

humans and between humans and nature would be harmonious and co-operative. These ideals would be shared with most feminists, who 'would advocate a view of nature that emphasized harmony and cooperation with other living things' (Birke 1986: 149; Soper 1995). In ecofeminist writings there tends to be an implicit optimism that once dualist structures are removed there will be no inherent imbalance between the human and the natural worlds, an assumption that I would not make.

However, overemphasis on the particular role of women in challenging the dualist divisions in western society could marginalize the importance of other inequalities and oppressions. Most ecofeminists are at pains to point out that they see sex/gender as being part of a matrix of oppressions. While some affinity ecofeminists may seem to adopt a reductionist position, seeing sex/gender as the original or most universal oppression, I would want to argue that attention to sex/gender can reveal structural dynamics that are helpful in confronting other oppressions. This is not, however, to claim a priority for sex/gender, it is simply *one* starting point.

Addressing the relationship of woman and nature as ecofeminism has done is problematic for feminists who have sought to minimize or destroy this connection. From the perspective of feminists who deny the social relevance of sex difference and claim equality with men in the 'public' world, ecofeminism is in danger of returning to the old essentialist arguments that denied women's equality in the first place. In the next chapter I will look at the feminist debate around 'nature' and biology and its implications for ecofeminist thought. Another debate that is very important in contemporary feminism is the question of sex/gender identity as the basis of political action or as the foundation for particular kinds of knowledge. I will look at ecofeminism in the context of this debate in Chapter 5.

4

Women, Biology and Nature in Feminist Thought

I know I have the body of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a king. (Elizabeth I, 1588. Speech to the troops at Tilbury on the approach of the Armada)

One essential feature of all ecological feminist positions is that they give positive value to a connection of women with nature which was previously, in the west, given negative cultural value and which was the main ground of women's devaluation and oppression. (Plumwood 1993: 8)

The fundamental difference between the attitude of Elizabeth I to her body, which has had many echoes through the ages, and Plumwood's summary of the ecofeminist position is their acceptance or rejection of female embodiment. While strong affinity ecofeminists would see female embodiment as positive in itself, most ecofeminists (including Plumwood) would see it as standing for the dilemmas of human embodiment generally.

The debates around the nature of sex/gender differences and the impact of women's biology on their social position has been very much a feature of western feminism. As I have pointed out, for women in other parts of the world and for poor women in western societies, embodiment is much more about obtaining basic sustenance and avoiding disease, disability through overwork and death. To discuss the woman-biology-nature debate within feminist thought is very much to embrace the concerns of relatively privileged western feminists with the danger of ignoring more fundamental problems which the majority of women face. To look at the debate between feminism and ecofeminism in this context must necessarily marginalize

or exclude the interests and experiences of many groups of women (hooks 1984). My motivation for returning to these issues is to open up the agenda and break through the preoccupations of western 'equality' feminism. To do this it is necessary to go back to some classic texts and re-examine the woman-biology debate. This is particularly important given the almost total domination of current western-feminist thought by postmodern cultural questions (Barrett and Phillips 1992). Embodiment in the sense used by ecofeminists, as a material problem for human beings, is not a focus in many contemporary feminisms. Explicit discussion of human embodiment and the relationship between woman, biology, nature and culture is more common in older feminist texts.

To the extent that western society has created the dualisms of nature/female/feminine and culture/male/masculine, women have found themselves subordinated through their alliance with nature/biology. Upper-, middle-, and upper-working-class white women have historically been prevented from playing a full part in public life on grounds of their biology. This has ranged from allegations of their innate wickedness, innate purity or physical frailty, to the requirements of motherhood (Ehrenreich and English 1979). Poor working-class women, on the other hand, were associated with nature as a justification for their hardship and hard labour. Similar arguments have been used by racists and colonizers to justify their exploitative and oppressive behaviour in terms of their 'superior' culture. In this sense the biology/nature association and its consequences are of more critical political importance than just representing the frustrations of middle-class women whose problem had 'no name' (Friedan 1963).

Transcending nature

The case for ignoring the alleged relationship between women and nature has been made by liberal feminists such as Mary Wollstonecraft. She argued that men and women share a common humanity, capabilities and capacities, and therefore deserve equal rights. In common with Enlightenment thinking of the time, she framed her claim for a common humanity in terms of the distinctiveness of human beings from 'brute nature'. This was not just a feature of liberal thinking; Marx also advocated a common human nature, which was set against 'mere' animal life (Marx 1844; Benton 1993). Although later feminists

have not felt the need explicitly to separate themselves from the natural world, the case for equality between men and women, whether on a liberal or a radical/socialist model, has tended to involve a rejection of the association of women with nature. From Mary Wollstonecraft to de Beauvoir and beyond, feminists have been at pains to help women escape from the constraint of their biology (de Beauvoir 1968; Firestone 1970). What was most firmly rejected was biological determinism, in Freud's terms that anatomy was destiny. Feminists particularly rejected the assumption that motherhood should be the determining factor in women's lives and that women's ability to bear children should determine their social role. It was argued that 'women are no more innately gifted for intensive childcare than men' (Barrett and McIntosh, 1982: 145) and that 'the biological experience of childbirth does not necessarily generate maternal emotions and behaviour in the form idealised in the west' (Jackson 1995: 138).

To enable women to escape their domestic role women's liberation movements have argued for equal opportunities in access to economic and social life, together with collective provision of childcare and other domestic support (Coote and Campbell 1982). This strategy is directly threatened by the ecofeminist positive re-evaluation of the association of women with nature. Critics have argued that an ecofeminist reassertion of women's association with the natural world, whether through their bodies, their caring role as mothers or nurturers, or their traditional subsistence work, far from being an agent for change in society, could become a reaffirmation of women's present position:

Ecofeminist prescriptions are for women to reject transcendence, embrace the body, bond to our mothers, remain embedded in our local ecosystems, abandon the goals of freedom and autonomy, rely on and care for our kin and community and remain in subsistence production. Such conservatism can hardly claim empowerment for women. (Jackson 1995: 129)

I hope to show that such a programme can be empowering and that assumptions that a transcendent 'freedom and autonomy' can exist outside of human embeddedness and embodiedness is ecologically, socially and theoretically unsound (Mellor 1996a).

As a starting point I want to return to the debates within feminism around women, biology and nature, and the relationship of all three to men and culture. Central to this debate are issues of commonality/common interest/sameness and difference/inequality/power, as

between men and women and between women. The general shorthand of 'difference/equality' belies the complexity of these issues (Gatens 1991a; Bock and James 1992). Difference/equality is not even a coherent dualism: difference is the opposite of sameness, and inequality of equality. I would agree with Joan Scott that equality does not imply the elimination of difference, and difference does not preclude equality (1991: 138). In this chapter I will be dealing mainly with the divisions between culture/man and woman/nature/biology; in the next chapter the divisions between women and the difference/equality debate within feminism will become more important.

Iris Marion Young has described androgynous 'humanist' feminism with its stress on the equality of men and women, as being in 'revolt against femininity'. By arguing for the 'superiority of the values embodied in traditionally female experience', she sees difference, 'gynocentric' feminism on the other hand, as a potentially more radical position (1985: 173). When first putting forward this argument in 1985, Young still felt that the danger of a woman-centred feminism in an anti-feminist reactionary context outweighed its advantages. However, writing in 1990 she finally 'climbed off the fence to the gynocentric side', arguing that humanist, androgyny feminism did not challenge the assumptions of patriarchal culture (1990: 7). I would want to make a distinction between humanist and androgyny feminism in this context, seeing humanist feminism as claiming the existence of a common hu(man)ity that ignores dualism. Androgyny (derived from the Greek for man-woman) on the other hand, does try to resolve the problem by combining male and female values, experience or labour in some way as the word implies.

