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The Role of Gender in Environmental Justice

Nancy C. Unger

Introduction

Many people associate Environmental Justice exclusively with the struggle by minority and low-income populations to achieve equitable treatment and involvement with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies. I am particularly gratified by the efforts of *Environmental Justice* to incorporate a more inclusive definition, as this journal explores the environmental burdens impacting all marginalized populations and communities. I favor this expansive definition because it allows for the possibility that a population that makes up the majority (women), even a racially and economically privileged majority in an economically privileged country (the United States) can nevertheless be marginalized and suffer uniquely from environmental injustices. Moreover, employing such a definition can reveal how such a marginalized and ostensibly powerless group can fight for environmental justice on its own terms—and win.

I am an environmental historian interested in the role that gender has played in environmental justice (and injustice) throughout the history of the United States. Gender matters profoundly in environmental justice history, but understanding of the role it has played is frequently lost in the sea of other influential factors including politics, economics, and the law, and more recently, in the emphasis on race and poverty that dominates so much of the work in the field.

My current book project “Beyond ‘Nature’s Housekeepers’: Gendered Turning Points for American Women in Environmental History” offers an enriched understanding

of the powerful yet underappreciated role of gender in American environmental history overall, as well as in the more specialized study of environmental justice.¹ It answers the question: How and why have men and women, even those of the same race and class, frequently responded so differently to the environment and environmental issues throughout American history? I argue that what people think it means to be a man or a woman (definitions that are socially prescribed and changeable) has played a significant role in their environmental consciousness and actions. Because male roles, values, and actions have dominated American society, they have far more pervasively been the subject of historical study, environmental and otherwise. My work, upon defining gendered differences and tracing their transformations over time, focuses primarily on how gender affected women in their perceptions of, and relationships with, the environment.

I was very pleased to find that two of the feature articles in the premier issue of *Environmental Justice* were devoted specifically to women's activism. In "A Small Group of Thoughtful, Committed Citizens," scholar Joyce M. Barry notes that women make up 90% of the membership in environmental justice groups around the country. My work on gender in environmental history will, I hope, help to explain why women have been so drawn to environmental justice activism. In an effort to highlight the constancy of gender as a factor shaping environmental attitudes and actions, my project begins with pre-Columbian Native Americans, extends as Europeans and Africans transformed the land, and continues through to the present day. The excerpts I present here highlight the actions of women perhaps not immediately associated with the modern Environmental Justice movement: middle-class, primarily white, homemakers.

Evolution of Prescribed Gender Spheres: The Nineteenth Century

By the 1850s nearly a fifth of the national population was living in towns and cities. As the ranks of this more urban group swelled during the early industrialization prior to the Civil War, its lifestyles, particularly gender relationships, came to influence the way virtually all Americans defined "true womanhood," or woman's proper sphere.

The concept refers to an idealized domestic environment of home, upheld by four pillars: piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity. Within this home, women were described as morally and spiritually superior to men, but also innately dependent, affectionate, gentle, nurturing, benevolent and sacrificing, bearing responsibility for inspiring and cultivating purity within all of the home's inhabitants. According to the prescriptive literature of the day, true happiness for these ideal women was found not in selfish pursuits, but in renouncing themselves in favor of total dedication to the service of others.²

Although excluded from the conventional avenues to prestige and power, middle-class women enjoyed a new consciousness and value of themselves as unique contributors to society. A self-contained female world emerged as women found increasing solidarity with each other.³ Ideally, this pure, domestic feminine world was wholly divorced from the tainted masculine world of politics, business, and money. In reality, however, the two worlds intertwined. Women discovered that to carry out their prescribed role, they often had no recourse but to immerse themselves in the world of men.

By 1915 a university bulletin noted, "The woman's place is in the home. But today, would she serve the home, she must go beyond the home. No longer is the home

encompassed by four walls. Many of its important activities lie now involved in the bigger family of the city and the state.”⁴ Such a view encouraged the notion of women as uniquely qualified and obligated to seek environmental justice.

During the progressive era (circa 1890-1917), many middle class female reformers, primarily but not exclusively white, claimed that male domination of business and technology had resulted in a skewed value system.⁵ Profit had replaced morality, they charged, as men focused on financial gain as the sole measurement of success, progress, and right. Men profited, for example, by selling impure food and drugs to an unsuspecting public. In the factories whose profits turned a few individuals into millionaires, men, women, and children toiled long hours for low wages in unsafe conditions, only to go home to urban ghettos rife with poverty, crime, and disease. Precious, non-renewable resources were ripped from the earth with no thought to their conservation, let alone preservation.⁶ In the face of so much gross injustice, environmental and otherwise, women, long prescribed to be the civilizers of men, staged protests and organized reform efforts.

