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Gendered Approaches to Environmental Justice
An Historical Sampling

Nancy C. Unger

While race and class are regularly addressed in environmental justice studies, scant attention has been paid to gender. The environmental justice movement formally recognized in the 1980s in no way, however, marks the beginning of the central role played by women in the long history of its concerns. Abuses based in gender as well as race and class have subjected women to a variety of environmental injustices. However, women’s responses to the ever-shifting responsibilities prescribed to their gender, as well as to their particular race and class, have consistently shaped their abilities to affect the environment in positive ways. Especially they have used their unique strengths and experiences based on their gendered identities (frequently but not always maternal) to the benefit of themselves and oppressed others. Through a sampling of women’s contributions, the relationships among gender, race, class, and environmental justice activism prove to be not just occasionally and peripherally a part of recent American history, but rather a varied yet pervasive force from the pre-Columbian period to the present.

PRE-COLUMBIAN NATIVE AMERICAN WOMEN: AGRICULTURAL PRACTICES AND POPULATION CONTROL

To generalize about the role of gender in pre-Columbian America is a dangerous business, as gender relations were highly variable. For example, the
hierarchy of tribes in many places was determined less by gender and more by age and lineage. Some tribes were matrilineal. In others, women served as advisers and sometimes as leaders, as shamans, and as warriors. Gendered divisions of labor were also rarely rigid. Men, however, frequently manipulated the environment by burning, hunting, and fishing. In areas where tribes practiced agriculture, women were usually the primary distributors of the corn, beans, squash, and pumpkins they planted, weeded, and harvested. In Southeastern New England, for example, from about 1000 A.D. to the time of European settlement, the corn alone produced by women provided about 65% of their tribes’ caloric input. Native American women, unlike the Europeans to come, were not planting their corn in neatly plowed rows bereft of all other vegetation. In New England they instead planted each hill with four grains of maize (corn) and two of pole beans that would twine around them. Between the hills they grew squash and pumpkins so that as their vines grew and spread, they would smother the soil from late growing weeds. By not leaving the soil totally exposed, they shielded it from excessive sun and rain and cut down drastically on the amount of weeding that subsequent European farming methods would necessitate.

Even those soils cultivated under Native women’s methods ultimately tired and crop yields lessened. Indian peoples then moved onto new, untilled soils. Early European colonists, stunned at this flagrant “waste,” urged the fertilization of the land already under cultivation, especially since it could be done with relative ease due to the abundance of local fish. Indians, in view of the small numbers of their people combined with the seemingly endless amount of easily accessible untilled land, rejected this solution as absurdly labor intensive. These contrasting approaches to the problem of soil depletion highlight the two cultures’ dramatically different land values, ultimately based on issues of population.

Indians did not live in total harmony with nature. Like all living beings, they were by no means exempt from changing, in permanent and meaningful ways, the environment in which they lived. An important, gender-based factor, however, distinguishes the Indians’ treatment of resources from the patterns subsequently established by Europeans. What allowed Indians to live in North America in sustainable ways for centuries was not that they were careful to conserve and use wisely every resource: plant, animal, soil, or water. If Indians did, in the occasional extreme case, hunt one species into local extinction, plenty of others remained. Their lifestyle continued to be sustainable, even as its individual elements changed over time. The key to their ability to carry out what William Cronon calls “living richly by wanting little,” was that they controlled their numbers, so that this “rich” lifestyle remained sustainable and could be enjoyed equally by all, the ultimate goal of the modern environmental justice movement. Native American wom-
en's greatest environmental impact came not through their gathering, irrigation projects, horticulture, fishing, herding, or preservation of foods. Instead, their greatest single impact came through their nearly universal practice of prolonged lactation.

