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## Women and Nature: A Privileged Standpoint?

We know that women suffer disproportionately from the many different manifestations of the global ecological crisis . . . The question is no longer what is the 'correct' position on the woman/nature relation, but rather how we situate ourselves as women and agents committed to fundamental change . . . the vantage point of women and environment has been a particularly useful perspective from which to criticize the western development model. (Harcourt 1994: 153)

If women's lived experience were . . . given legitimation in our culture, it could provide an immediate 'living' social basis for (an) alternative consciousness. (Salleh 1984: 340)

Women's experience with oppression and abuse, as well as their experience of mothering, can make them more sensitive to the oppression and abuse of nature, as well as better situated to remedy it. (Collard 1988: 138)

Women know from the inside out what it is like to weave the Earth into a new human being. (Swimme 1990: 21)

All the above statements are arguing for a privileged epistemological perspective for women in relation to the natural world and for women's positioning as effective agents in confronting the ecological crisis. By raising the question of epistemic privilege in the context of gender and knowledge in relation to the natural world, ecofeminism is entering a contentious field for feminist theory (Jaggar and Bordo 1989; Nicholson 1990; Harding 1991; Alcoff and Potter 1993). From a postmodern perspective, feminists are asking whether it is possible to claim a privileged epistemological viewpoint on any basis (Hekman 1990). From a difference perspective, epistemological claims on the

part of, or on behalf of, women can be seen as denying differences between women by essentializing their 'natures', universalizing their 'experience' and taking a reductionist position in prioritizing their viewpoint over that of other oppressed groups.

On what basis are ecofeminists claiming an epistemological privilege for women? The statements above offer a number of options: women as disadvantaged and oppressed; women as mothers, birth-givers and nurturers; women's 'lived experience'. To argue that women as *female* are the source of epistemic privilege would certainly be open to the criticism of being universalizing and essentializing. The same criticism is made of those who see women as having a distinctive culture or ethic (Gilligan 1982; Noddings 1984). A great deal of the criticism directed at ecofeminism reflects the way in which much of its rhetoric seems to be making such claims. However, in more considered statements this rhetoric tends to be qualified. For example, Charlene Spretnak, a proponent of ecofeminist spirituality, states that 'what cannot be said, though, is that women are drawn to ecology simply because we are female' (1990: 4).

While Spretnak urges us to 'embrace the body' and talks of the 'elemental power of the female body' as representing the goddess and the 'Earthbody', this is open to men as well as women (1991: 143). Spretnak, who like other cultural feminists asserts the previous existence of a goddess-based matriarchy, sees patriarchal society as emerging through socialization rather than 'inherent masculine behavior'. Men can therefore become re-socialized to embrace the 'Earthbody' (*ibid.*: 128). For Starhawk, 'earth-based spirituality' is based on immanence, interconnection and community. Immanence is the aliveness of the earth, connectedness is the way that immanence is expressed, community is the goal of a human society in harmony:

When we understand that everything is interconnected, we are called to a politics and a set of actions that come from compassion, from the ability literally to feel *with* all living beings on the Earth. That feeling is the ground upon which we can build community and come together and take action and find direction. (1990: 74)

Starhawk does adopt a standpoint perspective but not only on the part of women: 'Environmental issues cannot be intelligently approached without the perspectives of women, the poor, and those who come from other parts of the globe, as well as those of all races and cultural backgrounds' (*ibid.*: 83). For Ariel Salleh, a socialist ecofeminist, the important aspect is 'women's lived experience' linked to women's

subordination. Like Harding and Haraway, Salleh calls for 'an epistemology from below'. She argues that women's experience in capitalist patriarchal societies has given them a materially grounded base which privileges them 'temporarily as historical agents par excellence'. Women are in a contradictory position in that they are both inside and outside patriarchal systems. From this position, whether they are 'dominated' or 'empowered', they are well placed to 'take up the case for "other" living beings' (1994: 120). Salleh denies that this is an essentialist position. It is not women's bodies that locate them politically, but their position within the sex/gender division of labour. Nor do women spontaneously recognize this contradiction; they have to develop an 'ecofeminist consciousness'. Salleh therefore follows the Marxist model of distinguishing between a sex/gender in itself and a conscious sex/gender 'for itself', or rather 'for nature'. Women hold a privileged standpoint, but they may not necessarily 'see' it.

Similarly, Ynestra King, a social ecofeminist, does not assert a 'natural' affinity between women and the natural world, arguing instead that the socially constructed identity of women and nature could be consciously used as a 'vantage point' for 'creating a different kind of culture and politics that would integrate intuitive, spiritual and rational forms of knowledge, embracing both science and magic insofar as they enable us to transform the nature-culture distinction and to envision and create a free, ecological society' (1983b: 123). Vandana Shiva, writing from the perspective of Asian women, claims that 'the intellectual heritage for ecological survival lies with those who are experts in survival'. It is 'women as knowers' who are the experts in survival: 'women producing survival are showing us that nature is the very basis and matrix of economic life' (1989: 224). In stressing that women are experientially 'knowers', holding the intellectual heritage of subsistence societies, Shiva sometimes seems to be leaning towards making a claim for an essentialized embodiment of the feminine principle in women *per se*. However, in Mies's and Shiva's 1993 book *Ecofeminism*, Mies states that such knowledge is gained in struggle, quoting Shiva:

As Vandana Shiva points out in this book, a new vision – a new life for present and future generations, and for our fellow creatures on earth – in which praxis and theory are respected and preserved can be found *only* in the survival struggles of grassroots movements. (1993: 297; my italics)

This knowledge can be developed wherever people are marginalized and seeking earth-centred alternatives, even in countries in the North.

This would seem to imply that experience of a struggle for survival or subsistence defined as 'life-producing and life-enhancing work' (ibid.: 298) is the most important element in establishing 'praxis and theory'. In the case of people struggling for survival, poor men as well as poor women could as much be repositories of an alternative knowledge. However, elsewhere Mies argues for a more woman-based knowledge:

in defying this patriarchy we are loyal to future generations and to life and this planet itself. We have a deep and particular understanding of this both through our natures and our experience as women [such that] wherever women acted against ecological destruction or/and the threat of atomic annihilation, they *immediately* became aware of the connection between patriarchal violence against women, other people and nature. (ibid.: 14; my italics)

Mies and Shiva leave us with confusing messages about the relationship between women, nature and knowledge. Nature-oriented knowledge is seen as resting with those (particularly women) who still retain direct links with the natural world. However, political struggle is also an important source of realization of this knowledge, which can be shared by women who are not in immediate contact with nature or the struggle for survival. In which case, it would be perfectly possible for western men to disengage from their dominant forms of knowledge and embrace a 'subsistence perspective'.