Gender in Progressive-Era Wilderness Preservation and Resource Conservation

According to Lydia Adams-Williams, who promoted herself in 1908 as the first woman lecturer and writer on conservation, “Man has been too busy building railroads, constructing ships, engineering great projects, and exploiting vast commercial enterprises” to consider his environmental impact.⁷ Adams-Williams claimed that it fell to “woman in her power to educate public sentiment to save from rapacious waste and complete exhaustion the resources upon which depend the welfare of the home, the children, and the children’s children.”⁸ Many women agreed that, in the words of

environmental historian Carolyn Merchant, “Man the moneymaker had left it to woman the moneysaver to preserve resources.”⁹ Nature, in other words, had been denied nurture.

The notion of a strict gender divide over the need for wilderness preservation and resource conservation is belied by the number of male leaders in the nascent environmental movements in the early 1900s, with Theodore Roosevelt, Gifford Pinchot, and John Muir topping the list. But men who challenged the traditional male value that it was their economic as well as religious obligation to transform the earth and wrest its resources risked being scorned for such “unmanly” views. Writer George L. Knapp, for example, termed the call for conservation “unadulterated humbug” and the dire prophecies “baseless vaporings.” He preferred to celebrate the fruits of men’s unregulated resource consumption: “The pine woods of Michigan have vanished to make the homes of Kansas; the coal and iron which we have failed—thank Heaven!—to ‘conserve’ have carried meat and wheat to the hungry hives of men and gladdened life with an abundance which no previous age could know.” According to Knapp, men should be praised, not chastened, for turning “forests into villages, mines into ships and skyscrapers, scenery into work.”¹⁰

Historian Adam Rome frames “‘Political Hermaphrodites’: Gender and Environmental Reform in Progressive America,” around a contemporary cartoon rendering wilderness preservation icon John Muir both impotent and feminine. In the drawing, Muir is elaborately clothed in a dress, apron, and flowered bonnet as he fussily (and fruitlessly) attempts to sweep back the waters flooding Hetch Hetchy Valley. Pinchot, who became first chief of the Forestry Service, escaped such denunciations by making it clear that even as a conservationist, he still saw nature as in the service of men.

“Wilderness is waste,” he infamously proclaimed, “Trees are a crop, just like corn.” He dedicated his agency to “the art of producing from the forest whatever it can yield for the service of man.”¹¹ Roosevelt too framed his support for conservation in terms of benefitting human rather than non-human nature. In 1907 he addressed both houses of Congress to gain support for his administration’s effort to “get our people to look ahead and to substitute a planned and orderly development of our resources in place of a haphazard striving for immediate profit.”¹² It is a testament to Roosevelt’s hyper-masculine persona that he could so successfully sew the seeds of conservationism within a male population deeply suspicious of any argument even tinged with sentimentality.¹³

Views like George Knapp’s nevertheless remained common among men, prompting many women to environmental activism. Women, prohibited from voting and shut out from so much of the world of business and power, found an outlet for their energies in environmental activism.¹⁴ This was an arena in which their prescribed gender role as altruistic caregivers was a credential rather than a handicap. Women-only organizations and clubs focusing on environmental education and protection proliferated, even as women also played significant roles in environmental groups open to both sexes, such as the Audubon Society and the Sierra Club.¹⁵

Although male environmentalists were gratified by the moral authority women’s activism brought to conservation and preservation concerns, Adam Rome has traced the resistance to this incursion into the world of masculine authority.¹⁶ Fearing that charges of the sentimentality and emotionalism associated with women would ultimately weaken the cause of environmentalism, men eased or forced women out of positions of authority. Moving beyond the progressive era, women were not only pressured into resigning from

the kind of leadership positions detailed in Rome's study, but into quitting various outdoor activities as well. Women's participation in mountaineering declined sharply in the late 1930s, as did their leadership positions in the Sierra Club and other alpine organizations.¹⁷

Post-war Growthmania: "More is Better"

Despite continued male efforts to minimize female power in formal organizations, even full-time homemakers persisted in seeing environmental issues as part of their rightful sphere and to include environmental activism in their various individual, club, and volunteer activities.¹⁸ The shortage of male labor created by World War II brought women into jobs for which they had previously been declared unfit. In particular, work widely available for the first time in sawmills, in logging camps, and in forest management brought women new environmental insights as well as authority.

The atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 and the threat of nuclear warfare in the Cold War that followed forged a new kind of global environmental consciousness. Within the United States the immediate post-war period also featured stricter and more rigid gender prescriptions as patriarchy, Christianity, and especially the heterosexual nuclear family were prescribed as not only socially desirable, but politically necessary if the nation was to survive--and to triumph over--the communist menace.¹⁹ Men's world of profit, power, and control extended into nature through activities that included developing bigger and more deadly chemical weapons, controlling pests and weeds through poisons, and making the desert bloom by implementing massive water projects throughout the arid west. Woman's proper and natural place was, once again, decidedly not outdoors but within the home, where her role was to see to the health,

happiness, and safety of her husband and children. Yet “home” extended into the local community, where women provided much of the unpaid labor in neighborhood schools and houses of worship. Women around the world also participated in far more political activities, including “Ban the Bomb” campaigns and demonstrations, frequently citing their status as mothers and homemakers as their most compelling credential.²⁰

Some suburban women focused instead on the environmental hazards to which they were uniquely exposed. Homemakers, repeatedly urged to conserve during the war years, were now encouraged to consume the many products that their husbands’ spent their days working to provide. By 1955 half of all American households owned a television, one of the most powerful tools promoting what was later termed derisively “growthmania,” an obsession predicated on the assumption that “more [more goods, more living space, more people, more profits] is better.”

The gendering of consumption of the many newly available and heavily advertised consumer goods aligned suburban women in particular with environmentally harmful practices. New standards of cleanliness and appearance necessitated a range of chemical compounds inside each suburban home, garage, and toolshed. Phosphates routinely found in detergents (as well as disinfectants and deodorants) unbalanced ecosystems by fostering dangerously prolific marine plant growth. Women encouraged to beautify the inside of their homes and keep them in pristine condition routinely used solvent-based paints, primers, and varnishes that emitted volatile organic compounds, contributing to the destruction of the stratospheric ozone layer and playing a significant role in the creation of the greenhouse effect. And the pesticides and herbicides touted as essential to women’s beautifying their homes’ exteriors, especially through the

cultivation of colorful flowerbeds, made their way into the groundwater. The result was serious health problems in humans, including disruption in the endocrine system, cancer, infertility, and mutagenic effects.²¹ A few critics like Elizabeth Dodson Gray began to recognize that rampant consumerism was rapidly depleting natural resources and poisoning the environment, with women uniquely at risk and unwittingly at fault. Gray warned that more chemicals were found in the average modern home than in chemical labs of the past, and that “many homemakers know little about these chemicals and even less about their toxic and polluting effects.”²²

“Powerless” Homemakers: The League Against Nuclear Dangers Beats The Monster

Many organizations of women during the 1970s refused to allow gender-based stereotypes of their ignorance and powerlessness to thwart environmental justice, especially at the local level. As women dominated the leadership and ranks of a variety of community efforts designed to protect the environment, successful environmental grassroots organizations included LAND (League Against Nuclear Dangers), originated by homemakers in 1973 who, without previous activist experience, opposed a proposed nuclear power plant in Rudolph, Wisconsin.²³ These women were white and middle-class, in their thirties or forties; most were raising young children and were not employed outside the home.²⁴ They were, claims one scholar, “naturals” for activist work because their role as the primary caregivers to their children had previously involved them in broad humanistic/nurturing issues, their interactions with other activists were minimally contentious, and their lack of conventional power left them with little to lose.²⁵ Ridiculed for their lack of scientific credentials, LAND members educated themselves about

nuclear hazards. Most significantly, they worked to educate and gain the support of the entire community, not just appeal to those perceived to be in power.²⁶ Accordingly, they did not restrict their activities to producing the tools of traditional male dominated efforts: petitions, reports, graphs and charts. Of the written materials LAND did circulate, many were based on information provided by prize-winning scientist and biostatistician Rosalie Bertell, the Roman Catholic “Rebel Nun” who preferred “not to tackle government and industry herself but ‘to work directly with people [all over the world] and support them with scientific information’” written in clear, lay-person’s terms.²⁷ LAND utilized innovative consciousness-raising techniques that required no specialized knowledge to appreciate. They were inspired, for example, by the wildly successful Burma-Shave advertising campaign, in which some 7,000 sets of verses were posted along highways in forty-five states. A classic Burma-Shave series of signs, with each verse on a separate sign, and the signs spaced over the course of several miles, read:

In School Zones

Take it Slow

Let the Little

Shavers Grow

with the final sign always reading, “Burma Shave.”²⁸ In a LAND version, the signs read:

Nuclear Leaks

Can Cause

Human Freaks

LAND also produced anti-nuclear lyrics to popular songs and staged a highly publicized release of red balloons tagged with postcards describing the various radioactive

substances they represented.²⁹ The balloons' finders, spread across several states, returned the postcards to LAND, vividly demonstrating the traveling range of airborne contaminants. In 1980, the Wisconsin Public Service Commission bowed to widespread opposition, much of it generated by LAND, and canceled plans that had grown to include eight proposed nuclear power plants. "We won, we beat the monster," noted one LAND member, adding that the "sweet victory" was "gratifying for all the small Davids to confront Goliath and come out on top."³⁰ By the time the group formally disbanded in 1988, the world had witnessed events that proved LAND's concerns were well-founded rather than exaggerated: the partial core meltdown at Pennsylvania's Three Mile Island nuclear power station in 1979 and, the Chernobyl accident in the Ukraine in 1986, the worst nuclear accident in history. Many former LAND members became active in state, national, and international groups concerned with nuclear issues.

Conclusion

Even among privileged middle-class Americans, gender plays a powerful but frequently overlooked role in environmental injustice. In the nineteenth century, prescribed gender roles limited most American women's political and economic power. Women used the authority imbued by their prescribed altruism to promote environmental reforms during the Progressive Era. During the second half of the twentieth century prescribed gender roles exposed full time homemakers to certain environmental dangers, but also rendered them uniquely powerful as environmental activists. By embracing a more inclusive definition of environmental justice, the journal *Environmental Justice* invites broader, more encompassing investigations into the causes of—and remedies for—environmental injustice. In providing a forum that features and fosters many disciplines, including

history and gender studies, *Environmental Justice* promotes thoughtful analysis of how densely woven and complex webs of ideologies and actions have impacted the earth—suggesting new avenues of inquiry and new tools that may contribute to possible solutions to longstanding problems.

¹ The author's preliminary publications from which this essay is drawn include "The Two Worlds of Belle La Follette." *Wisconsin Magazine of History* Vol. 83, no. 2, (Winter 1999-2000): 82-110; "Women, Sexuality, and Environmental Justice in American History," *New Perspectives on Environmental Justice: Gender, Sexuality, and Activism*, Rachel Stein, ed., (Rutgers University Press, 2004), 45-60; "Gendered Approaches to Environmental Justice: An Historical Sampling," *Echoes from the Poisoned Well: Global Memories of Environmental Injustice*, Sylvia Washington, ed., (Rowman and Littlefield/Lexington Books, 2006), 17-34; "The Role of Nature in Lesbian Alternative Environments in the United States: From Jook Joints to Sisterspace," *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Biopolitics, and Desire*, Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson, eds., (University of Indiana Press), forthcoming 2009; and "Gender: A Useful Category of Analysis in Environmental History," *Oxford Handbook of Environmental History*, Drew Isenberg, ed., Oxford University Press, forthcoming 2009.

²See Lydia H. Sigourney, "Home," *Whisper to a Bride* 1850, in Mary Beth Norton and Ruth M. Alexander, eds., *Major Problems in American Women's History* 2nd ed., (D.C. Heath and Company, 1996), 109-110.

³Of the scholars who can at least agree on its existence, those who present the "woman's sphere" of the early to mid-nineteenth century as more negative than positive for women

include Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood, 1829-1860," *American Quarterly*, 18 (Summer 1966):151-75, and Mary P. Ryan, "Mothers of Civilization: The Common Woman, 1830-1860," *Womanhood in America*, (New Viewpoints, 1975):137-81.

⁴In Nancy Woloch, *Women in the American Experience* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1984), 299.

⁵ See Elizabeth Blum, "Women, Environmental Rationale, and Activism during the Progressive Era," in Glave and Stoll, eds. *To Love the Wind and the Rain*, (University of Pittsburgh, 2005), 77-92.

⁶Nancy C. Unger, *Fighting Bob La Follette* (University of North Carolina Press, 2000; Wisconsin Historical Society, 2008), 86-7.