Breastfeeding was very common for a child's first three years, but among some tribes the practice lasted for four years and sometimes even longer. Certainly breast feeding in the first two years had enormous practical benefits, primarily convenience and mobility. It was also valued because it brought decreased fertility. Because Native Americans actively sought to control their populations, breastfeeding was routinely extended past the period where children could easily thrive on solid foods, and frequently more than twice as long as in Europe. Along with prolonged lactation, Native American women, like their European counterparts, also practiced infanticide and abortion. To guarantee population control, breastfeeding was sometimes combined, as in the case of the Huron and California's Ohlones, with sexual abstinence, a practice also utilized by many indigenous peoples worldwide, including those who lived along the Amazon and within Africa's Congo basin. By carefully controlling their populations, keeping them below their "carrying capacity," Indian women made a crucial contribution to their peoples' ability to live easily sustainable lifestyles. Their populations were also periodically checked by factors including wars, droughts, and floods. In addition they endured "lean" winters, during which the sometimes intentionally limited stores of food ensured that the weakest were winnowed out. But these latter factors alone cannot account for the remarkably stable (although larger than previously believed) numbers of Indians estimated to have populated what is now the United States.

If prevailing gender relations had prohibited Indian women from employing measures of population control, some populations would have grown unchecked, compromising Indians' ability to move on to fresh lands for farming or hunting when the old ones had been depleted. The area where a "controlled" burn had flamed out of control could not have simply been abandoned in the confidence that fresh and fertile lands were readily available nearby. The species hunted into local extinction would not have been a provincial problem, but a widespread catastrophe. Native American women's active and welcome role in limiting their people's population reflects Indian perceptions of partnership with, rather than stewardship over, the land. It also reflects Indian gender relations, in that women shared more of a sense of control and partnership with their men than did their European counterparts. In addition, the role of Native American women in controlling their reproduction highlights the crucial and far too frequently overlooked role that population density plays in environmental justice issues.
ENSLAVED WOMEN: LIMITING POPULATION, 
FORCING EXPANSION OF LAND CULTIVATION

Europeans brought dramatic changes to the relationship between Native Americans and the environment, changes frequently facilitated by the people they brought with them as forced labor. The enslaved used their environmental knowledge to subtly undermine the institution that bound them. Plantation books kept by slave owners note the different field work expectations and/or performances based on sex. Because most slave owners shared the gendered perception that all men were smarter, more easily trained, and better workers than women, enslaved men were granted the majority of available skilled work. Like the more elite enslaved men, enslaved women also served as house servants, but an additional variety of jobs remained almost exclusively within the male domain: stable worker, blacksmith, driver, horse breaker, cooper, carpenter, etc. In the nineteenth century a disproportionate number of women (almost 90 percent) worked in the field, regularly outnumbering the men.

Women’s reproductive cycles proved a particular challenge as owners balanced their demands for strenuous labor from female slaves with the recognition that such labors could prohibit crucial human reproduction. Slave miscarriages “should never be the case on a well organized plantation,” wrote Haller Nutt, of Araby Plantation in Louisiana, and were a sign that “there is something wrong—[the female slave] has been badly managed and worked improperly.” To avoid miscarriage, “women in the family way should avoid ploughing—and such heavy work as fit only for men.” In his “Rules for the Plantation,” published in a South Carolina newspaper, John Billiller noted that “Sucking and pregnant women must be indulged as circumstances will allow.” While women who successfully birthed babies on Nutt’s plantation were rewarded with exemption from field work for a month, women who miscarried received an even longer dispensation and were to be “nursed more carefully” to ensure successful subsequent pregnancies.

Slaves manipulated plantation policies concerning reproduction for their own purposes. Methods used previously to control local homeland populations to their own benefit were adapted in their new situations as forms of resistance to slavery. The demands of forced field labor precluded most enslaved women’s ability to breastfeed with sufficient frequency to suppress ovulation. Instead, they limited reproduction by using the environmental knowledge brought from Africa and the Caribbean concerning the abortifacient qualities of a number of medicinal plants also available in North America (especially cotton root). Such practices not only reduced their masters’ supplies of new generations of forced laborers, but also served as a kind of strike, since reproduction was considered an important enslaved women’s role, contributing to higher prices for women considered to be promising “breeders.” Enslaved women risked great harm when they intentionally terminated their
own pregnancies. One owner advised, if "the woman is to blame herself [she] should be severely punished for it when she gets well." 18

