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How Many Mothers Does It Take to Change All the Light Bulbs?

The Myth of Green Motherhood

Environmentalism and mothers have a strained relationship. On the one hand, environmentalism has promoted the idea that the earth is “our mother,” a notion that has helped reveal humanity’s dependence on Nature for survival and encouraged an ethical obligation to “her.” In the Western environmental imagination, enlisting emotions that we attach to mothers in defense of nature has been a powerful rhetorical move; who would want to destroy “Mother Nature?” Yet, the elision of mother and earth masks the ways in which the environmental movement has failed to address issues of gender, much less motherhood. Like American society, mainstream environmentalism paradoxically glorifies motherhood as a metaphor for nature even as it undermines actual mothers. The average American mother is the quintessential environmental sinner for two reasons: she consumes and she reproduces. And, if human consumption and reproduction are the two greatest threats to planetary health, then mothers are a danger to the earth. This paper argues that the notion that mothering and the environment are “naturally” compatible is both simplistic and dangerous, and exposes the power relationships and social structures underneath the seemingly empowering and progressive veneer of “Mother Earth” rhetoric. This paper argues that the figure of the mother is not a good model for environmental ethics, and naturalizing motherhood is not a good strategy for gender equality. Rather, we need an environmental orientation toward motherhood that is better for both mothers and nature, and one that begins by better accounting for the contributions mothers and nature make to a sustainable society.

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and encouraged an ethical obligation to “her.” In the Western environmental imagination, enlisting emotions that we attach to mothers in defense of nature has been a powerful rhetorical move; who would want to destroy “Mother Nature?” Ecofeminists in particular have argued that the qualities associated with maternalism—care, giving, selflessness, empathy, communality, emotion, knowledge rooted in the body—create a better human-nature relationship than those associated with masculinity—conventionally self-interest, competition, and the mind. Both mainstream environmentalists¹ and many ecofeminists seem to agree that the figure of the mother is a good metaphor and rhetorical device for promoting environmental protection.

Yet, the elision of mother and earth masks the ways in which the environmental movement has failed to address issues of gender, much less motherhood. Like American society, mainstream environmentalism paradoxically glorifies motherhood as a metaphor for nature even as it undermines actual mothers. For example, the very same environmentalists who demand that we take care of “Mother Nature” are also likely to worry about overpopulation, and may even label women who choose to reproduce “breeders.” Indeed, the average American mother is the quintessential environmental sinner for two reasons: she consumes and she reproduces, a view of the American housewife distilled by theorists such as Thorstein Veblen, whose *Theory of the Leisure Class* is just one example of how the housewife came to be associated with “leisure.” By now, it is clear: consuming and reproducing define the American mother. She is often the person who makes most of the decisions about the household economy, even if she is not the primary wage-earner. She is the primary determinant of her household’s ecological footprint. If human consumption and reproduction are the two greatest threats to planetary health, then mothers are a danger to the earth.

The notion that mothering and the environment are “naturally” compatible, held by many environmentalists and some ecofeminists, is both simplistic and dangerous. It anthropomorphizes nature in troubling ways, naturalizes the social structures that construct motherhood as we know it, and disguises the poor treatment of mothers in American society that occurs behind the veneer of love for “mom and American pie.” Noel Sturgeon summarizes the problem with the image of “Mother Earth”: “the association of women with nature and with maternalism to inspire women to environmentalist actions ... ends up being a troubling message about women having to do the (house)work of cleaning up environmental damage” (*Environmentalism* 42). Joni Seager adds, “Earth as Mother is a deceptive paradigm for environmental politics” (219).

In this paper, I expose the power relationships and social structures underneath the seemingly empowering and progressive veneer of “Mother Earth” rhetoric. I argue that the mainstream U.S. environmental movement paradoxically rein-

forces the denigration of mothers even as it paternalistically appropriates the figure of the “mother” to advocate for nature. In doing so, contemporary U.S. environmental discourse “others” mothers and constructs a view of nature that fails to create the conditions for social and environmental health. The figure of the mother is not a good model for environmental ethics, and naturalizing motherhood is not a good strategy for gender equality. Rather, we need an environmental orientation toward motherhood that is better for both mothers and nature, and one that begins by better accounting for the contributions mothers and nature make to a sustainable society.