While both humanist and androgynous feminism may represent a 'revolt against femininity', ecofeminism is more concerned about the revolt against biology/nature in dualist society. All ecofeminism is gynocentric to the extent that it opens up the question of human embodiment and its particular relevance to the sexed body and women's position in society. Opening up this debate, as Young pointed out, holds the danger of being taken as a reactionary perspective. I would argue that it is a risk worth taking if a deeper radicalism is to be achieved.

Uniting women and nature: Andrée Collard

The identity and destiny of woman and nature are merged. (Collard 1988: 137)

Andrée Collard presents a strong affinity ecofeminism that seeks to revalue and reclaim women's biology and reproductive role. Her book, *Rape of the Wild* was written as a 'burning protest' against animal cruelty, ecological damage and the oppression of women (1988: 1). It provides an example of the kind of arguments that many feminists would see as undermining all their generations of struggles to escape from their association with biology. Far from wanting to put some distance between women and nature, Collard celebrates women's bodies and their biologically linked roles such as motherhood. Patriarchy is the enemy of nature while woman is to be its rescuer through her biological links to the natural world: 'Nothing links the human animal and nature so profoundly as woman's reproductive system which enables her to share the experience of bringing forth and nourishing life with the rest of the living world' (ibid.: 102). Collard recognizes that not all women are mothers, or want to be, but argues that each woman is united in a common mother-identity, 'whether or not she personally experiences biological mothering', as 'it is in this that woman is most truly a child of nature and in this natural integrity lies the wellspring of her strength' (ibid.). Patriarchy, on the other hand, is also biological; it is a disease that reveals itself in the treatment of women and animals (ibid.: 1).

As with much ecofeminist analysis, Collard sees the fundamental problem as lying in the separatist mentality and dominating dualism of patriarchy. It sets itself apart from nature (and women) in a way that allows for the development of cruel and oppressive behaviour towards both. Nature, on the other hand, 'has worked out a self-regulated flow of birth and decay, striking a balance between death and rejuvenation' (ibid.: 2). Whereas patriarchy is immoral, nature is innocent because it acts out of 'inherent need' not conscious behaviour - it is a 'wild and free spirit'. Collard sees the breakdown in the relationship between humanity (as patriarchy) and nature as the cause of all 'divisive "isms" - sexism, racism, classism, ageism, militarism, etc.' (ibid.: 3). If the 'isms' are to be overcome, nature must be reclaimed as sacred and valued for its own intrinsic worth. It must no longer be regarded as something that is dead, to be used and exploited. Humanity must re-establish a 'universal kinship' with

nature that would see nature as similar and equal, and not different and inferior: 'It is ultimately the affirmation of our kinship with nature, of our common life with her, which will prove the source of our mutual well-being' (ibid.: 137)

Like many cultural and spiritual feminists, Collard finds evidence for the possibility of 'universal kinship' between humanity and the natural world in the example of ancient and tribal societies. She also accepts the case for the existence of an 'ancient gynocentric way of life' (ibid.: 14) which exhibited 'nurturance-based values which women experienced and projected not only on their goddesses but on to every creature among them' (ibid.: 8). For Collard, 'the history of women's oppression must continually be juxtaposed with what came before. Only then can we have a vision of what we were and therefore what we can be' (ibid.). As with other accounts of a gynocentric pre-history, patriarchy emerges as a cultural clash between the male culture of a transcendent god that separates 'man' and nature and the more egalitarian, earth-loving culture of the goddess. Patriarchy replaced the gathering society associated with women's values and launched the cultural forms associated with hunting, war and violence. This, Collard argues, is what created the division of labour between men and women.

Collard offers us no material explanation of why men launched upon this cultural change. A psychological explanation is hinted at. Men are jealous of the creative potential of women and nature as represented in the goddess. This leads to a fear of female autonomy, 'the enemy within that must be held in check by compulsory heterosexuality and compulsory fertility' (ibid.: 106). 'Womb envy' lies behind 'man's scientific divine intervention' ranging from microbiology to animal experimentation (ibid.: 126). Collard also quotes Virginia Woolf's observation that 'male vanity needs female mirrors to reflect men at twice their size' (ibid.: 21). Patriarchy's denial of its material dependence on women and nature has further psychological consequences: 'A tradition that encourages us to free our bodies from the limitations of nature is one that plucks us from the web of life, leaving us stranded and longing for the very biophilic connections we are taught to repudiate' (ibid.: 47). Her answer to the ecological destruction that patriarchy has created is a reassertion of motherhood: 'Ecology is very much a motherhood issue since women and nature have been linked in our consciousness since pre-history . . . Good women have kept good houses on the model of Mother Nature for as long as there have been mothers' (ibid.: 147, 37). Such ideas can be criticized as embracing a biologically determinist and universalist

essentialism. Collard sees all women as 'biologically' mothers and her universalism is evident in such statements as: 'all women are victims of degradation. All women are experts in the art of survival' (ibid.: 148). She advocates the values and principles that 'are distilled from women's experiences everywhere and of all times' (ibid.: 137). However, on other occasions she is less absolute and suggests that women's experience of oppression and abuse, as well as mothering, makes them more 'sensitive' to the oppression and abuse of nature (ibid.: 138).

Although she praises the women's peace camps, Collard does not advocate women-only activity or a separatist solution. Instead, she advocates direct action campaigns that reflect deep ecological politics, particularly wilderness preservation. 'Women and men' are also urged to refuse to endorse the values that drive 'sexism, racism, classism and speciesism' (ibid.: 137). Implicitly, she also absolves those scientists and ecologists who have broken free of destructive science, particularly those who endorse a nature-centred perspective. She also has praise for the peasant farmers of Europe (ibid.: 143). The main enemy is modern scientific/technological systems, which separate people from a direct experience of nature: 'The way out of this morass is to strive with all our might to become as independent as possible of all those technologies that threaten life on earth' (ibid.: 146). There are no details of what alternative society could develop, except that it should celebrate wildness (freedom, self-regulation) and not be civilized; people must resist becoming 'tamed city-dwellers' (ibid.: 156).

Collard's assertion of the universal and essential relationship between women and nature is certainly problematic for most feminist perspectives. She believes, however, that feminism is weakened by not seeing these connections. I would agree with her that ecofeminism has the grounds for a more fundamental critique of patriarchy than feminisms which do not have an ecological perspective. Although most feminist texts do not dwell on ecological arguments, at some point the ecologically destructive nature of patriarchal society is often touched upon together with the assumption that women would be more ecologically sensitive. As Kate Soper has pointed out: 'Despite the pervasive resistance of feminism to any naturalization of gender relations, there has been an equally widespread sense that there is an overall affinity and convergence of feminist and ecological aims' (1995: 121). The time has come to make these hidden assumptions explicit, which means examining the 'pervasive resistance' within feminism to any association of woman with biology/nature.

Transcending Biology: Simone de Beauvoir

Men have presumed to create a feminine domain – the kingdom of life, of immanence – only in order to lock up women therein. But it is regardless of sex that the existent seeks self-justification through transcendence . . . what [women] demand today is to be recognised as existents by the same right as men and not to subordinate existence to life, the human being to its animality. (de Beauvoir 1968: 90)

Simone de Beauvoir, writing in the late 1940s, bridged the gap between first- and second-wave feminism. While echoing liberal feminism's rejection of the social and political limitations placed upon women through their association with their bodies, her analysis of the power relations between men and women did not allow for a simple equality model. Although her analysis accepted the dualism between nature and culture and the biologically based difference between men and women, she does not anticipate radical cultural feminism in arguing for the superiority of women's nature or culture. In fact, she does quite the opposite: 'in truth women have never set up female values in opposition to male values; it is man who, desirous of maintaining masculine prerogatives, has invented that divergence' (ibid.)