In the words of historian Judith Carney, "subordinated peoples used their own knowledge systems of the environments they settled to reshape the terms of their domination." 19 While slave owners may have considered the fieldwork carried out by women to be unskilled labor left to them by default, they nevertheless benefited from the gendered expertise of female field hands. Women’s agricultural expertise in rice, indigo, corn, and cotton production stemmed back to specialized knowledge and hand tool experience garnered in their native lands. 20 All field workers were, of course, subject to the will of the master. Within the cabins of the enslaved, however, women were highly valued and generally enjoyed greater gender equity than did white women. 21 Agricultural experience and wisdom combined with this sense of themselves as valued persons empowered enslaved women. Limiting their masters’ supplies of new slaves was only one of the many forms of passive resistance to white tyranny. Of particular interest is the passive refusal of field workers to fertilize increasingly depleted cotton fields or to terrace untilled hillsides. While field workers, disproportionately women, did not refuse outright to increase their masters’ crop yields, the expensive tools required were ill used, forever breaking or disappearing mysteriously. Costly fertilizers were applied improperly. So widespread were these actions that slave owners preferred to view them as further proof of their slaves’ laziness and stupidity rather than as calculated forms of resistance, and quickly abandoned terracing and fertilizing efforts. 22 As the soils became exhausted and cotton yields shrank, expansion onto fresh lands became imperative if King Cotton was to thrive, or even to survive.

Prior to the Civil War, many northerners, including Abraham Lincoln, professed not to oppose slavery where it existed, but wished “only” to prevent its spread. To cotton-growing southern whites, the crucial issue of soil depletion meant that to prevent the spread of slavery was to ultimately bring about its demise. The actions of field workers, disproportionately female, hastened the necessity for the geographic expansion of slavery. A series of political compromises opened some new territories to the institution, delaying but ultimately not preventing the day of reckoning: the Civil War. In other words, enslaved women’s environmental knowledge empowered them to indirectly play a role in facilitating their own freedom.

MIDDLE CLASS WOMEN: NINETEENTH-CENTURY FOUNDATIONS FOR ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

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, their lifestyles, particularly their gender relationships, came to influence the way virtually all Americans defined “true womanhood,” or woman’s proper sphere. Although the prescribed woman’s sphere in many ways circumscribed their involvement to activities inside the home, it nonetheless ultimately encouraged the notion of free white women as uniquely qualified and obligated to seek environmental justice.

The concept of woman’s proper sphere refers to an idealized domestic environment of home, upheld by four pillars: piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. Within this home, women were described as innately dependent, affectionate, gentle, nurturing, benevolent, and sacrificing. Morally and spiritually superior to men, women (mothers, ideally) within this sphere maintained a high level of purity in all things, and bore the complete 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.

Although this concept of true womanhood tied women more closely to their pre-industrial daily routines, it delivered to them a greater, more powerful, and often autonomous role within their own homes, as middle-class men were increasingly tied to the more public world of politics, power, business, professions, and money. This change for women was limited primarily to the urban middle class, yet its impact ultimately spread across geographic, class, and even racial lines. Countless books, magazines, pamphlets, speeches, and sermons held up the middle-class home as an example for families of virtually all classes, ethnicities, and income levels: a soothing retreat from the fast-paced, secular, cold, and crass commercialism of modern life, a haven in a heartless world made possible by the endless domestic and cultural pursuits of the woman at its center.

The women who internalized the values of the “sphere” found themselves on the horns of a dilemma. Ideally, their pure, domestic feminine world was wholly divorced from the tainted masculine public world. In reality, however, the two worlds intertwined. Women discovered that to protect their sole basis of power, they often had to immerse themselves in the world of men. The course from domestic to public life was long and often convoluted, but it was a journey many women felt they had no choice but to undertake. By 1915 a progressive noted in a university bulletin, “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.”

