

of NATURE

The problem with both analyses, however, is that gender identity is neither fully natural nor fully cultural. And it is neither inherently oppressive nor inherently liberating. It depends on other historical factors, and how we consciously understand woman-identification and feminism.

Socialist Feminism and Ecology:⁴ Socialist feminists have for the most part yet to enter feminist debates on “the ecology question.” They tend to be uneasy with ecological feminism, fearing that it is based on an ahistorical, anti-rational woman/nature identification; or they see the cultural emphasis in ecological feminism as “idealistic” rather than “materialist.” The Marxist side of their politics implies a primacy of material transformation (economic/structural transformation precedes changes in ideas/culture/consciousness). Cultural and material changes are not completely separate. There is a dialectical interaction between the two, but in the last instance the cultural is part of the superstructure and the material is the base.

Historically socialism and feminism have had a curious courtship⁵ and a rather unhappy marriage,⁶ characterized by a tug of war over which is the primary contradiction—sex or class. In an uneasy truce, socialist feminists try to overcome the contradictions, to show how the economic structure and the sex-gender system⁷ are mutually reinforced in historically specific ways depending on material conditions, and to show their interdependence. They suggest the need for an “autonomous” (as opposed to a “separatist”) women’s movement,

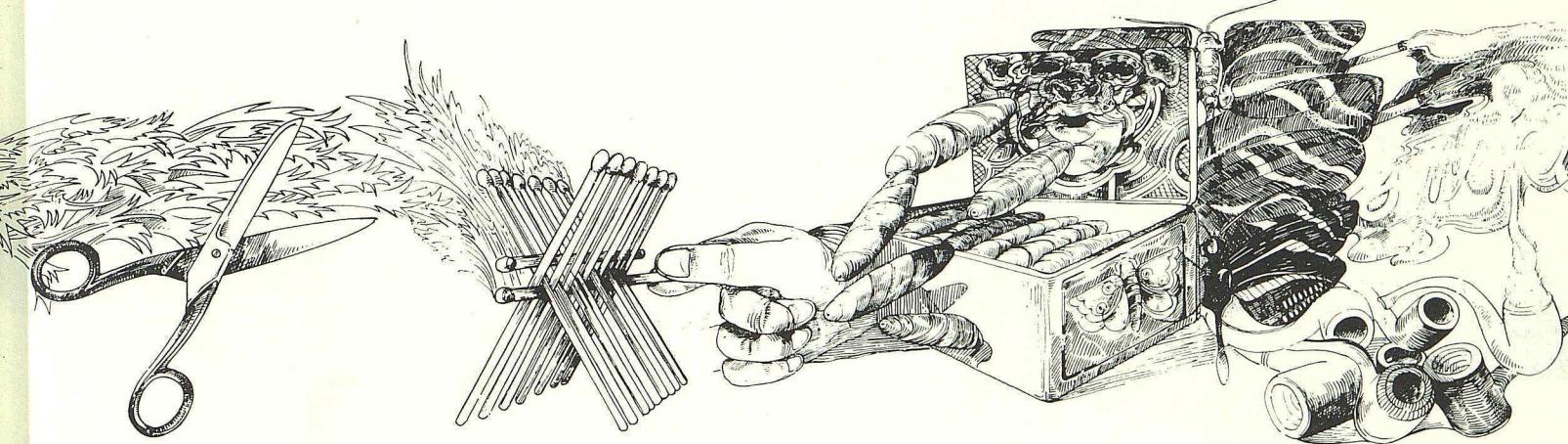
Ynestra King

sion and its identification with that of nature has been taken up, the socialist feminist solution has been to align women with culture in culture’s ongoing struggle with nature.⁹

Here We Go Again, This Argument Is at Least 100 Years Old!