At the heart of 'male values' is the distinction between transcendence and immanence. The cultural world is created through transcendence of the immanence of humanity's embeddedness in nature and biology. Rejection of immanence means that human society is always constructed over and against the natural world. Far from celebrating women's connection with the immanence of the natural world, as in Starhawk's spiritual ecofeminism, de Beauvoir saw women's biology as the source of their inequality. If women are to be free, they must escape their embodiment: '[T]he female, to a greater extent than the male, is the prey of the species: and the human race has always sought to escape its specific destiny' (ibid.).

The rejection of women's embodiment was central to de Beauvoir's feminism in her life and her writing. This rejection extended to domestic work (de Beauvoir prided herself on never having learned to cook), marriage and child-bearing, although not to her (hetero)sexuality. As Mary Evans has pointed out, this means that, effectively, de Beauvoir's sentiments and aspirations 'are derived from male expectations and assumptions about the organization of the material and emotional world' (1985: 56). For de Beauvoir, women achieved liberation by 'living like a childless, rather singular,

employed man' (ibid.: 57). Taken at face value, she could be seen as a very uncritical liberal feminist who has a very poor view of women who succumb to their marital and maternal roles. However, within the complexity of *The Second Sex* is a view of biology and male-female relations that comes much nearer to the perspective of radical feminism, and certainly gives a hint towards an ecofeminist analysis.

In de Beauvoir's view, the basic difference between men and women lies in procreation and reproduction. Sharing the western liberal view of individual autonomy as central to human freedom, she sees pregnancy and motherhood as necessarily alienating experiences. The child growing within the mother is a colonizing force. The essential difference between men and women is that men, once coitus has been achieved and the sperm deposited, withdraw back into their own autonomy. The male stays free and independent, while the female has the responsibility of species reproduction thrust upon her. Woman is 'first violated . . . then alienated – she becomes, in part, another than herself . . . tenanted by another, who batters upon her substance throughout her pregnancy, the female is at once herself and other than herself' (1968: 50).

This is certainly not the nurturing mother of Collard's ecofeminism. The implication for de Beauvoir is that if a woman does not experience pregnancy as alienation, then she is colluding with the biological imperative that is the cause of her subordination. The only answer, therefore, is to escape, to abandon biology, to become a man. For 'it is male activity that in creating values has made . . . existence itself a value: this activity has prevailed over the confused forces of life; it has subdued Nature and Woman' (ibid.: 91). From an ecofeminist perspective, the withdrawal from biology and the subjugation of nature and woman is not an option. All humanity is embodied and the cycles of birth, nurturing and death have to be continued if the species is to survive. De Beauvoir herself has written most movingly about senescence and death.

Despite the criticisms that can be made of her rather limited solution to women's subordination, her uncritical valuing of male-dominated culture and her dismissal of the problems of embodiment, de Beauvoir does come very close to an ecofeminist position in seeing that there are similarities in the way man both needs and rejects woman and nature:

Man seeks in woman the Other as Nature and as his fellow being. But we know what ambivalent feelings Nature inspires in man. He exploits her but

she crushes him, he is born of her and he dies in her; she is the source of his being and the realm that he subjugates to his will. (1968: 144)

Drawing on the existential philosophy that underlies her analysis de Beauvoir sees masculinity and femininity as irreducibly linked to each other. Male domination must be accompanied by female subordination, the one cannot exist without the other. Woman is the Other which creates identity for Man. This relationship is a unique one in human history. Whereas other oppressed groups can unite around a common history, language or culture, or can organize politically, women have no history and no independent base of organization. They are separated and isolated in their family units. Their histories are always and, essentially, intertwined with those of men; there is no woman's history without man, and no revolution can 'overthrow' the sex structure in the way that class revolution can overthrow economic structure.

Although at the time of writing *The Second Sex* de Beauvoir described herself as a socialist arguing that the term feminist was not relevant, her existential analysis takes her towards a radical feminism which hovers somewhere between a cultural and a materialist analysis. This is a move that she confirmed towards the end of her life (Simons and Benjamin 1979). The complexity of her analysis has made her an inspiration to many other feminists.

Escaping biology: Shulamith Firestone

One of the earliest second-wave radical feminists, Shulamith Firestone, saw de Beauvoir as 'the most comprehensive and far-reaching' of all feminists (1970: 16). However, she rejected the idealism of de Beauvoir's existential use of the Hegelian concept of Otherness in favour of the more material implications of human biology, as reflected in the sexual division of labour.

Firestone's *Dialectic of Sex*, first published in 1970, argued that 'biology itself - procreation - is at the origin of the dualism'. 'Sex class', unlike economic class, 'sprang directly from a biological reality: men and women were created different and not equal' (ibid.: 16). Pregnancy, she believed, was 'barbaric', and the only way to escape 'fundamental biological conditions' and the 'tyranny of the biological family' was to use reproductive technology to eliminate sex/gender differences. She also saw productive technology as a liberating force that would free men and women from useless toil. She looked forward to a 'cybernetic communism' that would 'abolish economic

classes, and all forms of labour exploitation, by granting all people a livelihood based only on material needs' (ibid.: 224).

Some twenty-five years later Firestone's optimism about reproductive technology looks rather naïve, and productive technology is seen as the cause of, rather than the solution to, human need and the relationship between humanity and the natural world. However, it is wrong to condemn Firestone for not foreseeing the future and in many ways she did show an early awareness of critical issues. One of the sections of her book is entitled 'Feminism and Ecology' and although she reflects the preoccupations and prejudices of her time on the ecology issue, she can be seen as one of the earliest advocates of a feminist position on the ecological crisis. She argues that the tyranny of biology that affects women is also reflected in humanity itself. Humanity is facing an ecological crisis which nature has imposed, compounded by cultural factors. Reflecting the optimism of the age (late 1960s), Firestone sees the solution as 'human mastery of matter', so that an artificial ecological balance can be created where the natural one failed. However, this technological solution is only possible if it is part of a feminist revolution:

The double curse that man should till the soil by the sweat of his brow and that woman should bear in pain and travail would be lifted through technology to make humane living for the first time a possibility. The feminist movement has the essential mission of creating cultural acceptance of the new ecological balance necessary for the survival of the human race in the twentieth century. (ibid.: 192)

Firestone was writing at a time when there was considerable (and highly alarmist) concern about the 'population explosion'. She argued for women's control of contraception as a solution to the 'crisis', while recognizing the political implications of birth control programmes. She does, however, call on her erstwhile Marxist colleagues to recognize behind the 'population explosion' rhetoric the issue of ecological imbalance.

The elements of Firestone's analysis are also very similar to that of affinity ecofeminists. She starts from the observation that nature produced the fundamental inequality between men and women: women give birth, men do not. This 'natural division of labour' has continued throughout human history, causing great damage to the psyches of both men and women: 'The division of the psyche into male and female to better reinforce the reproductive division was tragic: the hypertrophy in men of rationalism, aggressive drive, the atrophy of their emotional sensitivity, was a physical (war) as well as

a cultural disaster' (ibid.: 193). This is very different from de Beauvoir's rather benign view of hu(man) culture. For Firestone a feminist revolution would redress this balance, not through the superiority of women's culture, but through a material challenge to the sex-class division: 'Women were the slave class that maintained the species in order to free the other half for the business of the world' (ibid.: 192). This statement reflects Firestone's Marxist framework, and like Marxist feminists she sees a communist revolution as the political solution, although in reproduction as well as production. If, however, as ecofeminists would now argue, such solutions are not available, then Firestone's analysis leaves a material conflict of interest between men and women in the relation of society/culture to nature/biology. If reproductive technologies have proved to be as much a mechanism of patriarchal control as 'natural' reproduction, and the technologies of production are ecologically damaging, how are women to escape their 'slave-class' role as maintainers of the species? While contemporary feminists would want to quarrel with the assumption that all women are in a sex-class relationship to all men, the dilemma of transcendence as identified by de Beauvoir remains. In creating 'humanity', where do women stand in relationship to nature and culture?