During the Progressive era (circa 1890–1917), many middle-class female reformers, primarily but not exclusively white, claimed that male domina-
tion of business and technology had resulted in a skewed value system. 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, workers toiled long hours for low wages in unsafe conditions, only to go home to urban ghettos rife with poverty, crime, and disease. Precious, nonrenewable resources were ripped from the earth with no thought to their conservation, let alone preservation. 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. The nature of their proposed solutions, including resource conservation and wilderness preservation, reveal new insights into the power of gender in early industrialized society. An appreciation of that power will enrich examinations of other reform movements as well, as one women’s resource preservation program, and its contributions to environmental justice, illustrates.

**GENDER AND ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY**

Mrs. Robert Burdette of Pasadena served as the first president of the women’s California Club, established in 1900 in the wake of the state’s first and abortive women’s suffrage campaign. Burdette spoke plainly of the gendered divide across the nation on issues of natural resource conservation: “While the women of New Jersey are saving the Palisades of the Hudson from utter destruction by men to whose greedy souls Mount Sinai is only a stone quarry . . . the word comes to women of California that men whose souls are gang-saws are mediating the turning of our world-famous Sequoias into planks and fencing worth so many dollars.”

By 1910 there were hundreds of women’s conservation clubs with a combined national membership, according to activist Lydia Adams-Williams, of one million. Most male conservationists were happy to exploit to the fullest the prescribed notion that women were, unlike greedy materialist men, motivated purely by good, by the desire to uplift and improve society. In particular, women were presented as the guardians of natural resources that needed to be protected for the enjoyment of all rather than sacrificed for the enrichment of the powerful few. In 1910, Congressman Joseph Ransdell, chair of the National Rivers and Harbors Committee, identified himself as “a representative of the men who need and wish the help of women,” declaring, “We know that nothing great or good in this world ever existed without the women.”

Women, however, especially the very class of women who were joining
reform groups and clubs, appeared in some cases to be contributing more to resource depletion than preservation. After the lull in high fashion during the Civil War, new and elaborate styles in clothing and accessories erupted on the fashion scene. Women’s hats featured lavish displays of feathers. “The extremely softening effect,” proclaimed one fashion magazine, “is ever desirable, especially for ladies no longer young.”

Sometimes the entire bird was reconstructed, making it appear as if the wearer had a living bird, often roosting in an artificial nest, perched on her head. Other times only select feathers were plucked, sparing the life of the bird, but only temporarily. Frequently these harvests rendered the birds flightless, guaranteeing a quick kill for the nearest predator.

By 1910, the activities of the Audubon Society (begun by Boston socialite Harriet Lawrence Hemenway in 1896 in response to the slaughter of the Florida heron) were augmented by those of the two hundred and fifty women’s clubs active nationwide specifically in bird and plant protection. Marion Crocker, who strove to alert club women to the dangers of soil erosion, took up the campaign to dissuade women from wearing feathers in their hats.

With strip mining destroying the landscape and children dying in the mines of black lung disease, ladies focusing their conservation efforts on birds’ feathers seems trivial at first glance, and appears related only to bird protection rather than human-centered environmental justice. The significance of the save-the-birds campaign is revealed when placed in historical context: there had been an estimated nine billion passenger pigeons in the United States prior to European colonization—more than twice the number of all birds in the country in the modern day. Passenger pigeons were hunted for sport as well as for pig feed. The last of the species died in captivity in 1914, within weeks of the Carolina parakeet, which had been hunted into extinction for its striking plumage. It has been conservatively estimated that in the late nineteenth century, five million birds a year were killed throughout the world for their feathers. Resistance to further extermination of birds, Crocker insisted, was vital to the preservation of the human race. During this period before the widespread use of insecticides, birds provided virtually the only check on the insect population that threatened crops prior to harvest.

 Warned Crocker, “If we do not follow the most scientific approved methods, the most modern discoveries of how to conserve and propagate and renew wherever possible those resources which Nature in her providence has given to man for his use but not abuse, the time will come when the world will not be able to support life and then we shall have no need of conservation of health, strength, or vital force, because we must have the things to support life or else everything else is useless.”