The radical feminist/socialist feminist debate does sometimes seem to be the romantic feminist/rationalist feminist debate of the late 19th century revisited.¹⁰ We can imagine 19th-century women watching the development of robber-baron capitalism, “the demise of morality” and the rise of the liberal state which furthered capitalist interests while touting liberty, equality and fraternity. Small wonder that they saw in the domestic sphere vestiges of a more ethical way of life, and thought its values could be carried into the public sphere. This perspective romanticized women, although it is easy to sympathize with it and share the abhorrence of the pillage and plunder imposed by the masculinist mentality in modern industrial society. But what 19th-century women proclaiming the virtues of womanhood did not understand was that they were a repository of organic social values in an increasingly inorganic world. Women placed in male-identified power positions can be as warlike as men. The assimilation or neutralization of enfranchised women into the American political structure has a sad history.

Rationalist feminists in the 19th century, on the other hand, were concerned with acquiring power and representing women’s interests. They opposed anything that reinforced the



to maintain vigilance over women’s concerns within the production and politics of a mixed society. They see patriarchy as different under feudalism, capitalism and even under socialism without feminism.⁸ And they hold that nobody is free until everybody is free.

Socialist feminists see themselves as integrating the best of Marxism and radical feminism. They have been weak on radical cultural critique and strong on helping us to understand how people’s material situations condition their consciousnesses and their possibilities for social transformation. But adherence to Marxism with its economic orientation means opting for the rationalist severance of the woman/nature connection and advocating the integration of women into production. It does not challenge the culture-versus-nature formulation itself. Even where the issue of woman’s oppres-

idea that women were “different” and wanted male prerogatives extended to women. They were contemptuous of romantic feminists and were themselves imbued with the modern ethic of Progress. They opposed political activity by women over issues not seen as exclusively feminist for the same reasons rationalist radical feminists today oppose the feminism/ecology connection.

The Dialectic of Modern Feminism: According to the false dichotomy between subjective and objective—one legacy of male Western philosophy to feminist thought—we must root our movement *either* in a rationalist-materialist humanism *or* in a metaphysical-feminist naturalism. This supposed choice is crucial as we approach the ecology issue. *Either* we take the anthropocentric position that nature exists solely to serve the

needs of the male bourgeois who has crawled out of the slime to be lord and master of everything, or we take the naturalist position that nature has a purpose of its own apart from serving "man." We are either concerned with the "environment" because we are dependent on it, or we understand ourselves to be of it, with human oppression part and parcel of the domination of nature. For some radical feminists, only women are capable of full consciousness.¹¹ Socialist feminists tend to consider the naturalist position as historically regressive, anti-rational and probably fascistic. This is the crux of the anthropocentric/naturalist debate, which is emotionally loaded for both sides, but especially for those who equate progress and rationality.

However, we do not have to make such choices. Feminism is both the product and potentially the negation of the modern rationalist world view and capitalism. There was one benefit for women in the "disenchantment of the world,"¹² the process by which all magical and spiritual beliefs were denigrated as superstitious nonsense and the death of nature was accomplished in the minds of men.¹³ This process tore asunder women's traditional sphere of influence, but it also undermined the ideology of "natural" social roles, opening a space for women to question what was "natural" for them to be and to do. In traditional Western societies, social and economic relationships were connected to a land-based way of life. One was assigned a special role based on one's sex, race, class and place of birth. In the domestic sphere children were socialized, food prepared and men sheltered from their public cares. But the 19th-century "home" also encompassed the production of what people ate, used and wore. It included much more of human life and filled many more human needs than its modern corollary—the nuclear family—which purchases commodities to meet its needs. The importance of the domes-

ples and values, with roots in traditional women's ways of being in the world. This in turn might make possible a total cultural critique. Women can remember what men have denied in themselves (nature), and women can know what men know (culture). Now we must develop a transformative feminism that sparks our utopian imaginations and embodies our deepest knowledge—a feminism that is an affirmation of our vision at the same time it is a negation of patriarchy. The skewed reasoning that opposes matter and spirit and refuses to concern itself with the objects and ends of life, which views internal nature and external nature as one big hunting ground to be quantified and conquered is, in the end, not only irrational but deadly. To fulfill its liberatory potential, feminism needs to pose a *rational reenchantment* that brings together spiritual and material, being and knowing. This is the promise of ecological feminism.