Women, nature and culture

Within the dualisms of male/culture and female/nature, culture is used rather loosely to mean all aspects of the public world, religion, science, technology, militarism, production, knowledge, etc. This leaves unclear whether the critical factor in differences of power between men and women lies in social structures or in value systems. Equally, do those social structures or value systems rest on an assumed biological relation between women and nature (women as mothers) – a material/structural relation (women as a gendered slave class) – or is it purely a cultural association (women as motherly), in the narrower sense of culture?

As we have seen, de Beauvoir hovers between a biological and a cultural explanation. She seems to be arguing both that biology is the cause of the male-female dualism (the autonomy-procreation dilemma), and that it is a cultural phenomenon (the creation of identity through Otherness). Firestone on the other hand, has emphasized the biological and material base of male-female differences. Biology divides the sexes and male-dominated society builds on this, exploit-

ing women's slavery to free itself for 'the business of the world'. Sherry Ortner, writing shortly after Firestone, takes up the cultural side of de Beauvoir's analysis in an influential paper first written in 1972 'Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?' (1974, reproduced in Evans 1982).

The basic tenet of Ortner's analysis is that women are subordinate to men in all societies and that this subordination is directly linked to women's association with 'nature'. However, this does not imply biological determinism read as genetic determinism. Men are not genetically determined to be dominant or women to be inferior. Biological difference only becomes problematic when it is overlaid by 'culturally defined value systems' (ibid.: 489). Having maintained that women's subordination is universal, but having rejected biological sex differences as an explanation, Ortner tries to show how cultural forms can achieve universality. For this she goes back to biology in the sense of embodiedness and embeddedness (although she does not name these as such):

If we are unwilling to rest the case on genetic determinism, it seems to be that we have only one way to proceed. We must attempt to interpret female subordination in the light of other universals, factors built into the structure of the most generalized situation in which all human beings, in whatever culture, find themselves. For example, every human being has a physical body and ... must engage in some relationship, however mediated, with 'nature', or the non-human realm, in order to survive. (ibid.)

For Ortner this biological imperative means that human societies must dominate nature, and she goes on to make 'an assertion in all human cultures of the specifically human ability to act upon and regulate, rather than passively move with and be moved by, conditions of natural existence' (ibid.: 490). As humanity 'transcends the givens of natural existence, bends them to its purposes, controls them in its interest', so every human culture devalues nature in the process of that domination. Although Ortner uses the word 'human' in this context, it is clear that she means 'man', as women are devalued along with nature as a symbolic reflection of human dependence on, and dominance of, nature: 'My thesis is that woman is being identified with – or, if you will, seems to be a symbol of – something every culture devalues, something that every culture defines as being of a lower order than itself ... "nature" in the most generalized sense' (ibid.). The idea of women being a symbol of association with nature, rather than being identified as nature, is very important to Ortner.

They are 'merely' seen as closer to nature, not as embodying nature. Culture (still equated relatively unambiguously with men) 'recognizes that women are active participants in its special processes, but at the same time sees them as being more rooted in, or having more direct affinity with nature' (ibid.: 491). Despite wanting to keep women's relationship to nature as 'merely' a cultural artefact, Ortner's explanation of the subordination of women comes close to biological determinism. She shares with de Beauvoir a distaste for women's physicality and a support for 'culture' as a symbol of humanity. She agrees with de Beauvoir that women are trapped in their role as mundane producers of repetitive life. In this sense women are 'more enslaved to the species than the male' (quoting de Beauvoir in ibid.: 493), suffering considerable discomfort in the process. Men, on the other hand, escape the biological role of the repetition of life and can concentrate on what for both Ortner and de Beauvoir is the real focus of human existence – life as culture:

[M]an assures the repetition of Life while transcending Life through Existence (i.e. goal-oriented meaningful action); by this transcendence he creates values that deprive pure repetition of all value . . . in serving the species the human male also remodels the face of the earth, he creates new instruments, he invents, he shapes the future. (ibid.)

Still quoting de Beauvoir, Ortner argues that women want to share the cultural world of men:

For she, too, is an existent, she feels the urge to surpass, and her project is not mere repetition but transcendence towards a different future – in her heart of hearts she finds confirmation of the masculine pretensions . . . Her misfortune is to have been biologically destined for the repetition of Life, when even in her own view Life does not carry within itself its reasons for being, reasons that are more important than life itself. (ibid.: 494–5)

Like de Beauvoir, Ortner celebrates the transcendence of culture as 'Life', accepting the hierarchical dualism of nature and culture. Rejecting nature/biology as inferior, their solutions are to urge women to move towards the world of culture of 'creativity and transcendence' (ibid.: 506), which means accepting 'masculine pretensions'. Ecofeminism is in a much stronger position because it can use the celebration of nature and 'Life' as a critique of the human-centred and nature-hating world of 'masculine pretensions'.

Ortner argues that the masculine association of females with nature is unconscious – that is, men are not to be blamed. There is no sense of male interest here even though it is a universal cultural occurrence.

Women are intermediate between male/culture and woman/nature in that they share the cultural world of men (albeit through confirming their own subordination), while at the same time being unable to shake off the encumbrances of their biology, 'because of woman's greater bodily involvement with the natural functions surrounding reproduction, she is seen as more a part of nature than man' (ibid.: 495). There is a near-affinity perspective here; should 'seen as' be replaced by 'is'? Ortner goes on to argue that women's 'physiological functions' (particularly birth and lactation) lead to a 'logic of cultural reasoning' which limits her mobility and confines her to domestic space. Men, 'since they lack a "natural" basis for a familial orientation' (ibid.: 498) and cannot create 'naturally' from within their own being, are forced into cultural reproduction, to 'create artificially' (ibid.: 495). Ortner attempts to escape the biologically determinist implications of this argument by drawing on Nancy Chodorow's analysis of the psychological impact of early childhood development (1974, 1978). Chodorow based her analysis on a version of psychoanalytic thought: object relations theory. She argued that the exclusive involvement of women in early childcare meant that boys and girls were socialized in different ways. While both sexes had to break from the mother to establish their own identities, this was easier for boys than girls. Girls, sharing the same sex as their mother, did not manage to establish their separateness and were always drawn empathetically to nurturing relationships with others. Males, on the other hand, develop stronger ego boundaries and a more abstract, universalistic orientation to the distant world of masculinity. By emphasizing childhood socialization rather than Freudian drives or instincts in the development of the male and female psyche, Chodorow's approach was more sociological. The importance of her analysis for Ortner is that it gives a social explanation for women's cultural differences rather than seeing it as representing a biologically determined response.

Ortner, following Chodorow, argues that the socialization patterns in child-rearing produce a response in women's psyche that perpetuates their subordination and traps her into the repetitive cycle of reproduction. The obvious solution is to 'spring' women out of the intermediate role they have been 'forced' into. Ortner argues that as women's reproductive role is culturally imposed, it could be shared between the sexes. The problem is, what would motivate men or women to transcend the dualism? Can 'nature' be dissolved away? Like de Beauvoir, Ortner defines culture as transcendence of nature, 'culture being minimally defined as the transcendence, by means of

systems of thought and technology, of the natural given means of existence' (1974: 503). Yet it is this transcendence that Ortner sees as producing *culturally* the nature/culture distinction. How does a culture that is created by a separation from nature become the forum which creates that dualism or can resolve it? If culture is created against nature, and women are always more embodied in natural cycles than men, then such a culture can never liberate women.

Ortner, de Beauvoir and Chodorow can all be criticized for asserting a false universalism. They are projecting the concerns of white middle-class women on to 'women' generally. Ortner has been particularly criticized for her assertion of the universality of cultural forms (MacCormack 1980). MacCormack criticizes Ortner and de Beauvoir for tending towards an essentialist view of woman/nature, male/culture and of having a very westernized view of culture as individual achievement. For many cultures, historical continuity is a collective social achievement through extensive family and group structures (1980). Pointing out that there are vast cultural differences in the way gender, sex, culture and nature are perceived, MacCormack argues against universalizing statements about women's subordination and the woman/nature relation. Equally, Chodorow has been criticized for focusing on the specifically western child-rearing model of the isolated nuclear family (Spelman 1988: 85; Young 1990: 40).