#### Standpoint: the view from below

As we have seen, ecofeminism hovers between an approach that seems to prioritize the idea of *women's* experience reflecting an essential representation of women's embodiment, and an approach that looks at *women's experience* in a more historical and contextual way. However, this raises questions of how women's experience is to be galvanized and on what basis. The implication of most of the ecofeminist theorists surveyed above is that the main criterion is experience of disadvantage. Disadvantage is deemed to produce a perspective on society which is denied or obscured for the advantaged. This line of argument is reflected in feminist standpoint theory, which stands in direct lineage to Marxist theories of the epistemic privilege of the working class and Hegel's analysis of the master-slave relationship (Harding 1991: 120 f.). For ecofeminists, women, because of their structural disadvantage, can see the dynamics of the

relationship between humanity and nature more clearly than can (relatively) privileged men.

Hartsock originally framed the idea of a 'feminist standpoint' in *Money, Sex and Power* in 1983, with a revised version published in 1987. Following Iris Young, she developed her standpoint perspective as a feminist extension of Marx's historical materialism. Young's and Hartsock's starting point was the sex/gender division of labour, which is also central to social/ist ecofeminist analysis. For Hartsock, the limitation of Marx's materialism was that it did not focus on the whole of human activity in humanity's interaction with nature and each other. As human interaction with nature is socially mediated and shapes both human beings themselves and their knowledge, the sex/gender division of labour means that 'women's lives differ systematically and structurally from those of men' (1983: 231). Women's dual role in production and reproduction means that they have a wider understanding of the range of activities within human existence, which 'represents an intensification and deepening of the materialist world view' (ibid.: 236). Drawing on Nancy Chodorow's work, Hartsock sees men as withdrawing from the concrete world of women's lives and experience to the socially constructed world of 'abstract masculinity':

Masculinity must be attained by means of opposition to the concrete world of daily life, by escaping from contact with the female world of the household into the masculine world of politics or public life. This experience of two worlds, one valuable, if abstract and deeply unattainable, the other useless and demeaning, if concrete and necessary, lies at the heart of a series of dualisms—abstract/concrete, mind/body, culture/nature, ideal/real, stasis/change. (ibid.: 241)

Women's role as 'mediators' between men and nature provides the epistemological base for 'a specifically historical materialism, a materialism that can provide a point from which to both critique and work against phallogocratic ideology and institutions' (ibid.: 234). The concept of women as mediators of nature has already been raised by Ortner and has been developed by Salleh (1994) and Mellor (1997). It is a concept that is central to a materialist ecofeminism and one to which I will return.

Women's mediating role in the sex/gender division of labour has rendered relations between humanity and the natural world invisible in malestream theory, so that the 'biological, bodily component of human existence' is in danger of 'evaporating' (Hartsock 1983: 233). In order to develop an analysis that does not separate nature from

nurture, or biology from culture, Hartsock follows Sara Ruddick in separating those social forms that are virtually universal yet changeable (such as women's role in child-rearing) from those that are universal and less easily changeable (such as men's inability to bear children). Hartsock argues that it is only when the changeable aspects of the sex/gender division of labour have been tackled that the reality of biological limitations can be revealed. She recognizes the problem of universalism in her analysis, but with 'reluctance' proposes to 'lay aside the important differences among women and instead search for central commonalities across race and class boundaries' (ibid.).

A feminist standpoint, Hartsock argues can expand an understanding of human materiality and expose the 'perverse and deadly forms' of patriarchal institutions and ideology (ibid.: 231). However, such a standpoint is not readily available as 'raw data'. Knowledge based upon women's experience is not just 'there', it has to be struggled for intellectually and politically:

the vision available to the oppressed group must be struggled for and represents an achievement that requires both science to see beneath the surface of the social relations in which all are forced to participate and the education that can only grow from struggle to change those relations. . . an engaged vision, the understanding of the oppressed, the adoption of a standpoint . . . carries a historically liberatory role. (ibid.: 232)

A materialist understanding, Hartsock argues, gets women off the hook of being seen as either natural or social: 'as embodied humans we are of course inextricably both natural and social' (1987: 158). It has, however, been strategically necessary for women to emphasize the social aspect of their lives, rather than the natural. What is needed now is a revaluing of women's experience as the basis of a revolutionary politics that begins with 'the sexual division of labour . . . as the real, material activity of concrete human beings' in order to produce 'a fully human community, a community structured by connection rather than separation and opposition' (ibid.: 175). If 'women's experience' will guide humanity to 'a fully human community', this still leaves open the question of the relationship between experience and knowledge.

For Patricia Hill Collins, the most important distinction is between knowledge and wisdom. In defining an afrocentric feminist epistemology, she sees experience as the 'cutting edge' between them: 'Knowledge without wisdom is adequate for the powerful, but wisdom is essential to the survival of the subordinate' (1990: 208).

Collins sees the basis for Black women's wisdom in the connectedness of Black communities that emphasizes an ethic of caring and the importance of personal accountability, a 'connected knowing' based in holistic ideas: '[R]ooted in a tradition of African humanism, each individual is thought to be a unique expression of a common spirit, power, or energy inherent in all life' (ibid.: 215). Like Hartsock, Collins argues for the importance of the standpoint of subjugated knowledges not as answers in themselves but as a challenge to the 'truth' of dominating knowledges and as the basis of a wider picture. If Black women can claim a privileged perspective, it is as 'outsiders-within'. On the basis of their experience of exploitation and subordination at the hands of racist, patriarchal and capitalist societies, and drawing on their own cultural histories, Black women 'have a distinct view of the contradictions between the dominant group's actions and ideologies' (1990: 11).

### Knowledge and action

One of the main criticisms that can be made of standpoint theory is that it sets up *a* privileged view from *a* specific oppression – a woman's voice, a Black voice – that is essentializing, universalizing and totalizing. Collins argues against the idea of *a* specific oppression by seeing afrocentric feminism as part of a matrix of struggles against oppression. This does not, however, overcome the problem of there being *a* specific view from any particular position, or of whether such a view can obscure differences between women. More importantly, perhaps, it leaves unclear the responsibility of the oppressed for producing the solutions to their own, and others', oppression and in the case of ecofeminism, the survival of the planet.