For years before I had a baby, and as I pursued a doctoral degree in Environmental Studies, the environmental impact of choosing to reproduce, not to mention my concerns about the quality of the planet that my child would inhabit, made me wonder whether it was an ethical thing to do—to the planet and to my child. With all those diapers and commutes to soccer games and laundry and new car seats, I might as well just start hacking away at glaciers with a machete myself. I began focusing a lot more on how environmental discourses frame motherhood. Although I just had a baby—my first—in October 2010, I still wonder about the ethics of this decision, and, as I am sure is the case with many of the readers of this journal, I often feel my motherhood and my environmentalism are at odds with each other, despite all the rhetoric that told me that having a baby was the “most natural thing” I could do. Somehow, that’s not a consolation. And it only reinforces my concern that these issues are connected, as I use this paper to investigate these connections.

Protecting, Consuming, Reproducing: Mothers as Ecologically “Other”

Because they control many decisions about household consumption, mothers are targeted as the greatest consumers of new green products, from efficient appliances and light bulbs to non-toxic cleaning supplies and toys. And because they are the primary decision makers, they also are the ones implicitly called upon to solve the planet’s environmental crisis. Mothers must be mobilized to protect their children from the environmental crisis they are presumably causing. Told to provide for their children and also to protect their children from the toxic environment, mothers are fighting on two fronts. As industries and the government fail to support families, mothers have to take up the slack. In her recent article, “Mind Games,” on environmental toxins that cause neurodevelopment problems in children, Sandra Steinberger argues that the anti-state turn in contemporary economic policy in the United States has shifted the duty to protect children from state-mandated regulatory apparatuses onto parents. She writes, “As parents, we can only do so much to protect our children from

the brain-disrupting chemicals that lurk in every part of the Earth's dynamic systems—its water cycles, air currents, and food chains.” Relying on parents to be the gatekeepers of the environments their children are exposed to, while it maximizes parental guilt, misses the point that the power of parents to filter the environment is limited, and some forms of environmental protection have to occur at the community, national, and even global levels. As Steinberger puts it: “I am a conscientious parent. I am not a HEPA filter.”

What Steinberger fails to mention is that most of the “parents” doing this filtering work are mothers. Even women who describe themselves as apolitical and do not identify themselves as environmentalists often become environmental justice activists when they discover that their children “live downstream” from a point source of pollution. One of the few assets women can use to fight for environmental justice for their communities is to play on their roles as mothers, what many ecofeminists call “strategic essentialism,” following Gyatri Spivak,² relying on an essentialized notion of women-as-mothers and women-as-nature, essentialisms that make the “Mother Earth” equation seem so “natural.” Deploying maternal prowess to fight for environmental justice can only reify the troubling contradictions of “Mother Earth” even as strategic maternalism becomes an important—and often only—means of political mobilization.

“Green mothering,” as it is depicted in dominant environmental discourse, partly involves this kind of motherly vigilance about toxicity, but it also involves regulating the family’s environmental impact. The amount of energy that goes into raising a child is alarming, as any mother can tell you, but now, mothers are asked to consider the extent to which childrearing saps not only human energy, but environmental energy as well. Raising a child, especially in the United States in this particular historical moment, consumes a lot of carbon. According to a 2009 study by Paul Murtaugh and Michael Schlx, which created a frenzy throughout the green blogosphere and environmental news sources, an American woman who has a child expands her ecological footprint 20 times all of the offsetting work she does, such as recycling, carpooling, etc. In other words, she could spend her whole life being a religiously minimalist environmentalist, and undo all that work by a factor of twenty by having a child. The American mother is a particularly egregious sinner here, as the average lifetime consumption of a child born in America is 160 times that of a Bangladeshi child and five times that of a Chinese child. However, the study only looks at how reproducing affects a *mother’s* environmental impact; it is concerned with issues of “fertility,” not parenting more broadly. Once again, the omission of fathers from such a seminal study as this illustrates that not even scholars are considering the implications of making mothers the lynchpins of eco-collapse. In this era of late modern capitalism, a woman who chooses to “breed” is not only contributing to the population problem, she is

contributing to carbon use and emissions problems. She is an exponentially “ecologically other.”