While MacCormack criticizes the universalist assumptions in Ortner's work, she does praise Ortner's identification of women's role in mediating between culture and nature. She sees this as a retreat from essentialism, but argues that it is not something done exclusively by women. Given that both men and women are a combination of nature and culture, they are both involved in mediation. While this may be true, what is more important is whether men and women are *equally* involved in mediation. The idea of women as mediating between culture and nature is a very important one in ecofeminist thought. Ynestra King referred to women as a 'bridge'. For Ortner, women's mediating role is a purely cultural one, socializing children to bring them from nature into culture. Later theorists (including myself) would want to argue that women's mediating role is a much more material one. Their work in production and reproduction is much more wide-ranging than childcare, and it is through this work that women (among others) have been the 'bridge' upon which 'transcendent' culture has been built.

While early feminists such as de Beauvoir, Firestone and Ortner saw women's liberation as the rejection of women's biology, a new wave of radical feminism began to argue that women should reclaim

their bodies and their 'biological' role, particularly mothering. Speaking of the American context, Ann Snitow has argued that the 'demon texts' attacking motherhood were very shortlived within the women's movement and were replaced from the mid-1970s by an overt or covert pro-natalist stance (1992).

Reclaiming the body: Adrienne Rich

[F]emale biology – the diffuse, intense sensuality radiating out from the clitoris, breasts, uterus, vagina; the lunar cycles of menstruation; the gestation and fruition of life which can take place in the female body – has far more radical implications than we have come to appreciate. (Rich 1976: 39)

Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born* sought to reclaim women's bodies from patriarchal domination. Rich claimed that the institutionalization of motherhood and compulsory heterosexuality had alienated women from their bodies. The alienation that de Beauvoir identified in pregnancy is not the existential destruction of women's autonomy, but the loss of control by women over their own bodies. When feminists have 'recoiled' from their bodies, they are reflecting the rejection of female biology in patriarchal thought. Rich argued that women have to reclaim and gain control over their bodies. Like many affinity ecofeminists she wants to revalue the repressed half of the dualism. Women are called upon to explore and understand 'our biological grounding, the miracle and paradox of the female body and its spiritual and political meanings' (ibid.: 284). Rich wants them to be able to 'think through the body', so that 'every woman is the presiding genius of her own body' (ibid.: 285).

Rich can be read as seeking to 'upend' the man-woman dualism by giving priority and creativity to women, and as seeking to transcend that dualism. There are two endings to her book. In the final chapter she appears to be seeking to bring men's and women's lives into complementarity, to 'release the creation and sustenance of life into the same realm of decision, struggle, surprise, imagination, and conscious intelligence, as any other difficult, but freely chosen work' (ibid.: p. 280). This is followed by an Afterword, which ends with a more women-centred sentiment: 'we need to imagine a world in which . . . women will truly create a new life . . . the visions, and the thinking necessary to sustain, console and alter human existence' (ibid.: 285-6).

Rich, therefore, gives us two versions of how women's embodi-

ment is to be an agent of change. One is to dissolve the dualisms of patriarchal society by according women's work of motherhood the same status as other valued aspects of human life. The second is to upend the dualism by giving women responsibility for 'visioning' the future. However, in yet another part of the book she offers a different alternative, where humanity embraces its embodiment: 'In order to live a fully human life . . . we must touch the unity and resonance of our physicality, our bond with the natural order, the corporeal ground of our intelligence' (ibid.: 39). In so far as (some) men have transcended their physicality, they have lost contact with the natural order. As Rich points out women too, have lost touch with their physicality in patriarchal societies, experiencing motherhood as 'alienated labour'. If women can 'think through their bodies' and 'the corporeal ground of our intelligence', can men not also do so?

For Rich, motherhood in a patriarchal society is damaging to men and women. Mothering by subordinated women interferes with the process of maturation for men. Women infantilize men, who have become dependent on the unconditional love of women. Rich recalls a story told by Olive Schreiner in 1890. A woman is trying to cross a deep river while suckling a child. She is told 'no, you will lose your life trying to save him; he must grow into a man and save himself, and then you will meet him on the other side.' Rich urges men to break out of these dependent patterns 'not for me, or for other women, but for themselves, and for the sake of life on the planet Earth' (ibid.: 215).

The fear of embodiment: Dorothy Dinnerstein

As we have seen, the destructive impact of mothering on men and women has been a recurring theme in feminist thought. Dorothy Dinnerstein sees the whole process of human maturation as a 'human malaise'. When human beings are torn from the womb they experience a crisis of separation from which they never recover. Dinnerstein links this to humanity's ambivalent relationship to the natural world. Starting with the image of the mermaid and the minotaur, Dinnerstein sees humans as hybrids both continuous with, and different from, other animals. It is necessary to explore this human dilemma, because 'in these continuities, and these differences, lie both our sense of strangeness on earth and the possible key to a way of feeling at home here' (1987: 2). Humanity, and particularly 'man', has made the mistake of trying to run away from this malaise, this loss of continuity with 'life'.

Failure to confront human frailty is leading humanity into destructive patterns. This is particularly true for men. Women retain their connectedness through mothering and childcare. Men are cast adrift to rule the world in their terror. Men, and to a lesser extent women, are trying to console themselves for 'a peculiarly human loss – the loss of infant oneness with the world' – and to assert themselves 'against a peculiarly human discovery – that the most important features of existence elude control' (ibid.: 8). Humans are by nature unnatural. As tool-users they walk upright, although they were designed to walk on all fours. Forced by biology into division by sex in order to reproduce, humanity is a species against itself. It has immense creativity, but causes destruction. Humanity is the only animal species that knows it will die and is unable to bear the emotional weight of this enigma. Like Rich, Dinnerstein sees the failure to confront the dilemmas of human existence as infantilizing humanity: '[W]hat we have worked out is a masquerade, in which generation after generation of childish self-important men on the one hand, and childish play-acting women on the other, solemnly recreate a child's-eye view of what adult life must be like' (ibid.: 87).

For Dinnerstein, the almost exclusive role of women in early childcare means that 'for virtually every living person it is a woman . . . who has provided the main initial contact with humanity and with nature' (ibid.: 26). This means that the mother is an ambivalent figure: she gives love and security, but she also takes it away: '[T]he early mother, monolithic representative of nature, is a source, like nature, of ultimate distress as well as ultimate joy. Like nature, she is both nourishing and disappointing, both alluring and threatening, both comforting and unreliable' (ibid.: 95). Woman is the 'dirty goddess', the 'carnal scapegoat-idol' for human mortality. She is despised by men and women. Dinnerstein draws on de Beauvoir in claiming that 'from the day of his birth man begins to die: this is the truth incarnated in the Mother' (ibid.: 127). While Dinnerstein finds a great deal of commonality with de Beauvoir, she does not see the answer in transcendence of the biological world. Instead, she comes nearer to the ecofeminist notion of immanence, connectedness. Embracing embodiment is the way to 'contain the two sides of our central ambivalence toward what we are . . . inside each individual human skin where they belong'. If humanity is able to come to terms with its 'flawed life', it may be able to save itself and the web of life in which it is embedded, from extinction (ibid.: 228).

Although an ecofeminist perspective was implicit in Dinnerstein's book, which was first written in 1976, in a chapter written for an

ecofeminist anthology in 1989 she addresses these ideas more directly: 'Central to a humanly whole feminist vision is awareness that our traditional uses of gender form part of an endemic mental and societal disorder . . . that is killing our world . . . the rageful, greedy murder of the planet that spawned us' (1989: 193).