Although not referring specifically to ecofeminism, Uma Narayan has pointed to conflicting dangers in claims for women's epistemic privilege, which argue that 'our location in the world as women makes it possible for us to perceive and understand different aspects of both the world and human activities in ways that challenge the male bias of existing perspectives' (1989: 256). The first danger is that women who are not suffering a particular form of oppression will seek to 'speak for' the oppressed, while not being aware of their own role in subordinating other women. Such a danger seems apparent in both Hartsock's and Harding's work. Harding sees standpoint theory as 'not women's experience, but the view from women's lives' (1991: 269). The critical question is, whose view and from which women's

lives? Harding meets this criticism by arguing that knowledge should always be socially and politically self-conscious, thereby exhibiting 'strong objectivity' (1993). Certainly, for ecofeminism there is always a temptation to prioritize the ecological question over issues of differences between women and the power relations they represent.

The second danger that Narayan sees is a false assumption about the political efficacy of oppression. It cannot be assumed that because subordinated people live in two cultures or on both sides of their divided lives (as Collins claims) that this will result in a radicalizing or dialectical experience: 'The thesis that oppression may bestow epistemic advantage should not tempt us in the direction of idealizing or romanticizing oppression and blind us to its real material and psychic deprivations' (1989: 268). Similar concerns are raised by Flax (1990) and Braidotti et al., who argue that 'subjugation does not necessarily result in superior vision' (1994: 120). Also, to claim a superior voice for poor women is merely to reverse the hierarchies of knowledge and not transcend them. Braidotti et al. also see dangers in what they perceive as the way in which organizations such as DAWN claim to speak on behalf of poor women in the South, and they call upon 'all those concerned to facilitate pro-environmental changes' to take up their 'political and historic responsibility' to analyse critically their *own* position in the wider power structure in order to identify 'points of leverage' (ibid.: 171–2). They identify 'a radically differentiated female-embodied materialism', whereby 'the embodiment of the subject is the political standpoint which allows for the critique of dualism' (ibid.: 174). The proposition that ecofeminists should engage in political action within their own societies has already been made by both Mies and Ruether, but the argument of Braidotti et al. is somewhat undermined by a postmodern perspective. In seeing 'the body as a construct, an interface between symbolic and material forces' (ibid.: 174) it is not clear how such a struggle can be broadened without adopting a 'totalising perspective'. How would a struggle over her body by a middle-class white woman connect with the struggle of a young girl sold into sex slavery, or the exploitation of the natural world?

What Hartsock seems to be arguing is that the starting point is not *women's* experience, by virtue purely of their female embodiment, or *women's experience* as a subjective phenomenon, but *women's experience* as a historical and material relation, which may be built upon either by women themselves or by politically conscious activists (including men). Such an analysis will not satisfy radical difference and postmodern feminists who would want to return to the subjec-

tive phenomenon of women's experiences and to decentre the concept of 'women'. It would also not satisfy the postmodern critique, in that the feminist standpoint perspective is clearly within the western humanist tradition. Standpoint theory locates 'subjugated knowledges', which by definition have to be 'realized'. This can be done either by subjugated groups themselves or by others, often from more privileged groups, who 'reason dialectically' or search for the voices of others. Standpoint theory therefore offers two seemingly contradictory positions: knowledge is located or 'situated' with those who are oppressed or subordinated, yet that knowledge remains available to all those who would search for it.

The important element here is the subjugation rather than the situation. If knowledges are merely situated, then they are relative to the positions/perspectives of particular social locations. A relativist position would be appropriate as there would be no reason to prioritize any particular location. Starting from a position of subjugation, the material 'fact' of inequality is the starting point. As Haraway has argued: "'Subjugated" standpoints are preferred because they seem to promise more adequate, sustained, objective, transforming accounts of the world' (1991: 191). Ecofeminist epistemology argues that situatedness, while representing context and diversity, also has concrete things to say about social and ecological location. Situatedness is not just about 'raw' experience, but is always located in social relationships and in relation to the natural world: 'A situated self is a self-reflective self; a self that always attempts to explore her relationship to others and the world' (Gruen 1994: 128). As Harding argues, dominant groups need to 'systematically interrogate their advantaged social situation' which in any event renders them 'epistemologically disadvantaged' (1993: 54). Like Haraway, Harding argues that less privileged positions are epistemologically advantaged: '[T]he activities of those at the bottom of . . . social hierarchies can provide starting points for thought – for *everyone's* research and scholarship – from which humans' relations with each other and the natural world can become visible' (ibid.; italics in the original). Like Hartsock and Gruen, Harding and Haraway do not claim that the subjugated have 'raw vision'. Vision reflects the *power* to see, not just sight itself, 'there is no immediate vision from the standpoint of the subjugated' (Haraway 1991: 193). The perspective of the subjugated is not 'innocent' it is not a mirror, a truth, but neither is it a relativism where every position/perspective tells a different story. Haraway argues that every located position gives only a partial view. The case for solidarity rests in putting together all the partial views to get a

picture of the whole. Haraway describes this as 'embodied objectivity' (ibid.: 188). Because the concept of 'objectivity' implies a positivist framework, I would prefer to see this as a realist rather than an objectivist perspective. Also, as the ecofeminist perspective refers not only to embodiment, but embeddedness within an interconnected ecological framework, I would prefer Starhawk's (and, ironically, de Beauvoir's) concept of immanence. An immanent realism would be revealed through patterns of subjugation and the perspectives they generate within the human community, and through an awareness of the interrelatedness of humanity and nature in ecological processes.

In asserting with Ynestra King that women are a 'bridge' between culture and nature, ecofeminists are arguing that women provide a 'critical position' in terms of the natural world. This is not to deny individual and collective differences, but, as Hartsock argues, to look for commonalities because the overall problem is so great. Haraway writes: 'We need the power of modern critical theories of how meanings and bodies get made, not in order to deny meanings and bodies, but in order to live in meanings and bodies that have a chance for the future' (1991: 187). The kind of critical perspective taken by standpoint epistemology must necessarily draw on elements of the western intellectual tradition, i.e. realism and materialism/structuralism. Yet ecofeminists also see the western tradition and its epistemological framework as the source of women's subordination and the ecological crisis. This would appear to put ecofeminism politically nearer to a postmodern than a modernist position. One perspective which ecofeminists and postmodernists share is a critique of dualism within western culture (Hekman 1990).