Popular culture, to the degree it is becoming increasingly “green,” has capitalized on these worries. Advertisements, which once made me anxious about my skin tone and waistline, now exploit my guilt about having a child. If you’re going to reproduce, the logic goes, at least do it with as little an impact as possible. Books and websites are part of a whole industry of advice about how to “raise your baby green,” as one book puts it. In contrast to the 1970s environmental movement, which advocated simplicity and other kinds of lifestyle downsizing, like a “diet for a small planet,” the current environment imperative is to maintain the lifestyle of mass consumption, but to “greenwash” it. In other words, going green does not necessarily mean cutting consumption, a message that deserves closer scrutiny before mothers throw out their washing machines with the bathwater, so to speak.

Al Gore’s powerful film *An Inconvenient Truth* (2002) illustrates this shift to a focus on consumption as a means to environmental salvation. The film brought climate change into public consciousness (at least for a while, as studies show that climate change is again off our collective radar³). At the end of the film, the credits are interspersed with a series of directives that tell the audience how to “save the world,” an uplifting ending given the film’s apocalyptic rhetoric. To save the planet from collapse, the film tells us to “buy energy efficient appliances and . . . light bulbs.” That the first item on Gore’s agenda would be a form of consumerism is telling. For example, where do the older appliances go when we replace them with newer, energy efficient ones? Next, we should lower our thermostats and weatherize our homes. Later, and this is meant for the children in the audience (the consummate idealists), “tell your parents not to ruin the world that you will live in.” And, “if you are a parent, join with your children to save the world they will live in.” These instructions, along with other advice such as joining international organizations and pressuring your power company to use green energy, are put forth as the answers to the environmental crisis. They reveal assumptions about the audience and about what the film’s producers think the source of the problem is—the household and the family that lives in it.

When I saw this film, I was excited about the genius of Gore’s accomplishments: he made an intangible social risk—climate change—into a palpable problem. Gore connects his nostalgia about his lost childhood on a tobacco farm to global climate change in a way that helps his audience make sense of their own sense of alienation from nature. Gore’s rhetorical moves are brilliant: he invokes the narrative of a pre-lapsarian fall from green grace that characterizes all successful environmental discourse, from Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden* to Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*. He uses statistics, provides the long-term

history of climate change politics, and gives voice to scientists who have been silenced by political administrations who see climate change as bad for politics and the economy. Indeed, as an environmentalist, I was thrilled about the film. After viewing it, I was reinvigorated about my doctoral work in environmental studies. I went home, changed my light bulbs, and started air-drying all my laundry—even in rainy Oregon.

But on reflection and as a feminist, I am ambivalent about the film's messages, which are consistent with the dominant environmental dogma I have been hearing for the several years that I have been studying U.S. environmental discourse. In particular, to end the film telling the *audience* how it can fix global climate change is dangerously misleading, and lulls the individuals in the audience into complacency about holding our governments and markets accountable for the size of *their* ecological footprint, and for creating the conditions that make our individual footprints so damaging in the first place. What kind of economic system, for example, treats the Exxon Valdez oil spill as a greater contributor to the GDP than selling the oil itself would have been (see *Who's Counting*)? What kind of legal system protects polluters as it rejects the precautionary principle? Although I agree that if the public carried out all of these green actions, the world would indeed be a healthier place, the advice in the film is not only misdirected, it is implicitly gendered—even “mothered.” It tells us that the solution to environmental crisis must occur at the level of the consumer-mother. But the film fails to question the sustainability of consumption in general and ignores or obscures the much greater impact caused by agriculture, industry, government, and even the service part of our economy, despite the obvious fact that the larger the entity, the more “freedom” it has—secured by greater lobbying prowess—to pollute, extract, and misuse the environment.

A good example of these internal contradictions and omissions in the environmental message to change our lifestyles is the “locavore” movement, which argues that eating local foods is better for the environment because it reduces the carbon emissions required to transport food from producer to consumer. Locavorism has become widely accepted as a form of food security and food justice in the United States, as seen in the popularity of books like Michael Pollan's *Omnivore's Dilemma* and Barbara Kingsolver's *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*. As it turns out, though, transportation from producer to consumer only accounts for four percent of agriculture's environmental impact (Zeller). Large-scale agricultural processes, like monoculture, genetic modification, and the globalization of crops, have far greater impacts on the environment, from soil degradation to water pollution and even the movement of migrant labor, than, say, a truck carrying a load of tomatoes does.