The political control of reproduction: Mary O'Brien

Another writer who challenges the masculine and individualist bias of de Beauvoir's thinking about nature/culture dualism is Mary O'Brien. She is particularly critical of the notion of transcendence where 'the significant movement in masculine history is *anti-physis*, that male values have been created in the course of a historical struggle to overcome nature' (1981: 68). O'Brien argues that biological history – species history – is as important as cultural history and goes further to argue that masculine domination of cultural history reflects male frustration at not being able to control species history. Men's insecurity at their rather limited involvement in procreation leads to male domination as a 'doctrine of potency': 'at the heart of the doctrine of potency lies the intransigent impotency of uncertainty' (ibid.: 191).

Taking her cue from the Marxian dialectics of production, O'Brien argues that what is needed is a dialectics of reproduction. While Marx argues that 'man' is alienated from production, O'Brien argues that man is alienated from reproduction and thus from nature in general. Although she does not explicitly embrace an ecofeminist perspective, her concerns are the ecologically destructive effect of the nature/culture divide: 'the problem is to move from the war against nature and against life to policies of integration with nature and with life' (ibid.: 201). She also shares with ecofeminists a belief that 'female consciousness' is the key to the alienation of 'man' from 'nature': '[I]n a world in which the need for reintegration with nature is becoming more and more apparent, it may well be an urgent task, and one for which integrated female consciousness is pre-eminently suited' (ibid.: 64). Women's role is to transcend the dialectical oppositions that reflect 'the history of male attempts to impose order on contingency' (ibid.: 192). O'Brien argues that Marx was wrong to claim that the sphere of production was the origin of human sociability, rather it is grounded in reproduction: 'A feminist philosophy of birth must ground sociability and the ethics of integration where they belong: in the essentially social process of reproduction' (ibid.: 40). Reproduction is the key for O'Brien because, as a 'material process, biological

reproduction necessarily also sets up an opposition between those who labour reproductively (women) and those who do not (men)' (ibid.: 36). She sees this division of labour as the key to understanding western dualism and the domination of women. She argues that the dialectic of reproduction can be materially analysed from the 'standpoint of women . . . women working from within women's reality' (ibid.: 188) through the creation of 'a transformed universal, feminine consciousness' (ibid.: 190). I will return to the debate about women's standpoint in the next chapter.

Following Marx, O'Brien argues that women in the sphere of reproduction hold the key to political agency in the same way that the proletariat relates to production, through their labour. Women's long history of oppression can now be ended because they can control their reproductive power by means of contraception. She describes this as a 'world historical event', echoing Engels's claim that male control over women's fertility resulted in the world-historic defeat of women (ibid.: 189 italics in the original; Engels 1884).

In advocating a technological solution to the dialectic of reproduction, O'Brien is coming close to the 'cybernetic' world of Shulamith Firestone. However, the main difference between O'Brien's ideas and Firestone's (which both take a Marxian framework) is that women's biology is no longer to be escaped, instead it has become a site of struggle. A similar conceptual division between nature and culture is, however, evident in O'Brien's work. Echoing de Beauvoir and Firestone, she asserts that now women are 'freed from the brute contingency of biological compulsion', they are 'free' to join men in the making of history by embarking upon 'the elaboration of their second nature' (1981: 194). However, they are not to join the masculine world of culture, rather women's historical task is a very ecofeminist one: 'It is becoming increasingly clear that the struggle of feminism is not the struggle for liberation, or for some abstract humanism, but a historical force whose task is the regeneration and reintegration of historical and natural worlds' (ibid.: 195). These words are echoed in the work of Maria Mies, writing more than ten years later.

The political control of reproduction: Maria Mies

[W]omen strove originally for liberation from exploitative and oppressive male-female relations, we now deal with the question of 'emancipation' from the uncontrolled reproductive potential of the female body, of 'emancipation' from our female nature. (Mies and Shiva 1993: 221)

Maria Mies is concerned at the way the feminist argument for a woman's right to choose – reproductive autonomy – is linked to a notion of self-determination that represents a bourgeois conception of rights and privileges. As the structures that support communal and social relations break down, women are forced to gain their reproductive autonomy by placing their bodies in the hands of 'technodocs', who can manipulate fertility through the new reproductive technologies. Mies is concerned that the long-term effect of this process is that women stand to lose control of their bodies to commercial interests, technological manipulation and state regulation. Bodies are beginning to be seen as composed of commodifiable bits from eggs, sperm and womb, through blood plasma and body tissue to kidneys, which can be bought and sold on a 'free' market. They can be manipulated by governments and international agencies, as in sterilization programmes, or by patriarchal interests, as in the abortion of female fetuses.

While acknowledging that reproductive technologies have been seen as being of great benefit to women, particularly in relation to fertility treatment and safe abortion, Mies argues that the dangers outweigh the benefits: '[W]e can no longer argue about whether reproductive technology or genetic technology as such are good or bad; the very basic principles of this technology have to be criticized no less than its methods' (ibid.: 175). She argues that the reproduction of 'living relations' with the natural world and in human communities will enable women to regain control over their bodies without recourse to the technodocs. Men and women are urged to come to the realization that 'nature is not our enemy, our bodies are not our enemy, that our mothers are not our enemies' (ibid.: 229).

Mies contrasts de Beauvoir's Enlightenment view of transcendence (self-determination, freedom, the universal) with the idea of immanence (life, nature, the organic, the animal, the particular) that de Beauvoir sought to escape. De Beauvoir's solution to the Otherness of women in relation to men must necessarily entail the maintenance of, or the creation of, new Others to sustain the self of the transcendent (middle-class) woman:

[S]elf-determination of the social individual, the subject, was – and is – based on the definition of the 'Other', the definition as object, of certain human beings . . . autonomy of the subject is based on heteronomy (being determined by others) of some Other (nature, other human beings, 'lower' parts of the self). (ibid.: 223)

The concept of freedom in Enlightenment thought sets mind against

body, culture against nature. Far from the Boston Women's Health Collective's notion of 'Our Bodies' as 'Our Selves', a woman's body has become her enemy; 'Its "wild" generative capacities' threaten her independence and self-determination (ibid.: 226). The rejection of the female body is part of the whole rejection of embodiment in Enlightenment thought: that 'humans are born from women and must die, that they have a body, senses, emotions'. What the Enlightenment is rejecting is the 'living relationship' that humanity has with the environment: 'the earth, the water, the air, plants, animals, and other human beings' (ibid.: 224). This rejection meant that the Enlightenment was built upon a structure of exploitation, oppression and repression: '[T]he rise of man was based on the descent of woman. Europe's progress was based on the regression of colonies. The development of productive forces (science, technology) was based on robbery, warfare and violence, at home as well as in the colonies' (ibid.: 223). Mies argues for a revaluing of the woman–nature–culture connection, as well as offering a materialist analysis of the structures of exploitation that have created the freedom, self-determination and autonomy that many feminists have sought. Individualized self-determination rests on the paraphernalia of western culture from science and technology, capitalist economic relations, to militarism and the state. For Mies, all are male-dominated structures of violence and control. Western notions of freedom are based on a structure of exploitation, including the oppression and exploitation of women, based on class, 'race' and colonization.

From an ecofeminist perspective it is not possible to avoid confronting the woman–nature–biology connection if the material contradictions of human embodiment and embeddedness are to be addressed, which brings into question the relationship between ecofeminism and other feminist perspectives.