### Dualism: the logic of domination

Western culture has treated the human/nature relation as a dualism and . . . this explains many of the problematic features of the west's treatment of nature which underlie the environmental crisis, especially the western construction of human identity as 'outside' nature. (Plumwood 1993: 2)

As we have seen, ecofeminists trace the destruction of the natural world to the hierarchical dualisms of western society, although they may differ in the historical period and origins identified. The debate around western dualism has been the point at which poetic ecofeminism meets academic ecofeminism, the latter being particularly represented in the work of environmental philosophers such as

Val Plumwood (1986, 1990, 1993) and Karen Warren (1987, 1990, 1994).

Both Plumwood and Warren see dualism as representing a cultural institutionalization of power relations. This is described by Warren as a 'logic of domination' and by Plumwood as a 'logic of colonization'. Such a logic not only divides categories of thought and life, but also prioritizes one over the other. Plumwood refers to this as hyperseparation or radical exclusion (1993: 49), calling instead for a 'critical ecological feminism' that will resolve these dualisms by exposing the assumptions that underpin them.

Plumwood, like Ruether, sees the origin of dualism in western thought as lying with the Greeks, particularly Plato. What Plato did was to separate off the sphere of ideas from the rest of human existence, and particularly human embodiment, both as subsistence and (hetero)sexuality. As women were associated in Greek culture with both subsistence as household production and carnal sexuality (as opposed to Plato's idealized sexuality of the young male), women were by definition not part of the world of ideas. According to Plumwood, this has led to a 'hyperseparated conception of the human', which forms the 'master identity' of western culture (ibid.: 72). The master culture emphasizes rationality, freedom and transcendence of nature, and Plumwood argues that the fatal flaw of western dualism was to tie these ideas to domination.

Plumwood shares with many other feminists a critique of masculinity as the hidden dimension of the western definition of the 'human' (Hartsock 1983; Lloyd 1984; Ruether 1975; Irigaray 1985). She is also concerned that male green thinkers are tending to look uncritically and with approval towards Greek society as a model of ecological sustainability, in the same way that male political theorists have praised Greek democracy without appreciating its gendered (and slave-based) nature. For Plato, the world of ideas and of order through reason (*logos*) is separate and superior to the inferior sphere of matter. It is the *logos* that gives order to the world. The body and materiality, on the other hand, are essentially chaotic. *Logos* (world-soul) must be superior because it (he) must maintain order. The elements of Plato's dualism of soul and nature can clearly be seen in Christianity, and his separation of ideas and nature in western rationalism. However the world of materiality (like sin) is always with us and must be continually repressed by the *logos* both within society and within the individual.

Plumwood explains the origins of Plato's dualism in the war-based character of Greek society. The dominant classes of Greek culture

could only maintain their society through war and domination. If an elite male were to live 'the life of the master, his ability to lead a life above slavish necessity depended on war' (1993: 97). He must always be ready to fight and die (gloriously) in battle. Life, therefore, could not be valued for itself. Instead the 'order' of society that transcended individual human existence was accorded the highest value. Plumwood, like Hartsock, argues that Platonic theory is a justification for the valorization of death over life. But she believes that this type of thinking has led to an 'existential homelessness' (ibid.: 71) in western thought, 'an alienated account of human identity in which humans are essentially apart from or "outside of" nature, having no true home in it or allegiance to it' (ibid.). This alienation is made all the worse by the fact that 'modernity has dispensed with the other world' (ibid.: 101). There is no longer a transcendent world of *logos* or soul, there is no form or father in heaven. Instead, modern society has to face the meaninglessness of death: 'Modernity, despite its pride in throwing off the illusions of the past, has not provided an earthian identity which gives a life-affirming account of death, or comes to terms with death as part of the human condition' (ibid.: 102). What is needed, Plumwood argues, is an 'ecological identity' which is based not on alienation from the natural world, but connection with it. However, masculinist culture is not moving in this direction. Instead, it is struggling to take control of the world of nature and the body through 'progressive' science and technology, while still denying the materiality of human existence. This 'backgrounding' of nature has had destructive consequences. Economic systems have developed in ways that have 'externalized' nature from economic calculations and concern. Depletion of resources or pollution of the environment is not treated as a responsibility of companies, or, until recently, of governments.

Another key figure identified by Plumwood in the incorporation of dualism into western philosophy was the French mathematician/philosopher René Descartes (1596–1650). While Plato's dualism had focused upon the 'other world' of soul/*logos*, Descartes directed his attention towards developing human knowledge and control of the natural world. What was distinctive about humanity, he argued, was the existence of mind, read as consciousness with the ability to think and reason. As nothing else in existence possesses mind, the natural world, including the human body and all other animate life, is seen as an inert object to be controlled and manipulated. Mind becomes disembodied and body/nature becomes mindless, a machine. Plumwood sees Descartes as undertaking a 'stripping out' process, whereby all similarities between human mind and body/nature are

defined out to leave only pure disembodied consciousness 'I'. This is the autonomous human-centred form of consciousness that both deep ecologists and ecofeminists see as lying at the heart of the destructiveness of western thinking. All agency is denied to the natural world, so that nature has no 'originative power' within itself (ibid.: 115):

*Consciousness* now divides the universe completely in a total cleavage between the thinking being and mindless nature, and between the thinking substance and 'its' body, which becomes the division between consciousness and clockwork. Gone is the teleological and organic in biological explanation. Mind is defining of and confined to human knowers, and nature is merely alien. (ibid.: 116; italics in the original)

Susan Bordo has decried Cartesian dualism as a 'flight to objectivity', where (as in the case of Plato) all possible distractions from pure consciousness are removed (1987). Like Bordo, Plumwood sees the 'objective' self as implicitly masculine, with the separation of the masculine mind not only from 'female' body but from all other forms of animate life, including the 'mind's' own body. As a socialist ecofeminist, Plumwood also broadens the idea of the 'mind' as masculine by seeing it as representing a 'master' identity that encompasses a much wider framework of domination: "The body is "feminine-associated" but it is even more clearly associated with other oppressed groups, such as "primitives", animals, slaves and those who labour with their bodies' (ibid.: 116). The hyperseparated, disembedded master identity presents us with a 'self' in western philosophy which not only represents the 'ideals' of masculinity, but of 'class, race and species colonisation' (ibid.: 152).