Moreover, a gendered analysis of the locavore movement shows quite clearly

the problems with treating the home as the location of environmental redemption. Vasile Stanescu has critiqued the locavore movement for its anti-immigrant and anti-feminist implications. He notes that focusing on the environmental impact of food is a luxury, and he criticizes locavores for deemphasizing the “clothing miles,” “computer miles,” or “cell phone miles” involved in the production and distribution of these other products. Stanescu writes:

a narrow-minded focus on only “food” and “food miles” renders invisible many other environmentally unsound practices, whether they are conscious decisions to drive around in search of the best local food, or unconscious participation in the consumption of non-food goods with an environmental and human cost. (18)

A feminist analysis of the local food movement must take these political economic structures into account. A fully gendered analysis also recognizes, as Stanescu argues, that although the movement to focus more on cooking healthily, organically, and locally at home is indeed better for children’s health, the burden of this labor falls on mothers. The choice to “focus, unscientifically, only on the question of food,” Stanescu continues, “blends over into a negative portrayal of women and particularly feminists, who are frequently portrayed as culprits because of their decision, supposedly, to no longer cook.” The farmer heralded by both Pollan and the movie *Food, Inc.* explicitly (“I’ll be real sexist here,” he confesses) calls for women to get back into the kitchen (qtd. in Stanescu 20).

The message that the mother must be a green consumer is so powerful not because of how true it is, but rather because women internalize it. And they internalize it in part because it is repeated so often. Green motherhood has become another niche market—a way to make money. I couldn’t help but ask, even as I was being moved to change my light-bulbs at the end of Gore’s film, who does Gore think is going to do this work? Who does the labor of switching from disposable diapers to cloth diapers, making the extra effort to air-dry laundry, and researching energy-efficient appliances? Who makes recycling a household norm and then does the work of cleaning, sorting, and removing it? Who does the work of raising green children to save the planet? Overwhelmingly, mothers do this work. The burden of purchasing energy efficient appliances, weatherizing homes, pestering energy companies, abiding by children’s requests to “save the world they will live in,” and joining those children to save that world, rests not on the shoulders of men, fathers, or even women in general, but on *mothers*.

Furthermore, green consumer marketing fails to take account of the ways that different kinds of consumption are gendered. While the myth suggests

that, because mothers are in charge of household consumerism, they are more environmentally-destructive than men, studies show that women's consumption is based more on "need," where more of men's consumption is based on "want." Women are more likely to "spend on goods that benefit children and enhance their capacities" (qtd. in Crittenden 120). Thus, the myth that mothers are ecologically dangerous because they consume so much to support households fails to account for the fact that mothers are less likely to partake in far more environmentally destructive forms of "conspicuous" or "lifestyle" consumption than men, who spend more on "alcohol, cigarettes, status consumer goods, even 'female companionship'" (qtd. in Crittenden 121) when they have disposable income. Our image of wives consuming while husbands are working not only trivializes women's economic roles, but makes them morally questionable, while failing to address the main sources of environmental stress.

This denigration of women's consumerism as environmentally sinful and the denigration of mothers' work as "leisure" was clear in research I did for my master's degree on advertisements for sports utility vehicles (SUVs). In that research, I observed that, although much SUV advertising sells masculine myths of exploring nature, as SUVs became popular with women and urban men, their "masculine" cachet was under threat. SUV advertising increasingly appealed to a growing female market by deploying a maternal discourse of safety. But the growing association between SUVs and mothers was perceived to be an affront to the "rugged individualist," outdoorsy masculinity that SUVs once signaled, so much so that GMC changed the name of its SUV, the Suburban (a name that screamed "housewife"), to Yukon.