Ecofeminism and essentialism

[B]iological arguments are all too frequently adduced to provide justification for women's continued oppression and in that sense feminism has had to confront biology. (Birke 1986: vii)

[T]he problem for feminist materialists is to admit nature, particularly the body – that is, a constrained essentialism – while giving priority to the social, without concluding at the same time that human beings are infinitely malleable. (Rose 1994: 22)

It may be that the danger of essentialism will always be present in

ecofeminism simply because we are engaged with such fundamental grand questions – questions like the relationship between humanity and non-human nature (interview with Barbara Holland-Cunz in Kuletz 1992: 10)

As Barbara Holland-Cunz points out, in bringing ecology and feminism together, ecofeminism engages in a contradictory approach to the political freedoms associated with the Enlightenment. While much of feminism has sought to gain 'freedom and autonomy' for women through social and technical 'progress', ecology, and particularly deep ecology, has launched a profound critique of modernity (ibid.: 3). Ecofeminism must necessarily be seen as acting against the interests of one or other of its constituent parts; it has to convince (most) feminists to let go of their Enlightenment-based commitment to 'freedom and autonomy' (Mellor 1996a) and convince (most, particularly male) green thinkers that male dominance is a central problem (Mellor 1992c).

Confronting biology, for women, means confronting the structures of power that have rested upon women's association with nature, animality and human embodiment. Bringing the mind and body, nature and culture back into a direct relationship must open up charges of essentialism. From an ecofeminist perspective, feminism (and all other political and social theories) have to address the mermaid/minotaur issue. How do human beings cope with their physicality and the consequences of it, their embodiment and their embeddedness? It is no use feminists trying to avoid these issues in case it reaffirms women's oppression. In ecological terms, ignorance (ignoring) is destructive.

In its emphasis on 'body politics' ecofeminism is very close to radical feminism, even when its analysis takes a predominantly social/ist rather than an affinity perspective. Given that human beings are sexed animals, any discussion of biology must open up the question of whether women are in a different relation to their physicality than men. This seems to be the point at issue for all the writers discussed above. Collard sees women's bodies as connecting them directly with the natural world, whereas men are in a destructive relation to it. For de Beauvoir, women are more ensnared by their biology than men and have to transcend their physicality by denying it. Firestone argues that biology always potentially condemns women to the barbarity of pregnancy and must be escaped. Ortner believes that male culture's fear of nature pushes women into an identification with it, a point that Dinnerstein also makes, but in a

different way: men and women's fear of embodiment creates a rejection of woman as mother. Rich begins the re-evaluation of mothering and the assertion of a potential maternal culture freed from male control. O'Brien observes a difference in male and female psyches based on procreation, and Mies sees women's bodies as a site of struggle and one that cannot be avoided if ecological sustainability is to be achieved.

Feminism has moved, as we have seen, from a rejection of women's biology/sex to a reassessment of their relationship to biology/nature, at least by radical feminists and ecofeminists. Is such an approach necessarily essentialist? This charge contains at least three different elements: biological determinism, universalism and reductionism (Eisenstein 1984; Ferguson 1993).

Biological determinism is the concern of most critics of cultural/radical feminism and affinity ecofeminism (Davion 1994). Biology is seen as producing particular patterns of behaviour and ways of thinking: women as nurturing and loving, men as aggressive and competitive. This is easily dismissed by the observation that not all mothers are loving and caring and not all men are aggressive and destructive. Writing like that of Collard does appear to imply innate male-female differences, but as with most writers who assert the existence of a pre-historic matriarchy, the differences are seen as basically cultural. Men and women are not locked into some biologically determined eternal dance of death.

Feminists are rightly concerned that discussion of biology may feed the prejudices of patriarchal biological determinism. As Sayers argues, feminists cannot ignore biology, but they do not need to embrace explanations based in biology. What is needed is a concrete understanding of how women are oppressed in sexual and family relations (1982: 201). Ecofeminism widens this critique to understand the position of women in human-nature relations. The danger of reactionary conservatives taking advantage of this debate is less likely where the discussion of human, and particularly women's embodiment, takes place in the context of a fundamental critique of the male-dominated, unequal and ecologically destructive world that excludes women in the name of biological determinism.

The criticism of essentialism on the basis of universalism in feminist thought is a potentially more damaging critique. The critique of universalism has been levelled at radical feminism and ecofeminism, led by Black feminists and postmodern theorists (hooks 1981; Riley 1988). Universalism involves the claim that all women share a common experience of subordination. Often this reflects what Eisenstein

has called a false universalism, where the preoccupations of some (white, middle-class) women are projected on to all women (1984: 132). The Bangladeshi campaigner against population control, Farida Akhter, for example, points out that the western feminist campaign for reproductive rights has no meaning for women who have to accept sterilization as a way of getting food (quoted in Mies and Shiva 1993: 219).

The third way in which some feminisms have been seen as essentialist is in making reductionist claims that the male–female dualism is the ultimate and determining one. This is certainly true of many ecofeminists, including Collard, who see sexism as the basis of all other ‘isms’. There are two ways that this could be read. One is that women’s subordination was the *first* subordination, the other that it is *at all times* the primary subordination. I would not wish to defend ecofeminists on either of these points. I would argue that slavery is as old as women’s subordination, as far as we know, and that class, ‘race’ and colonialism are arguably more oppressive and exploitative than sexism in many contexts.

Rethinking essentialism

Elizabeth Spelman has pointed to the irony that while masculine cultures have seen women as inessential in relation to what it means to be hu(man), feminism has claimed an essentialized ‘generic’ woman as its political ‘subject’. As has been pointed out many times in critiques of white middle-class feminism, a generic concept of ‘woman’ denies differences between women, or as Spelman prefers ‘heterogeneity’ (1988: 174). As with Eisenstein’s false universalism, it presents the particular experience of white middle-class women as standing for all women. As most ecofeminists are white and middle class and expound a theory of ‘women’ as pivotal in addressing the ecological crisis, it is obviously a target of this type of criticism.

For Spelman, far from the body representing an essentialized woman, it is rejection of the body that is central to an essentialized view of women. The heterogeneity of women in their particular lives and locations are real people in real bodies: ‘Once the concept of woman is divorced from the concept of woman’s body, conceptual room is made for the idea of a woman who is no particular historical woman – she has no color, no accent, no particular characteristics that require having a body’ (ibid.: 128). Spelman sees ‘somatophobia’ disdain for, and rejection of, the body as being symptomatic of sexist,

racist and classist attitudes. Inferiority is assigned to those associated with the functions of the body, sex, reproduction, appetite, secretions, excretions and those who serve the bodily functions of others: ‘[W]hen a group views its liberation in terms of being free of association with, or responsibility for, bodily tasks, its own liberation is likely to be predicated on the oppression of other groups – those assigned to do the body’s work’ (ibid.: 127–8). Feminists who reject human, and particularly female embodiment, are following the division between culture and embodiment as set out by Plato and Aristotle. For Aristotle (male and female) slaves were responsible for the needs of embodiment, while ‘free’ women were excluded from participation in the *polis* on the grounds of their embodiment. Women could become philosopher-kings in Plato’s republic, but only by rejecting and transcending their embodiment.

‘Somatophobia’ is not overcome by identifying an essential woman-ness, ‘a “woman” substance that is the same in each of us and interchangeable between us’ (ibid.: 158). For Spelman it is impossible to speak ‘as a woman’, only as a particular woman whose heterogeneity is based on ‘identity in terms of race, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, language, religion, nationality’ (ibid.: 187). It is interesting that this list leaves out the sexed and gendered body. Do statements about women’s embodiment necessarily fall into the trap of essentialism? Are embodiments always particular embodiments – is there no context in which we can speak of the embodiment of women as *women*? Is there a middle way between asserting a generalized biological determinism (women’s innate natures, a generic ‘woman’, etc.) and a totally contextualized auto/biographical view of individual women?

Diana Fuss has argued that the distinction between essentialism and social constructionism is not a watertight one. She shows convincingly that those who make an essentialist case rest on an implicit constructionism, and vice versa. She argues that social constructionists should not assume that their concepts escape essentialism. To the extent that constructionist ideas are determinist, they are equally as essentialist as ‘natural’ theories. At the same time it would be wrong to assume that ‘nature’ is fixed, immutable and determining: ‘[T]here is no compelling reason to assume that the natural is, in essence essentialist and that the social is, in essence, constructionist’ (1989: 6). The problem rests on the difficulty of theorizing the social in relation to the natural (ibid.: 1). Fuss shares with ecofeminists a concern that the question of women’s biology must be addressed. Nor is such a debate necessarily essentialist:

[O]ne can talk about the body as matter, it seems to me, without presuming that matter has an essence.