⁷ Unger, "Gendered Approaches to Environmental Justice," 86-87.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Merchant, "Women of the Progressive Conservation Movement: 1900-1916," *Environmental Review* 8, no. 1 (Spring 1984): 65.

¹⁰ "George L. Knapp Opposed Conservation," in Merchant, ed., *Major Problems in American Environmental History*, 2nd ed. (D.C. Heath, 2006), 322.

¹¹ See Robert V. Hine and John Mack Faragher, *Frontiers: A Short History of the American West* (Yale University Press, 2000), 176-90.

¹² "President Theodore Roosevelt's Conservation Message, 1907," in Leon Fink, ed., *Major Problems in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 2nd ed, (Houghton Mifflin, 2001), 413.

¹³ See Sarah Watts, *Rough Rider in the White House: Theodore Roosevelt and the Politics of Desire*, (University of Chicago Press, 2003).

¹⁴ See Suellen Hoy, “‘Municipal Housekeeping’: The Role of Women in Improving Urban Sanitation Practices, 1880-1917,” in Martin Melosi, ed., *Pollution and Reform in American Cities, 1870-1930* (University of Texas Press, 1980), 173-98; Maureen A. Flanagan, “The City Profitable, The City Livable: Environmental Policy, Gender, and Power in Chicago in the 1910s,” *Journal of Urban History* 22 (January 1996): 163-90; Merchant, “Women of the Progressive Conservation Movement, 1900-1916,” 55-85.

¹⁵ See Linda C. Forbes and John M. Jermier, “The Institutionalization of Bird Protection: Mabel Osgood Wright and the Early Audubon Movement,” *Organization & Environment* 15 (December 2002): 458–474; Kathy S. Mason, “Out of Fashion: Harriet Hemenway and the Audubon Society, 1896-1905,” *Historian* 65 (Fall 2002): 1-14; Jennifer Price, “Hats Off to Audubon,” *Audubon* 106 (November-December 2004): 44-50; Polly Welts Kaufman, *National Parks and the Woman's Voice: A History* (University of New Mexico Press, 1996, 2006).

¹⁶ Adam Rome, “‘Political Hermaphrodites’: Gender and Environmental Reform in Progressive America,” *Environmental History* 11 (July 2006): 440-63.

¹⁷ See Susan R. Schrepfer *Nature's Altars: Mountains, Gender, and American Environmentalism*, (University Press of Kansas, 2005).

¹⁸ See for example, Nancy C. Unger, “The We Say What We Think Club,” *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 90, no. 1 (Autumn 2006): 16-27.

¹⁹ See Elaine May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (Basic Books, 1988).

²⁰ See Adam Rome, “‘Give Earth a Chance’: The Environmental Movement and the Sixties,” *Journal of American History* 90, no. 2 (2003): 525-54.

²¹ See Nancy Langston, “Gender Transformed: Endocrine Disruptors in the Environment,” in Virginia J. Scharff, ed., *Seeing Nature Through Gender* (University of Kansas Press, 2003), 129-66.

²² Donna Warnock, pamphlet “What Growthmania Does to Women and the Environment,” circa 1985, Syracuse: Feminist Resources on Energy and Ecology, Box 14, File 6, Atlanta Feminist Lesbian Alliance (ALFA), Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Duke University.

²³ See Virginia Kemp Fish, “We Stopped the Monster: LAND in Retrospect,” 1994, in LAND, Box 1-folder 1, Wisconsin Historical Society (WHS).

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 5. Virginia Kemp Fish, “Widening the Spectrum,” *Sociological Imagination*, 31 no. 2, (1994): 106.

²⁶ Gertrude Dixon, “How We Have Organized and Acted,” in Jack Miller, *A Primer on Nuclear Power* (Anvil Press, 1981), 44.

²⁷ Elaine Carey, “Honors Piling up for the Rebel Nun,” 25 Jan. 1987, *Toronto Star* in LAND, 1-4, WHS. See also Phil Mader and Judi Cumming, “Environmental Activism: The Case of Rosalie Bertell,” *Archivist: Magazine of the National Archives of Canada* 116 (1998): 20-29.

²⁸ Another typical series read, “Brother Speeders/Let’s Rehearse/All Together/‘Good Morning, Nurse.’” Curtis Kant, “Warning Signs,” *Reminisce* (May/June 2006): 66.

²⁹ Lyrics in LAND 3-17, postcards LAND 1-2, WHS.

³⁰ Fish, “Spectrum,” 106.

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