Dialectical Feminism: Transcending the Radical Feminist/Socialist Feminist Debate: The domination of external nature has necessitated the domination of internal nature. Men have denied their own embodied naturalness, repressed memories of infantile pleasure and dependence on the mother and on nature.¹⁵ Much of their denied self has been projected onto women. Objectification is forgetting. The ways in which women have been both included in and excluded from a culture based on gender differences provide a critical ledge from which to view the artificial chasm male culture has placed between itself and nature. Woman has stood with one foot on each side. She has been a bridge for men, back to the parts of themselves they have denied, despite their need of women to attend to the visceral chores they consider beneath them.

An ecological perspective offers the possibility of moving beyond the radical (cultural) feminist/socialist feminist im-



tic sphere, and hence women's influence, declined with the advent of market society.

Feminism also negates capitalist social relations by challenging the lopsided male-biased values of our culture. When coupled with an ecological perspective, it insists that we remember our origins in nature, our connections to one another as daughters, sisters and mothers. It refuses any longer to be the unwitting powerless symbol of all the things men wish to deny in themselves and project onto us—the refusal to be the "other."¹⁴ It can heal the splits in a world divided against itself and built on a fundamental lie: the defining of culture in opposition to nature.

The dialectic moves on. Now it is possible that a conscious visionary feminism could place our technology and productive apparatus in the service of a society based on ecological prin-

passe. But it necessitates a feminism that holds out for a separate cultural and political activity so that we can imagine, theorize or envision from the vantage point of *critical otherness*. The ecology question weights the historic feminist debate in the direction of traditional female values over the overly rationalized, combative male way of being in the world. Rationalist feminism is the Trojan horse of the women's movement. Its piece-of-the-action mentality conceals a capitulation to a culture bent on the betrayal of nature. In that sense it is unwittingly both misogynist and anti-ecological. Denying biology, espousing androgyny and valuing what men have done over what we have done are all forms of self-hatred which threaten to derail the teleology of the feminist challenge to this violent civilization.

The liberation of women is to be found neither in severing

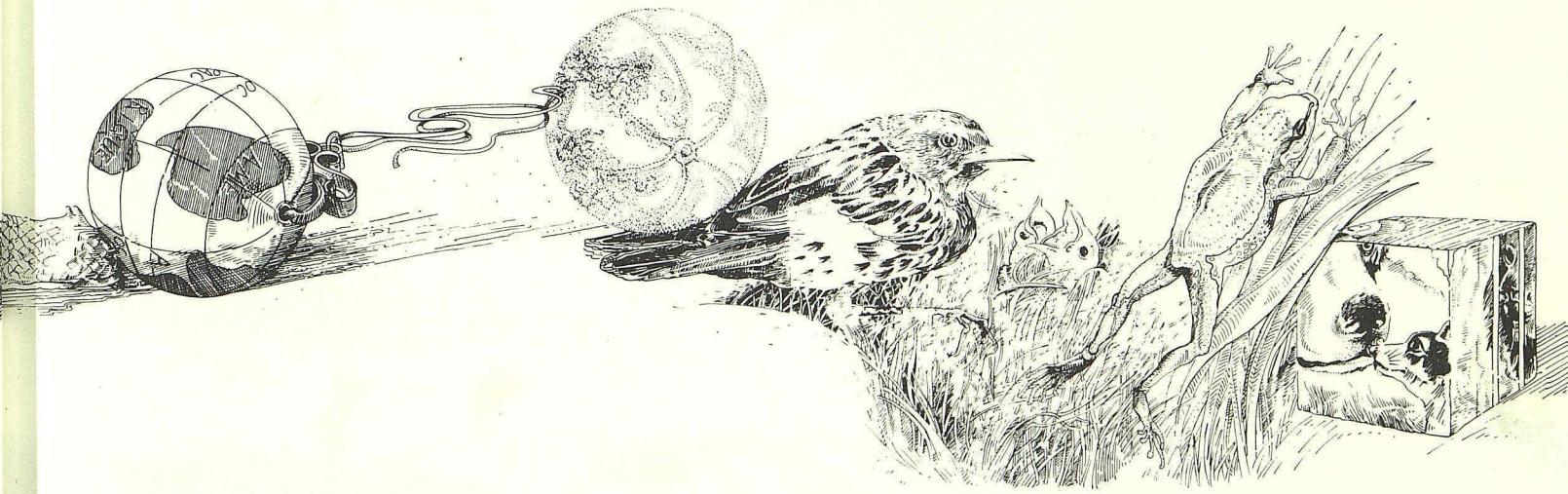
all connections that root us in nature nor in believing ourselves to be more natural than men. Both of these positions are unwittingly complicit with nature/culture dualism. Women's oppression is neither strictly historical nor strictly biological. It is both. Gender is a meaningful part of a person's identity. The facts of internal and external genitalia and women's ability to bear children will continue to have social meaning. But we needn't think the choices are external sexual warfare or a denatured (and boring) androgyny. It is possible to take up questions of spirituality and meaning without abandoning the important insights of materialism. We can use the insights of socialist feminism, with its debt to Marxism, to understand how the material conditions of our daily lives interact with our bodies and our psychological heritages. Materialist insights warn us not to assume an *innate* moral or biological superiority and not to depend on alternative culture alone to transform society. Yet a separate radical feminist culture within a patriarchal society is necessary so we can learn to speak our own bodies and our own experiences, so the male culture representing itself as the "universal" does not continue to speak for us.¹⁶