... substituting social determinism for biological determinism, and replacing sex with gender, may not be the most productive ways to deal with the question of biology. Biology will not simply go away, much as we may wish it to; it has to be theorized. (ibid.: 51)

While not offering us her own theorization of biology, Fuss has attempted to open up a dialogue between social constructionism and essentialism which allows for the strategic use of essentialist arguments. I would agree with Elizabeth Carllassare that Susan Griffin also uses essentialist arguments in this way, as a poetic illustration of the scientific/abstract-rational/male voice as against the poetic/embodied-embedded/female voice (Carllassare 1994).

Postmodern feminists have been most marked in their criticism of essentialist universalism in feminist thought, as represented in the category woman/the feminine or even feminist (Riley 1988). Despite her claim that sexual division is a 'bifurcation of the discursive world', Riley is still left with the 'obstinate core of identification... the concept of the female body. Even if it is allowed that the collective "women" may be an effect of history, what about biology, materiality?' (ibid.: 101) Her answer is that bodily materiality is not a constant for women, that 'women only sometimes live in the flesh distinctively of women' (ibid.: 105). She also points to the fact that the experience of embodiment generally is not sexed. Malnutrition, for example, is only sexed when it affects women as women, as in the case of amenorrhoea. The ecofeminist concern with embodiment is also not limited to questions of sexual difference. Embodiment involves everything that we have to do as humans to express our biological being-ness: sex, procreation, feeding, excreting, dying. These can be incorporated into socio-economic systems, or be carried out with personal love and caring or even cruelty, but they need to be done.

To focus exclusively on sex/sexuality or procreation/mothering ignores the areas of human life that involve other kinds of oppression and exploitation, particularly production and consumption. An emphasis on sexuality and early child-rearing represent the preoccupations of a bourgeois sexualized culture in a society which separates the public from the private and limits (some) women to a domestic/mothering role. From the perspective of a concern with the ecological consequences of human activity and the socio-economic inequalities that people face in meeting their physical needs, it is an ethnocentric diversion. A wider conception of embodiment interconnects with many forms of oppression and avoids the reductionist view that sex

oppression is the most fundamental. Certainly sex/gender is important in relation to the particular embodiment that relates to sexed bodies, but that is by no means the whole story of humanity's relationship to biology/nature.

It is ironic that postmodern feminists, who have been central to the critique of essentialism and universalism in feminism, have themselves been accused of essentialism (Hekman 1990). This is particularly true of the work of Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous, who take the Lacanian position that all culture represents a patriarchal world. Language itself represents the symbol of the phallus: all knowledge, culture and language is phallogocentric. When the child leaves the world of the imaginary and enters the world of the symbol, woman is lost. Feminist postmodernism has taken the division between culture and woman to its logical extreme. All culture as represented in the 'word' or the 'text' is male. The dualism between man-woman, culture-nature is complete: all culture is man; any representation of woman in culture must be a construct of patriarchal thought. So where is embodied woman to go? For Irigaray and Cixous, the embodied woman and particularly her sexuality, is the only aspect of woman which escapes male control. All that she is left with is her pre-social self. This rests in her sexed and sensual difference, her *jouissance*. For Irigaray (1985) this means celebrating women's 'otherness' as an ontological condition, and expressing women's desire as the 'sex that is not one' – that is, the multi-sited sexuality of the female, as against the phallus-centred one sex of the male. However, this is limited as a mechanism of political action because it is, by definition, outside the phallogocentric world. To engage with the Logos/Symbolic is to succumb to patriarchy. As Lynne Segal has argued, the influence of psychoanalytic thinking in feminism has had the effect of a move away from engaged politics and has also encouraged an idealist and essentialist view of sexual difference (1987: 133).

Julia Kristeva takes a less sexually essentialist view by turning not to sexuality, but to the biological role of the mother. Denying that she is a feminist, she argues that both men and women can reclaim the pre-Oedipal experience of the maternal body. The symbolic world of the male can be escaped by turning to the repressed feminine in all of us (Butler 1990: 82). Despite these engagements with the body, French postmodern feminism does not engage with biology/nature in a way that will answer the ecological problems raised by ecofeminism. By ontologically prioritizing cultural struggle within the human community, or more precisely within language and culture, postmodern feminism cannot begin to address the relationship between humanity

and nature. It is a human-centred and radically social constructivist perspective, which denies the natural world or human biology any independent agency. This does not mean to say that the postmodern critique of modernity is not important, particularly its attack on the unitary Enlightenment 'subject' and the dualist logic that underpins it. However, this critique can be made without a psychoanalytic and/or a linguistic 'turn'.

Conclusion

Ecofeminism starts from a recognition of the centrality of 'nature' to human existence. Nature is untranscendable in de Beauvoir's sense. It will always be part of the human condition and must be addressed directly. The question then becomes how the nature-culture dualism that has marginalized women and nature can be confronted. An analysis of the relationship between male domination, women and nature is at the heart of ecofeminism. Women's relation to human embodiedness and embeddedness provides the key to understanding and confronting the hierarchical power relations that characterize western society and make it so oppressive to women and destructive to the environment.

If women's (and men's) position in the nature-culture dualism is seen as biologically determined or essentially different, it is clear that the dualism will never be bridged. The only solution is a separatist one. Men and women will have to follow their own paths. If the nature-culture dualism is seen as being socially constructed either on the basis of different (but not essentially different) value systems as between men and women (mothers and warriors), or on the basis of social inequalities (capitalism, hierarchy), then at some point the value systems could be changed or the inequalities ended. Values could be substituted (mother's values for warrior values), or could be seen as complementing each other (yin and yang, androgyny). The idea of balance and complementarity are very common in green thinking and I will discuss them in Chapter 6. A social/ist solution would eliminate the oppression of women and nature through the elimination of social inequalities. (I will discuss these ideas in Chapter 7).

A third possibility is that the nature-culture dualism is directly related to women's subordination, that dominant men materially need women (and other groups) to be in a subordinate position. Ecofeminists argue that women form the link with nature, in that

women's work keeps hu(man)ity's 'dirty little secret' of its embodiment, (women as Dinnerstein's 'dirty Goddesses'). Non-human nature contains the dirty secrets of hu(man)ity's consumption and excretion. The focus in this context turns from a biologically based view of woman to a biologically based view of humanity. Transcendence cannot be achieved without an 'Other' as Mies pointed out. The 'Other' is not a psychic or cultural mirror in the creation of identity (de Beauvoir), but carries out the basic work of embodiment that makes transcendence possible for *some* people. The outcome of this view of culture-nature relations would be a political struggle over the sexual/gender division of labour. Whereas an emphasis on sex, sexuality and mothering must necessarily return to sex-based biological differences, a focus on women's work as representing hu(man) embodiment can be linked to the way in which many peoples and groups unequally bear the burden of the embodiment of so-called 'free', 'autonomous', transcendent 'Subjects' (Mellor 1997). I would argue that to see women and nature as being in a material relation brings together the biological and social aspects of embodiment (Mellor 1996b). I will discuss this further in Chapters 7 and 8.

Central to ecofeminist thought is the argument that to the extent that women stand in a sex/gendered relationship to human embodiment, they have a special awareness of the nature and consequences of human embodiment either as differently bodied beings (as birth-givers, incarnation of the female), or as people differently concerned with human embodiment (as mothers, care-workers, etc.). To claim that women have a privileged perspective on the ecological dilemmas facing humanity is a contentious one for feminism, a debate that I will explore further in the next chapter.