Ecology*. New York, New York: New York University Press, 1997.

²⁴ Gibbs, Lois. *Love Canal and the Birth of the Environmental Health Movement*. Washington D.C.: Island Press, 2011.

²⁵ Mellor, Mary. *Feminism & Ecology*. New York, New York: New York University Press, 1997.

²⁶ Gibbs, Lois. *Love Canal and the Birth of the Environmental Health Movement*. Washington D.C.: Island Press, 2011.

the Clean Air Act and the Water Pollution Control Act have been made laws on the national level. Women coming together in Love Canal and fighting for their families saved the lives of many in the community and gave birth to the environmental health movement. Women all across the country came together to protect their communities and their families, raising their voices and concerns to change the way the environment had been treated for centuries. The work of these women was never done, and the second wave of feminists allowed for women of the women of the late 1980's and 1990's to begin the ecofeminists movement. While often more radical than the movements of the sixties and seventies, ecofeminists gained much of their inspiration from the women of the feminists movement and the impact they had on the environmental movement. The legacy of these women continue as young women read Silent Spring and Love Canal and the Birth of the Environmental Health Movement and realize the changes that can be made in their own communities.

Women were necessary in the environmental movement and without the work they put forth, the change that was enacted in the 1960s and 1970s would not have occurred on the scale it did. Women were inspired by other women, like Rachel Carson and Lois Gibbs who forged the path for women to have a voice in environmental policies. Women who were involved in the feminist movement needed the women in the environmental movement to allow them an outlet to fight for the rights of the environment. Women in the environmental movement needed women in the feminist movement to provide them with a voice and a system that empowered them to fight what they were passionate about. Women were critical to the environmental movement and without these two movements coming together the change that occurred in 1960s and 1970s would not have been possible.

Bibliography

Primary

- THIS LAND IS YOUR LAND: ECOLOGICS: THE EXTERNALITIES OF POLLUTION, By Maureen Haight and Keith Haight. In Alternative Features Service, Vol. 2, Packet 68, October 13, 1972 (Berkeley, CA: Privately Published, 1972). 1pp.
- DO YOU REALLY NEED AN ELECTRIC TOOTHBRUSH?, by Lynnette Knaack. In The Argonaut, Vol. 20 no. 4. (New York, NY: Sierra Club, Atlantic Chapter, 1970).
- DO YOU REALLY NEED AN ELECTRIC TOOTHBRUSH? (Part II), by Lynnette Knaack. In The Argonaut, Vol. 20 no. 5. (New York, NY: Sierra Club, Atlantic Chapter, 1970).
- Gibbs, Lois. *Love Canal and the Birth of the Environmental Health Movement*. Washinton D.C.: Island Press, 2011.
- Kathleen Wood Laurilla collection located in the IWA Box 30
- Shirley Briggs Collection located in the IWA

Secondary

- Mellor, Mary. *Feminism & Ecology*. New York, New York: New York University Press, 1997.
- Merchant, Carolyn. *Earthcare*. New York, New York: Routledge, 1996
- Eliza, Griswold. "The Wild Life of 'Silent Spring'." *The New York Times Magazine*, September 23, 2012.
- Rome, Adam. "'Give Earth a Chance': The Environmental Movement and the sixties." *The Journal of American History*. 90. no. 2 (2003).
- Vera Norwood, *Made from This Earth: American Women and Nature*. Chapel Hill, 1993
- Unger, Nancy. *Beyond Nature's Housekeepers: American Women in Environmental History*. New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.