Men could not be trusted to carry out the crucial task of saving the birds, and, ultimately, humanity, asserted Lydia Adams-Williams, who promoted herself in 1908 as the first woman lecturer and writer on conservation.
According to Adams-Williams, "Man has been too busy building railroads, constructing ships, engineering great projects, and exploiting vast commercial enterprises" to consider the future.36 Speeches on the floor of the U.S. Senate gave fuel to such charges, including Missouri's James A. Reed's response to a 1913 bill introduced to protect migratory birds: "Why should there be any sympathy or sentiment about a long-legged, long-beaked, long-necked bird that lives in swamps and eats tadpoles. . . . Let humanity utilize this bird for the only purpose that the Lord made it for . . . so we could get aigrettes for the bonnet[s] of our beautiful ladies."37 To the horror of those who saw clearly the crucial role that the pest control provided by wild birds played in national and international economies and ecosystems, Reed dismissed the protection of birds as trivial, born out of "an overstrained, not to say maudlin sympathy for birds born and reared thousands of miles from our coast."38 Such widespread anthropocentric and nationalistic views left many women believing that, in the words of environmental historian Carolyn Merchant, "Man the moneymaker had left it to woman the moneysaver to preserve resources."39 According to Adams-Williams, 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."40

Crocker and her fellow reformers sought legislation protecting the birds, but took more immediate action as well. When the powerful millinery industry deflected their criticisms, proclaiming itself merely acceding to the demands of women, Crocker and her colleagues focused on educating the female hat-buying public. Some of their pleas were designed to appeal to maternalism. Aigrettes, for example, were "harvested" during the breeding season, when the feathers were at the height of their beauty, leaving the parents dead and the young to die of starvation. "Remember, ladies," urged a California Federation of Women's Clubs newsletter, "that every aigrette in your hat costs the life of a tender mother."41 Crocker herself chose not to play the maternal card directly. She stressed the necessity of birds in interrelated plant and animal kingdoms, reminding her listeners of the crucial roles birds played in agriculture and pest control. "This is not sentiment," she stated flatly, "It is pure economics."42

The response to Crocker's pleas for women specifically to take action, combined with the campaigns of other various women conservationists, ultimately resulted in a variety of successes, indicated by the plea from a Colorado legislator to the president of the General Federation of Women's Clubs: "Call off your women. I'll vote for your bill."43 In October of 1913, a new Tariff Act outlawed the import of wild bird feathers into the United States, and in 1916 Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes ruled that wild birds "are not in the possession of anyone and possession is the beginning of ownership."44 Women continued to wear hats, but milliners throughout
the United States and Europe bowed to the legal and societal pressures to dramatically reduce their dependence on feathers as primary decoration, the exception being peacock feathers, which are shed naturally. Thus, prior to achieving suffrage, by basing their arguments primarily within their sphere of home and family, women were able to wield legislative influence, and, by preserving millions of birds, protect complex and vital environmental relationships from ruin by a powerful American industry.

ECOFEMINISM CHALLENGES THE POSTWAR PATRIARCHAL RESURGENCE

Following the triumph of women’s suffrage, patriarchal traditions did not disappear from the American scene. Nonetheless, the upheavals caused by two world wars and the intervening depression forced perpetual challenges to the traditional gender stereotypes and prescribed spheres. With the Cold War, however, came new, stricter and more rigid prescriptions. The perception of communism as a powerful threat to American freedoms and ways of life produced a pervasive fear. 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. The ideal American family, glorified as the greatest bulwark against communism, featured a husband and father who produced the family’s single income, leaving a wife whose sole occupation was caring for her family, especially serving her husband and raising good patriotic Americans.

With her publication of *Silent Spring* in 1962, pioneer ecofeminist Rachel Carson challenged male notions of power and progress, specifically the governmental fathers’ attitudes toward industrial waste as well as their vast reliance upon pesticides, especially DDT. One woman’s praise for Carson denounced the highly touted postwar notion that “Father Knows Best” (the title of one of the era’s many popular TV shows in which a happy, nuclear family is shepherded through life’s little hazards by a wise and benevolent patriarch): “‘Papa’ does not always know best. In this instance it seems that ‘papa’ is taking an arbitrary stand, and we, the people are just supposed to take it, and count the dead animals and birds.” Despite her many male critics in the scientific community who dismissed her as overly sentimental, if not hysterical, Carson’s radical critique of the country’s dependence on chemical pesticides has come to be widely recognized as one of the most influential books of the twentieth century. Through her rejection of prevailing gender stereotypes of female subservience to male wisdom, Carson has been credited with making the public aware of attempts by the scientific-industrial complex to manipulate and control nature to the ultimate detri-
ment of all, thereby inspiring the environmental justice and ecofeminist movements of subsequent decades.\(^{47}\)