We have always thought our lives and works, our very beings, were trivial next to male accomplishments. Women's silence is deafening only to those who know it's there. The absence is only beginning to be a presence. Writers like Zora Neale Hurston, Tillie Olsen, Grace Paley and Toni Morrison depict the beauty and dignity of ordinary women's lives and give us back part of ourselves. Women artists begin to suggest the meanings of female bodies and their relationships to nature.¹⁷ Women musicians give us the sounds of loving ourselves.¹⁸ The enormous and growing lesbian feminist community is an especially fertile ground for women's culture. Lesbians are pioneering in every field and building communifi-

understand our position historically and attempt to realize the human future emerging in the *feminist present*. Once we have placed ourselves in history, we can move on to the interdependent issues of feminist social transformation and planetary survival.

Towards an Ecological Culture: Acting on our own consciousness of our own needs, we act in the interests of all. We stand on the biological dividing line. We are the less rationalized side of humanity in an overly rationalized world, yet we can think as rationally as men and perhaps transform the idea of reason itself. As women, we are naturalized culture in a culture defined against nature. If nature/culture antagonism is the primary contradiction of our time, it is also what weds feminism and ecology and makes woman the historic subject. Without an ecological perspective which asserts the interdependence of living things, feminism is disembodied. Without a more sophisticated dialectical method which can transcend historic debates and offer a nondualistic theory of history, social transformation and nature/culture interaction, feminism will continue to be mired in the same old impasse. There is more at stake in feminist debates over "the ecology question" than whether feminists should organize against the draft, demonstrate at the Pentagon or join mixed anti-nuke organizations. At stake is the range and potential of the feminist social movement.

Ecological feminism is about reconciliation and conscious mediation, about recognition of the underside of history and all the invisible voiceless activities of women over millennia. It is about connectedness and wholeness of theory and practice. It is the return of the repressed—all that has been denigrated and denied to build this hierachal civilization with its multiple systems of dominance. It is the potential voice of the



Ellen Lanyon. *Transformations II (Endangered)*. Detail.

ties with ecological feminist consciousness. Third World women are speaking the experience of multiple otherness—of race, sex and (often) class oppression. We are learning how women's lives are the same and different across these divisions, and we are beginning to engage the complexities of racism in our culture, our movement and our theory.