Despite this very material basis to her analysis of the master identity and her call for a critical ecological feminism, towards the end of her book, Plumwood moves to a more poststructuralist language and orientation. She seeks to challenge the 'master's story' that has been built out of the dualisms of western thought. However, she rejects the spiritual ecofeminist's 'story'. Nature is not to be seen as representing 'spirit' or a 'Goddess' (ibid.: 126). Plumwood also rejects 'extreme holism', where humanity is to be sunk into nature to such an extent that it is indistinguishable. Instead, she wants to extend the 'concepts of autonomy, agency and creativity to those who have been denied them under the Cartesian division of the world', so that 'we reconceive ourselves as more animal and embodied, more "natural", and that we reconceive nature as more mindlike than in the Cartesian conception' (ibid.: 124).

The Greek/Enlightenment concept of 'humanity' needs to be challenged from a feminist perspective, since it has been constructed in a 'framework of exclusion, denial and denigration of the feminine sphere, the natural sphere and the sphere associated with subsistence' (ibid.: 22). How is the concept of the 'human' to be challenged? Not, argues Plumwood, by the assertion of an alternative 'woman's culture', which she calls 'uncritical reversal' (ibid.: 31). She makes the criticism that many other feminists have made of ecofeminism, that to celebrate the feminine is to celebrate what is only a distortion of the masculine/feminine dualism (Davion 1994). To celebrate womanhood is to celebrate something that has been created by inequality. Making the same point as Ynestra King, Plumwood argues that the challenge must be to the dualism itself, i.e. to the master's story. It will be no easy task to challenge the 'cultural bondage to the logic of the master' that reflects the 'deep structures of mastery':

Although the super-rich increasingly own both the world and the word, the master identity is more than a conspiracy: it is a legacy, a form of culture, a form of rationality, a framework for selfhood and relationship which, through the appropriation of culture, has come to shape us all. (ibid.: 190)

The implication in Plumwood's analysis is that the deep culture of master identity appeared with the Greeks, but built on a pre-existing pattern of elite domination, which was male-dominated and slave-owning. It would appear, then, that being preceded consciousness, i.e. that the cultural form came to represent a pre-existing pattern of domination and not the other way round. By the end of her book Plumwood, despite the poststructuralist language, combines a material and a cultural analysis. One solution she gives is that the master story will falter through inherent *material* contradictions: 'After much destruction, mastery will fail, because the master denies dependency on the sustaining other; he misunderstands the conditions of his own existence and lacks sensitivity to limits and to the ultimate points of earthian existence' (ibid.: 195). However, such a materialist analysis is undermined by the use of much weaker concepts. Mastery has moved from being a colonization and domination to a 'story' or an 'identity', in which women are complicit. The focus of political action is also directed away from material struggle to personal and political transformation. Plumwood asks 'active and intentional subjects . . . to recognise and eject the master identity in culture, in ourselves, and in political and economic structures', and instead to develop 'forms of rationality which encourage mutually sustaining relationships

between humans and the earth'. Such alternative frameworks would be based on examples of 'care, friendship and love . . . radical democracy, co-operation, mutuality' (ibid.: 195–6). These are not specifically limited to women, although Plumwood does refer to 'women's stories of care' (ibid.: 196). She is calling on all those men and women who share ecofeminist and related perspectives to join forces. However, the specific focus of that struggle is not made clear and the elements of a specifically materialist analysis are lost. A politically undifferentiated 'we' are to engage in struggle over identities and stories, not material relations.

For Plumwood, the ecological impact of the 'logic of colonization' lay in western patriarchy's 'mastery of nature' through its male-dominated knowledge systems. This 'mastery' has been exemplified by western science and technology, of which one of the earliest critiques was made by the socialist ecofeminist Carolyn Merchant, a view that has been echoed in the work of other feminist critics such as Evelyn Fox Keller (1983, 1985, 1992) and Hilary Rose (1986, 1994).

#### Masculinist science and the death of nature

The removal of animistic, organic assumptions about the cosmos constituted the death of nature – the most far-reaching effect of the Scientific Revolution. (Merchant 1983: 193)

Carolyn Merchant's book *The Death of Nature* was first published in 1980. While acknowledging the destructive framework of Judaeo-Christian religion and culture as well as western rationalism, Merchant's particular target was the scientific revolution of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. She argues that the emergence of scientific rationality was the final twist that released the full destructive potential of western patriarchal culture. Until the scientific revolution, exploitation of the natural world had been restrained by an organic view of nature as both female and alive. Nature was revered as a nurturing 'Mother Earth', and feared as a wild and tempestuous spirit. But the scientific revolution brought about a disenchantment of 'Nature'. Wild and alive Nature was replaced by a mechanistic world view that saw the natural world as dead and passive. Whereas the organic view had restrained exploitation, or at least made it self-conscious, the mechanistic view, associated with Descartes and Newtonian mechanics, led to the 'death of nature', as an idea and in practice.

The aliveness of Nature before the scientific revolution had been represented through the 'female principle', which 'emphasized the interdependence among the parts of the human body, subordination of the individual to communal purposes in the family, community, and state, and vital life permeating the cosmos to the lowliest stone' (ibid.: 1). The alternative perspective of vitalism, represented by philosophers such as Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz and Lady Anne Conway, were eclipsed (ibid.: 253 f.). The wisdom of those, particularly women, associated with the old organic relationship was also lost or destroyed. Merchant argues that the scientific revolution was legitimated by Judaeo-Christianity, which had bequeathed to 'Man' the God-given right of the domination of nature. This could finally be achieved through the development of modern science. The Christian faith and other patriarchal faiths had already destroyed women-based myths and religious images, and had even gone as far as persecuting and massacring women in large numbers as witches (ibid.: 127 f.). For Merchant, the women persecuted as witches represented the chaotic and wild aspect of nature, particularly as represented in women's sexuality. This was a period of transition:

[T]he old organic order of nature in the cosmos, society and self was symbolically giving way to disorder through the discoveries of the 'new science', the social upheavals of the Reformation, and the release of people's animal and sexual passions. In each of these realms, female symbolism and activities were significant. (ibid.: 127–8)

One of the main exponents of the new methods was Francis Bacon, who, as Merchant notes, was Attorney-General to James I during a wave of witchcraft trials. Bacon's language is rife with the imagery of torture and even makes reference to the persecutions:

For you have but to follow and, as it were, hound nature in her wanderings, and you will be able when you like to lead and drive her afterward to the same place again . . . Neither ought a man to make scruple of entering and penetrating into these holes and corners, when the inquisition of truth is his whole object – as your majesty has shown in your own example. (quoted in ibid.: 168)

Merchant's critique of Newtonian mechanics and the early exclusion of women from modern science has been followed by a number of feminist critiques of science (Alic 1986; Harding 1991; Keller 1985; Rose 1994).