What is ecofeminism? The answer depends on which ecofeminist is asked.\(^{48}\) Some argue that women are better qualified to understand and therefore right environmental wrongs. In most parts of the world, because of gender relations, women are the ones who are “closest to the earth,” the ones who gather the food and prepare it, who haul the water and search for the fuel with which to heat it. Everywhere they are the ones who bear the children, or in highly toxic areas, suffer the miscarriages and stillbirths or raise damaged children. Because, as one Brazilian woman puts it (echoing the sentiments of American Lydia Adams-Williams expressed nearly a century earlier), by dedicating themselves to the pursuit of immediate profit, “Men have separated themselves from the ecosystem,” it falls to women to fight for environmental justice and to save the earth.\(^{49}\) Within the United States, a variety of mutually exclusive forms of ecofeminism rival for dominance. One branch emphasizes the power of goddess mythology and argues that women, especially as mothers, are the natural guardians of “Mother Earth.” Their horrified rivals counter that these kinds of claims perpetuate old gendered stereotypes. They argue that women and nature are mutually associated and devalued in western culture and that it is because of this tradition of oppression that women are better qualified than men to understand and empathize with the earth’s plight, and to more fairly distribute its resources. These ecofeminists see the anthropocentrism that is so damaging to the earth as just one strand in a web of unjust “isms” including ageism, sexism, and racism, that must be destroyed in order to achieve a truly just world.

**“POWERLESS” HOMEMAKERS IN THE MIDWEST ATTACK WAR AND THE GLOBAL ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION CAUSED BY RAMPANT MATERIALISM**

In the autumn of 1971 about a dozen Wisconsin homemakers began a unique effort to remake American culture: “Women for a Peaceful Christmas” (WPC). The founders had previously worked in various political campaigns, but they found that altruistic letters by women who were perceived as “just housewives” yielded no results. They were inspired by the nationwide Women’s Boycott for Peace held in June of that year, organized by women in Ann Arbor, Michigan.\(^{50}\) Citing Gallup poll figures reflecting that 78 percent of American women wanted the United States out of Vietnam by the end of the year, these women decided to “speak in a language all men can understand: refuse to support a wartime economy.”\(^{51}\) “Money talks,” noted one of the WPC founders. “This is our non-violent form of pressure.” Added another,
“We do not want to support the economy which is killing our sons.”52 Members of WPC wanted more than “just” peace. They sought a “reordering of national and personal priorities,” beginning with a turning away from the waste and conspicuous consumption that had come to characterize the United States, especially during Christmas and Hanukkah.53 Their goal was not a holiday boycott, but rather they offered alternatives designed to make celebrations “more meaningful, less commercial, less wasteful, and more peaceful,” with suggestions ranging from gift ideas (including handicrafts, environmentally friendly canvas shopping bags, and organic cleaning products), to alternatives to energy-consuming Christmas lights. “If you don’t want your Christmas celebrations to be controlled by the monoliths that corrupt governments and pollute environments,” WPC urged women, the sex that did the vast bulk of holiday shopping, “take matters into your own hands. Don’t buy the pre-packaged, disposable Christmas! Make your own.”54

Under the slogan “No More Shopping Days Til Peace,” WPC organized ostensibly powerless homemakers into a “quiet revolt against ‘an economy which thrives on war and the destruction of our earth’s resources.’” Its members entertained “no illusions of making much of a dent in an economy that encourages over consumption,” and yet their message rapidly spread nationwide (aided by press coverage ranging from church bulletins to national publications including the Christian Science Monitor and Newsday, as well as support from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People). They celebrated women’s ability to “however infinitesimally, slow down the breakneck speed of American consumerism” and preserve precious natural resources for all.55