There is much that is redemptive for humanity as a whole in women's silent experience, and there are voices that have not yet been heard. Cultural feminism's concern with ecology takes the ideology of womanhood which has been a bludgeon of oppression—the woman/nature connection—and transforms it into a positive factor. If we proceed dialectically and recognize the contributions of both socialist feminism and radical cultural feminism, operating at both the structural and cultural levels, we will be neither materialists nor idealists. We will

denied, the ugly and the speechless—all those things called "feminine." So it is no wonder that the feminist movement rose again in the same decade as the ecological crisis. The implications of feminism extend to issues of the meaning, purpose and survival of life.

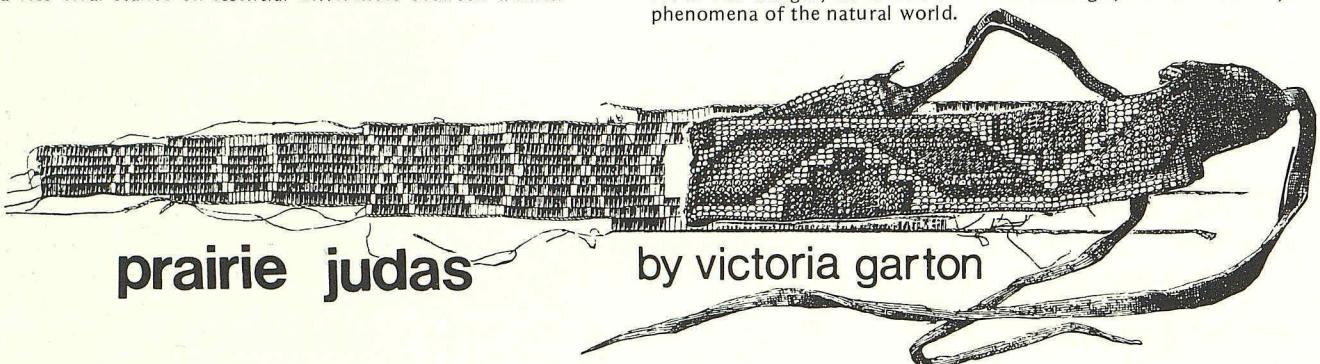
Never to despise in myself what I have been taught
to despise. Not to despise the other.
Not to despise the *it*. To make this relation
with it: to know that I am it.

—Muriel Rukeyser, "Despisals" 19

1. Ellen Willis, *The Village Voice* (June 23, 1980). In the *Voice* (July 16-22, 1980), Willis began with the question: "Is ecology a feminist issue?" and was more ambiguous than in her earlier column, although her theoretical position was the same.
2. Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: The Meta-Ethics of Radical Feminism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978).
3. Susan Griffin, *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979).
4. For an overview of socialist feminist theory, see Zillah Eisenstein, Ed., *Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1979).
5. See Batya Weinbaum, *The Curious Courtship of Women's Liberation and Socialism* (Boston: South End Press, 1978).
6. See Heidi Hartman, "The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a More Progressive Union," *Capital and Class*, no. 8 (Summer 1979).
7. The notion of a "sex-gender system" was first developed by Gayle Rubin in "The Traffic in Women," *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed. R.R. Reiter (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975).
8. See Hilda Scott, *Does Socialism Liberate Women?* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1976).
9. See Sherry B. Ortner, "Is Woman to Nature as Man Is to Culture?," *Woman, Culture, and Society*, ed. M.Z. Rosaldo & L. Lamphere (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974).
10. For a social history of the 19th-century romanticist/rationalist debate, see Barbara Ehrenreich and Dierdre English, *For Her Own Good* (New York: Doubleday/Anchor, 1979).
11. Mary Daly comes very close to this position. Other naturalist feminists have a less clear stance on essential differences between women and men.
12. The "disenchantment of the world" is another way of talking about the process of rationalization discussed above. The term was coined by Max Weber.
13. See Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980).
14. For a full development of the idea of "woman as other," see Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Modern Library, 1968).
15. Dorothy Dinnerstein in *The Mermaid and the Minotaur* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977) makes an important contribution to feminist understanding by showing that although woman is associated with nature because of her mothering role, this does not in itself explain misogyny and the hatred of nature.
16. See de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*.
17. See Lucy Lippard, "Quite Contrary: Body, Nature and Ritual in Women's Art," *Chrysalis*, no. 2 (1977).
18. Alive, Sweet Honey in the Rock, Meg Christian, Holly Near, Margie Adam—the list is long and growing.
19. Muriel Rukeyser, *The Complete Poems of Muriel Rukeyser* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1978).