### The feminist critique of science

In the overall critique of dualism within western culture, science represents the 'hard edge'. As with most feminist critiques of male-dominated society, the first level of criticism was at the exclusion and marginalization of women in science. Feminist historians found evidence of women's hidden contribution (Alic 1986), the history of women's experiences and role in the area (Rose 1994) and their distinctive perspectives (Keller 1983). As Keller and Rose point out, it was only later that the critique moved to a more fundamental concern with the nature of science itself. The major jump was from the exposure of the exclusion, exploitation and marginalization of women in a male-dominated scientific world to a critique of science itself as a masculinist project. Keller describes how in 1975, almost overnight, she moved from being a mathematical biophysicist, committed to physical laws as the 'apex of knowledge', to a questioning of whether the masculine basis of science destroyed its integrity as a subject. This change occurred through life changes such as taking leave to accompany her husband on a sabbatical and teaching interdisciplinary studies. In confronting her experience as a woman in science, Keller began to question the legitimacy of the scientific model in which she had been trained, in particular, its claim to produce disembodied knowledge that was self-detached, impersonal and transcendent (1992: 19). The detachment of the scientific model, Keller argues, has led to the technologies of life or death such as nuclear physics and molecular biology (1985), a concern shared by many feminists, ecologists and anti-militarists (Easlea 1983).

Following Chodorow, Keller sees the masculinization of science as resulting from childhood socialization. Women, given their gendered socialization, are likely to approach their study of the natural world with less detachment. Scientific knowledge does not have to be impersonal and transcendent; it can reflect both love and feeling. Keller draws on her study of the work of the geneticist Barbara McClintock to illustrate her case (1983). McClintock saw the natural world as infinitely complex, with organisms having a life and order of their own. Scientists who wish to understand them should 'listen to the material' and have a 'feeling for the organism' (Keller 1983). By contrast, masculinist science rests on a detached claim to be able to produce a 'copy theory' of reality that is both objective and objectifying. Unsurprisingly, McClintock's failure to follow the accepted scientific model led to accusations of 'person-

ality difficulties' and marginalization in her profession (Keller 1985: 159).

Keller argues that the idea of science as a 'mirror of nature', or as reflecting the 'laws of nature', is purely a metaphor for the prevailing hierarchical assumptions of western culture, with humans as the discoverers and interpreters of a subordinate natural world. Words, argues Keller, are far too limited a resource to permit a faithful representation of the cultural world of our own experience, let alone the hugely complex structure of the natural world (1992: 29). In fact, the assumption that science can reflect and explain the world must mean that the development of knowledge is being artificially restricted: 'To assume . . . that all perceptible regularities can be represented by current (or even future) theory is to impose a premature limit on what is "naturally" possible' (ibid.: 30). Science is on stronger ground if it relates itself to practice: 'good science is science that effectively facilitates the material realisation of particular goals' (ibid.: 5). However, she goes on to point out that these goals can be good or bad.

One example of the destructive impact of the use of science to achieve certain goals is the 'green revolution', of which as I have pointed out Vandana Shiva has been a particularly influential critic (1989). Like many feminist critics of science, Shiva was herself a scientist, a nuclear physicist. The green revolution is an example of what Shiva has called 'maldevelopment'. Central to the problems of the green revolution were crops designed in western laboratories without an understanding of local environmental and economic conditions in the South. At first, the green revolution appeared to be a huge success, as heavily cropping varieties of rice and wheat seemed to be the answer to the widespread Malthusian fear of human population growth outstripping the resources of the planet. However, the limitations of the policy soon became clear. The new varieties needed vast amounts of water, which quickly depleted the 'once and for all' resource of ground water. Rapid and constant evaporation in hot climates left residues of salt on the ground which poisoned the soil. Heavy cropping caused soil erosion, and the crops were susceptible to pests. Only wealthy landowners could afford the necessary fertilizers and pesticides.

Alongside the scientific agriculture went large-scale water-management schemes, such as dams and hydroelectric plants that displaced large numbers of people. The Narmada dam scheme in India, for example, threatened 250,000 people with relocation and was the subject of fierce opposition. Women farmers were particularly

vulnerable, as their needs were not recognized. In the case of the Mahaweli Irrigation and Development Project in Sri Lanka, for example, men were given resettlement land as 'heads of households', while women received nothing. As a result, women have to work even harder on the newly irrigated land without gaining any of the benefits (Jayaweera et al. 1994).

Shiva's criticism of 'scientific' agriculture and western development programmes generally is that by projecting themselves on the basis of a universal, rational, value-free, objective knowledge, they displace other belief and knowledge systems that are more ecologically sustainable:

Modern reductionist science, like development, turns out to be a patriarchal project, which has excluded women as experts, and has simultaneously excluded ecological and holistic ways of knowing which understand and respect nature's processes and interconnectedness *as science*. (1989: 14-15; italics in the original)

Like Merchant, Shiva traces this violence back to the destruction of women 'knowers' in the witchcraft purges, and sees it as represented in the elimination of tribal and peasant cultures today. For Shiva, the violence of science is achieved through both epistemological and ontological reductionism. Epistemologically, science fragments knowledge, subjects it to particular rules of evidence and holds only western scientists to be 'knowers'. Ontologically, it sees the natural world as itself fragmented and inert, disconnected from humanity and subject to universalistic mechanical laws: 'Reductionist science is a source of violence against nature and women because it subjugates them and dispossesses them of their full productivity, power and potential' (ibid.: 22). Reductionist science, Shiva argues, violates women, tribal peoples and peasants by designating them non-experts and non-knowers, even within their own lives and experience. It impoverishes the poor and women, even when claiming that they will be the ultimate beneficiaries. Reductionist science commits a violence against nature by destroying its integrity. Ultimately, reductionist science is self-defeating because it does violence to knowledge itself. By claiming universal control of knowledge in the name of western superiority, it achieves a 'monoculture of the mind' (Shiva 1993) which denies alternative ways of knowing.