As the war in Vietnam came to a close, the focus of WPC shifted increasingly to environmental issues. Mindful of worldwide food and energy shortages and of pollution and economic uncertainty, its members campaigned especially against waste.56 When asked by a disapproving reporter during the group’s fourth year of operation if their goal was to undermine “The American Way of Life,” founder Jan Cheney responded, “I hope so. We have to rethink the way we live. I can’t believe we’re so dependent on [useless, manufactured] ‘things’ that we can’t learn to make useful things, instead of what Madison Avenue tells us what we want.”57 WPC denounced traditionally commercial Christmas celebrations as “wasteful of the earth’s energy and resources, and encourag[ing of] a thing centered, rather than a people-centered way of life.”58 Simplified, environmentally friendly alternatives allowed individuals “to decide what’s really important in life and what just gets in the way.”59

Gendered aspects of WPC’s crusade have been carried into the new millennium. Bitch Magazine: Feminist Response to Pop Culture regularly urges its readers to recognize and resist the oppression of women, including media
insistence that women find power, joy, and fulfillment while bonding with each other in an endless round of spending sprees on non-essential goods.

In the 2003 "Bitch Holiday Gift Guide," Bitch cofounder Lisa Jervis alerted readers to Buy Nothing Day, a project of Adbusters Media Foundation, and urged consideration of the global ecologic and economic repercussions of women's consumption that is "most fevered" during the winter holiday season, including the perpetuation of sweatshop labor and waste of natural resources. Noting that the wealthiest 20 percent consume 80 percent of the world's resources, the Buy Nothing Day campaign offers a variety of alternatives to rampant materialism, promoting a "shopping-frenzy-free" holiday season.

Women For a Peaceful Christmas was just one of many organizations of women during the 1970s that was refusing to allow gender-based stereotypes of their 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. These women were white and middle class, in their thirties or forties; most were raising young children and were not employed outside the home. 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. 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. Accordingly, they did not restrict their activities to producing the tools of traditional male dominated efforts: petitions, reports, graphs, and charts. LAND utilized innovative consciousness-raising techniques that required no specialized knowledge to appreciate, including placing Burma Shave–style protest signs along roadways, writing anti-nuclear lyrics to popular songs, and staging a highly publicized release of red balloons tagged with postcards describing the various radioactive substances they represented. The balloons' finders, spread across several states, returned the postcards to LAND, vividly demonstrating the traveling range of airborne contaminants. 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, layperson's terms. In 1980,
the Wisconsin Public Service Commission bowed to widespread opposition, much of it generated by LAND, and canceled plans for all eight proposed nuclear power plants. When LAND disbanded in 1983, many of its members became active in groups concerned with nuclear issues on the state, national, and international level.  

MODERN CAMPAIGNS FOR ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE BY WOMEN OF COLOR

Members of WPC and LAND suffered the effects of lingering gendered stereotypes but, by virtue of their class and color, enjoyed many privileges not shared by women activists of color, especially those in economically depressed communities. Beginning in the 1950s, mining companies, in a series of actions later denounced as "Plundering the Powerless," aggressively gutted lands held by Chicanos and especially by Native Americans for nuclear fuel. Native American women established the national organization Women of All Red Nations (WARN) in 1978 to strengthen themselves and their families in the face of ongoing attacks on Indian culture, health, and lands. In 1980, WARN drew attention to the fantastically high increase in miscarriages, birth defects, and deaths due to cancer on Indian reservations in areas of ongoing intense energy development (especially uranium mining) including Nebraska, the Southwest, and western South Dakota. WARN's emphasis on the drastic increase in childhood cancers of the reproductive organs (at least fifteen times the national average) made the demands for action by mothers particularly compelling. Sister Rosalie Bertell’s observations on genetic defects and environmental health hazards on the extensively mined areas were quoted throughout this campaign. But the involvement of many WARN members was motivated by a variety of factors in addition to maternal concerns, including property rights and values based in gendered traditions. Among the Navajo, for example, land often belonged to the women, since it could be passed down from father to daughter, uncle to niece. In addition, many men had died as a result of their work as miners (the risk of lung cancer increased by a factor of at least eighty-five), leaving their widows to band together seeking compensation. WARN also worked to inform Native American women of their rights to resist an aggressive government-funded mass sterilization program WARN termed genocidal. At a WARN sovereignty workshop Indian women were told they "must lead." Activists urged them, "Control your own reproduction: not only just the control of the reproduction of yourselves . . . but control of the reproduction of your own food supplies, your own food systems" to rebuild traditional native cultures and ways of living with the earth.