Ynestra King, based in Northampton, Mass., is writing a book on feminism, ecology and survival entitled *Feminism and the Reenchantment of the World*. She works with Women and Life on Earth and the Women's Pentagon Action and teaches in the Goddard College "Feminism and Ecology" summer program.

Ellen Lanyon is a painter, printmaker and educator in Chicago and NYC. Her imagery involves science versus magic, transformations, and phenomena of the natural world.



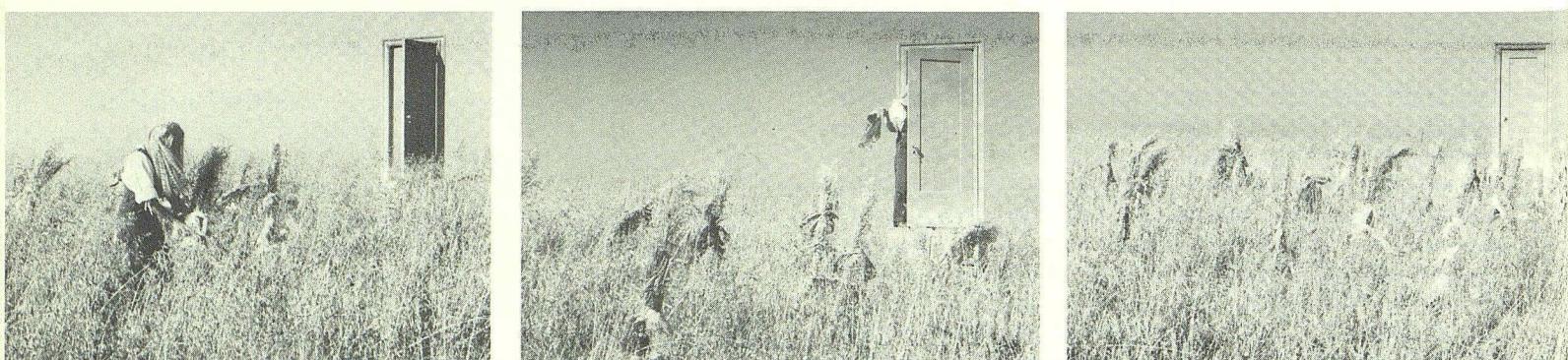
The coal company's shovel
has gobbled the prairie
and dropped it at my door.

You who have never been possessed
by land spreading from your years
know nothing.

What is hunger compared to this?
The sun no longer comes to my window.
The untamed wind has gone away.

As promised, I have thirty pieces
and my dirt.
It mounds a sad last kiss
covering my beggar's plot
burying me alive.

Victoria Garton's work has appeared in *Prairie Schooner*, *Anima* and *Spoon River Quarterly*. She is the first woman elected to the three-judge commission which manages Vernon County, Missouri.



Christine Oatman. *Tying Oats (As If It Were Children's Hair)*. 1980. "In late spring and early summer, the fields of ripe grain are a pale golden color; from a distance the tall waving oats look not unlike blonde hair. I had a longing to tie the oats with ribbons, as one would tie children's hair, as my mother once tied mine. / In June of 1980 I placed a replica of my bedroom door—painted a gradated blue like the sky—in a field of ripe barley and wild oats on Otay Mesa. I passed through this door-of-my-dreams one afternoon with an armful of multicolored ribbons and proceeded to gather sheaves of oats, tying and braiding them with the ribbons. As I worked, the field of grain gradually seemed to be transformed into a flock of tow-headed children at play, symbolized by the colorful bows and fluttering ribbons. / In the early evening, my fantasy realized, I departed through the door-of-my-imagination and closed it, softly, behind me." Since 1970 Christine Oatman has done "Personal Landscape Fantasy" projects around San Diego.