Shiva sees the process of colonization and the 'White Man's burden' of responsibility for 'development' in the South as a trap for the North as much as for the South. The trap comes from the fact that 'processes of wealth-creation simultaneously create poverty,

processes of knowledge creation simultaneously generate ignorance, and processes for the creation of freedom simultaneously generate unfreedom' (in Mies and Shiva 1993: 264). Decolonization of the South must be accompanied by 'decolonizing' of the North if new forms of knowledge and social structure are to be created.

• Maria Mies, like Shiva, also sees a direct relationship between reductionist science, colonization, patriarchy and capitalism. Mies echoes Plumwood's critique of the idea of mastery as central to western thought. She sees the violence of western science towards nature as representing western man's need to establish himself as separate and 'above' his embodiment:

[I]n order to be able to do violence to Mother Nature and other sister beings on earth, *homo scientificus* had to set himself apart from, or rather above, nature. . . . The modern scientist is the man who presumably creates nature as well as himself out of his brainpower. He is the new god, the culture hero of European civilization. (ibid.: 47)

Echoing Dinnerstein, Mies sees the key to European scientific man as his negation of his 'symbiosis' with nature and with his human mother. It is in this denial of symbiosis that European models of emancipation and liberation have been created. It is not just science that Mies critiques, it is the whole development of western liberalism as well as the basis of capitalism in colonial exploitation. For Mies, all are linked:

Without turning a reciprocal, symbiotic relationship between humans and nature into a one-sided master-and-servant relationship, the bourgeois revolutions would not have been possible. Without turning foreign peoples and their lands into colonies for the White Man, the capitalist economy could not have evolved. Without violently destroying the symbiosis between man and woman, without calling woman mere animal nature, the new man could not have risen as master and lord over nature and women. (ibid.: 47)

Like Plumwood, Mies sees western knowledge as being 'purified of all traces of the fact that we are born of women and that we shall die, that we are carnal, mortal beings'. All embodied ways of knowing are therefore rejected: 'sensuous knowledge, our experience, all feelings and empathy, all power of imagination and intuition' (ibid.).

Sandra Harding has identified three approaches within the feminist critique of science and its masculinist epistemology. The first is feminist empiricism, which tries to correct the failings of masculinist science as 'bad science'. There is no basic problem with the idea of

science, it has just been distorted by the male interests and prejudices that have dominated it. The second is standpoint theory, which aims to produce a successor science based on 'strong objectivity' that is from a contextualizing and positioning of knowledge. The third is a postmodern rejection of the Enlightenment epistemological framework on which the scientific model rests, that there is *a* truth which can be objectively identified (1991). As McLennan has argued, feminist standpoint epistemology stands rather uneasily between feminist empiricism and postmodernism (1995) and Harding herself has hovered uneasily between leaning towards feminist empiricism and postmodernism (Maynard 1994). For Harding:

Knowledge claims are always socially situated, and the failure by dominant groups critically and systematically to interrogate their advantaged social situation and the effect of such advantages on their beliefs leaves their social situation a scientifically and epistemologically damaged one for generating knowledge. (1993: 54)

Clearly, from this statement Harding is expecting 'knowledge', although it is not clear if it is *a* knowledge. The debate on objectivity and science is very much focused around the problems of subjectivity as against objectivity. For ecofeminists, the more critical question is human subjectivity/objectivity in relation to the subjectivity of nature as an object. If humanity is part of an immanent reality, an interconnected whole, then, while epistemological questions are vital for humanity, they do not affect the dynamics of the whole. There is a 'truth' about those relations that is at present beyond hu(man) grasp.

### Gender, nature and knowledge

He says that woman speaks with nature. That she hears voices from under the earth. That wind blows in her ears and trees whisper to her. But for him this dialogue is over. He says he is not part of this world, that he was set on this world as a stranger. He sets himself apart from woman and nature. (Griffin 1978: 1)

I am a woman born and shaped by this civilization, with the mind of this civilization, but with the mind and body of a woman, with human experience. (Griffin 1989: 17)

Griffin here points to three levels of experience, embodiment, humanity and civilization. Her argument is that male domination has

withdrawn not only from embodiment, but from human experience in its widest sense. Civilization has been created over and against nature. Women hang half in and half out of that process as 'insider-outsiders' in Collins's sense, as the 'bridge' between 'man as stranger' and embodied nature. In *Woman and Nature* Griffin is poetically exploring the two voices of 'man as science' and 'woman as nature'. These stand figuratively, although Griffin has been taken as essentializing male/female in this context. The point that she is making is not that women are closer to nature, but that (some aspects) of male-dominated culture and society is further away.

The (eco)feminist critique of science leaves the problem of whether science *per se* is the problem, or the fact that it is a (white, western, bourgeois) male-dominated scientific project. Within feminism, this dilemma is represented by a division between those such as Rose (1994), Keller (1985) and Harding (1993), who are arguing for a successor science, and those who dismiss science as part of the failed foundationalist project of the western Enlightenment (Hekman 1990). The feminist critique of science is left between the Scylla of postmodern 'social relativism' and the Charybdis of Enlightenment 'scientific objectivism'.

Keller's answer is to judge science according to its efficacy against a framework of cognitive, psychosocial, economic, political and technical interests (1992: 90). Her aim is to re-embody and locate science as a socially constrained phenomenon. However, Keller also wants to avoid going the whole way towards social relativism. While science is most certainly not a 'mirror of nature' according to the copy theory, it is also not a cultural artefact. To see science as a purely cultural artefact is to see nature in the same light. This would not be acceptable from an ecofeminist perspective, which sees in the natural world not only a distinct identity, but an identity which embraces humanity. Humanity is inside, not outside nature, immanent not transcendent. This issue has been addressed by Donna Haraway, who describes herself as trying to hang on to both ends of the dichotomy of a 'usable doctrine of objectivity . . . a successor science', and postmodernist accounts of difference. She wants simultaneously to have 'an account of radical historical contingency for all knowledge claims . . . and a no-nonsense commitment to faithful accounts of a "real" world' (1991: 187).