Women of color perpetually bring unique perspectives to ongoing issues concerning their environments. Toxic waste facilities, chemical emissions,
and health risks from air pollution disparately affect communities of color. In the modern environmental justice movement African American women in particular, frequently the heads of single-parent households, bring a legacy of assertiveness, leadership, and maternal concerns. They play a prominent role in a number of community organizations, waging campaigns against environmental dangers in the workplace and the home, especially in areas known as “brown fields” because of their toxicity. Latinas too emphasize their dual role as mothers and workers in combating environmental hazards. In California, for example, they continue to build on a long legacy of struggle led by the United Farm Workers against various pesticides, particularly those affecting reproduction. Aided by activist organization Communities for a Better Environment, Latinas also played a significant role in forcing the government to remove La Montana, the mountain of concrete rubble created by the freeway collapses during 1994 Northridge earthquake, that was dumped in their community.

**CONCLUSION**

Women’s perspectives on their environments, and their contributions to environmental protection, have changed dramatically across time and space, especially as affected by class, race, and responses to prescribed gender roles. As a result, American history presents innumerable examples of women’s activism—in a myriad of forms—and its contributions to environmental justice.

**NOTES**

Early versions of portions of the material in this essay concerning sexuality appear in “Women, Sexuality, and Environmental Justice in American History,” *New Perspectives in Environmental Justice: Gender, Sexuality, and Activism*, Rachel Stein, ed., (New York: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 45–60. A Mary Lily Grant funded research at the Sallie Bingham Center for Women’s History and Culture at Duke University. Additional research support was provided by an Arthur Vining Davis Grant from Santa Clara University. Mary Whisner generously provided editing expertise.


3. See Morrill Marsten to Jedediah Morse, November 1820, Thomas Forsyth
5. See Ibid., 91–108.
15. A.B. [John Billiller], “Rules for the Plantation,” Sumterville, South Carolina news clipping, 3 Nov. 1847, McDonald Furman Papers, Special Collections Library, Duke University.
23. See Lydia H. Sigourney, “Home,” *Whisper to a Bride* 1850, in Mary Beth Nor-
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36. Ibid., 65.


40. Ibid.

41. Ibid., 72.


43. Ibid., 68.

44. Ibid.


50. See “Women Plan Boycott for Peace on June 21,” Des Moines Register 3 June 1971, p. 11, folder 8, Women for a Peaceful Christmas (WPC), WHS.

52. William Becker, “‘Money Talks,’ Women Say; Boycott Shopping in War, Waste Production,” unidentified clipping, file 8, WPC, WHS.
54. Press Release, Nov., 1973, folder 8, WPC, WHS.
56. Lambrecht; 1974 Press Release, folder 8, WPC, WHS.
58. 1974 Press Release, WPC, WHS.
59. “Fair Displays Ideas.”
61. See Virginia Kemp Fish, “We Stopped the Monster: LAND in Retrospect,” 1994, in LAND, Box 1-folder 1, WHS.
62. Ibid., 8.
65. Lyrics in LAND 3-17, postcards LAND 1-2, WHS.
67. Fish, “We Stopped the Monster,” 2.
70. Rosalie Bertell, “Uranium: Employment, Use and Health,” Prairie Messenger 1 March 1981, in LAND 4-9, WHS.
76. Manuel Pastor and Rachel Morello-Frosch, “Assumption Is Wrong—Latinos Care Deeply About the Environment,” San Jose Mercury News, 8 July 2002, 6B.