Haraway points out that social constructivism can only go so far. While social relationships may be culturally constructed, to see knowledge in this way destroys the ability to talk about knowledge at all, except as stories: '[T]hose of us who still like to talk about reality

... would like to think our appeals to real worlds are more than... an act of faith like any other cult's' (ibid.: 185). This is even more of a problem when the 'real world' is non-human nature. While postmodern arguments may be persuasive for social reality, physical reality has a concrete existence. Postmodernists like Hekman may argue that all experience of the natural world is interpreted socially and culturally (1990: 142), but this assumes a dead and malleable 'nature' - 'dumb reality', in Foucault's terms. For ecofeminists the natural world is not dumb; it not only has existence, but agency. Humanity may variously interpret and respond to natural phenomena, but cannot ultimately construct them or itself. As Keller argues, the natural world is too complex. From this perspective, postmodernism is as human-centred and arrogant as the Enlightenment science that Merchant condemned.

While ecofeminists would want to challenge the false application of 'natural laws' such as in the attitude of biological science to women (Birke 1986; Sayers 1982), it would not want to deny that the natural world has its own independent processes. For ecofeminists, the natural world is a material force in itself. It is actual and real in its consequences. There is therefore a 'truth' about human-nature relations - the problem is, what epistemological framework would best reveal (or glimpse) it? From an ecofeminist perspective, Haraway points to the mortality and ultimate lack of control that human embodiment represents. The natural world is not just a resource to be exploited or even something that can be interpreted in a positivist or objectivist sense. Humanity cannot 'know' nature. Its active dynamic agency is always beyond our grasp. Haraway sees the natural world as a 'Coyote or Trickster' with an independent sense of humour with whom humanity must learn to converse. Knowledge of the natural world is a 'conversation', not a discovery.

### Conclusion

What ecofeminism would criticize is the transcendent objectivity of male-dominated science that Haraway has called the 'god-trick of seeing everything from nowhere' (1991: 189). She argues for an 'embodied objectivity', which I have called immanent realism. Embedded and embodied human beings, as part of the natural world, will never be able to grasp the whole, but can struggle to gain knowledge about the limits, potentialities and responsibilities that immanence entails. Haraway argues that transcendent objectivity

represents 'a story that loses track of its mediations', it is disembodied, abstract and unlocatable and therefore irresponsible. 'Embodied objectivity', in contrast, represents knowledge that can provide an 'earth-wide network of connections' (ibid.: 187). It is objective because it is knowledge that is locatable and responsible. The possibility of sustained, rational, objective knowledge rests in such an interconnected web of knowledge.

I would agree with Haraway that knowledge as 'vision' was always an element of science and that such a vision needs to be reclaimed. Green versions of science are emerging that take a much more holistic view (Lovelock 1979; Capra 1976). However, for knowledge to be locatable and responsible it also needs to be situated. The case for taking the standpoint of the subjugated is that it is less likely to be irresponsible and unlocatable. If superordination, as I have suggested, is based on transcendence, it is, by definition, a process of detachment. However, taking a standpoint in this way only makes sense if the subordinate and superordinate are structurally and materially related. Standpoints are not just stories or perspectives, they are different aspects of a material relation. It is the material relation that is the object of knowledge, not the particular perspective of particular people. Haraway's conception of bringing together partial perspectives makes no sense unless there is a whole to be grasped. The whole for ecofeminism is the structure of relationships that surround human immanence and 'create' transcendence.

The problem with the radical social constructivist critique of knowledge is that the epistemological problems raised have come to stand for ontological questions about human existence. Consciousness (in the form of symbolic structures) is seen as determining 'being' from bodies to social institutions and practices, such as science. From an ecofeminist perspective, just because hu(man)s have a problem about understanding their environment, it does not mean that it doesn't exist. Postmodernists warn against committing the conceptual fallacy of confusing the representation with the real. However, in avoiding the error of naturalizing the cultural, it is important not to end up committing the reverse error of socializing the natural. I will make the same point in the context of Marxist social constructionism.

'Nature' within western philosophy and science may be a social construction but the natural world has its own agency and dynamic (Soper 1995: 149 f.). As Keller argues, 'the locus of real force in the world [is] physical not mental' (1992: 25). It may be that formal scientific knowledge-gathering systems are not the best way to understand the human interrelationship with nature. A spiritual or

some other body-based intuitive approach may be more appropriate in raising awareness, although more detailed information-gathering would require experiential or (appropriate) scientific knowledge. The critique of masculinist science is not just that it has not disentangled the 'real force' of the physical world from the conceptual and social biases of the dominant groups that scientists represent, but that it has not seen that detachment from nature is central to the Enlightenment view of the world. To the extent that the material position of most women enables this detachment to be made on the part of (some) men and even fewer women, then the power relations surrounding the sex/gender division of labour and women's 'difference' cannot be just another 'story'. I will elaborate upon this in Chapters 7 and 8. In the next chapter I will look at ecofeminism in relation to those who put humanity's relationship with nature at the forefront of their analysis and take the 'real force' of the physical world as a starting point: green theorists and particularly deep ecologists.

## 6

### *Feminism and the Green Movement*

The relationship between feminism and the green movement needs to be discussed in terms of women's involvement in green politics and the place of feminism in green thought. As Seager has shown, women provide much of the grassroots support for environmental campaigning, but fall away when organizations become more formal and bureaucratized (1993: 176 ff.). Women predominate where activism is local and free or low paid. When involvement becomes more demanding in both time and distance and positions are salaried, men begin to take control. Rosemary Teverson has confirmed this process in her British study of the employment structure of groups such as Greenpeace, World Wide Fund for Nature and Friends of the Earth (1991). She found a high level of participation by women in the more junior clerical and administrative posts, but a much reduced proportion in the campaigning, fundraising and senior management posts. The women who did achieve senior posts found themselves under pressure to commit themselves wholeheartedly to the organization and, in particular, not to 'burden' themselves with children. Part of the pressure came from a concern within these organizations not to 'divert' precious funds to pay for maternity leave and other forms of childcare support.

Men also figure strongly in the hagiography of environmental movements – for example, Christopher Manes's history of Earth First! (1990). Although women are well represented in direct action movements, her-story remains to be told. Seager argues that the high profile of men in organizations such as Earth First! both creates and reflects a bias in their campaigning towards issues such as wilderness