An advertisement for the Nissan Xterra further reveals this gendered battle between the image of the SUV as housewife people-mover and its image as a rugged, mobile man-cave: "Some SUVs are built to look pretty in mall parking lots. This one is built to be *used*—often in ways most people would never imagine" (my emphasis). The ad dismisses activities associated with mothering as frivolous leisure (mall shopping), while, implicitly, what men do in SUVs is "work"—they "use" the SUVs. Moreover, drivers on SUV chat rooms display a notable disgust for both women who drive SUVs and those whose primary use of SUV is not off-roading. The irony, of course, is that soccer moms are working harder than the weekend warriors who "use" SUVs for off-roading and exploring. It is also obvious that off-roading has more environmentally serious consequences, as "getting back to nature" in an SUV is not likely to preserve its "pristine" qualities. SUV discourse provides a clear example of the gendered ironies of green consumerism, which casts women's work as leisure, men's leisure as "work," and portrays the use of a vehicle for mothering as more environmentally damaging than using that vehicle for forms of recreation that destroy landscapes.

Lurking just beneath this rejection of soccer moms as failing to use SUVs “authentically” (that is, ostensibly to “get close to nature”) is an “environmentalist disgust” for women’s roles as reproducer. Drawing on Peter Stallybrass and Allon White’s notion of “bourgeois disgust,” which argues that consumer tastes are a measure of classism, I suggest that environmentalist disgust constructs “others” according to their apparent threat to nature. A prominent example of environmentalist disgust is the movement’s alarmism about population growth. On the surface, being concerned about population growth seems innocent enough. The environmental movement initially argued that overpopulation was the cause of the environmental crisis, an argument that Paul Ehrlich most famously put forth in his 1963 book, *The Population Bomb*. But conservatives have used environmental disgust to label certain groups as more of a threat than others. Like old fears of the “yellow peril,” the image of the “swelling masses” of the Third World who want “our” First World resources pervades much environmental alarmism, and it is a short step from there to assume that the problem is Third World *women*. The population argument is hotly debated within environmental circles, with feminists in particular lodging the strongest critiques against populationism because of its gender implications, particularly for Third World women.⁴ Betsy Hartmann summarizes this critique:

Subsumed into the analytic frame of population pressure, women, through their fertility, become the breeders of environmental destruction, poverty, and violence. They are the invisible heart of environmental scarcity, made visible only when policies to ease ‘population growth-induced scarcity,’ such as ‘family planning and literacy campaigns’ [(Thomas Homer-Dixon)] are put forward. (60)

Women, because they are seen as the cause of reproduction (despite the fact that men are required for the job), become “ecologically other”—a term I use to describe groups that mainstream environmentalism identifies as environmentally sinful. This feminist critique is an “environmental reproductive justice” critique that exposes the ways in which discourses about reproduction and nature reinscribe gender oppression and mask social inequality.

Some environmentalists still believe that population is the biggest problem, while even Ehrlich himself revised his argument to argue that it is not just *numbers* of people, but *how* those people consume that creates the environmental threat. He produced a revised equation and even attempted to appease his feminist critics by insisting that the education of women was the best form of birth control, an idea that feels pro-woman on the surface, but is problematic in other ways, including the fact that it is still based on the Malthusian growth

model, which has been challenged. Ehrlich's equation, Impact = Population X Affluence X Technology, accounts for how people consume, and asserts that greater affluence in a nation leads to greater national consumption.⁵ His logic, even if not widely known by the term IPAT used by environmental scholars, still prevails: the environmental crisis today is compounded by the combination of people populating and those populations consuming a lot. Although Erlich hoped this revision would clarify his argument and thereby calm the strong feminist critique of his original thesis, my point here is to argue that adding consumerism to the population equation only exacerbates the gender bias of the argument. Women can be blamed for consumption as well as reproduction, and this is *especially* true when they are mothers.

Motherhood Is Work, Not Nature

Juggling work and domestic life is the modern woman's condition, to be sure. Feminists have noted that although being able to work is liberating, as long as the household division of labor remains gendered female, women will work double-time. In *The Second Shift* (1989), Arlie Hochschild observed that one of the side-effects of women's success in the workforce, when there were no changes in the division of labor at home, is that women work a "second shift" as housewife and mother, along with their day jobs. As a result of this "unfair" distribution of work, some feminists, like the group Wages for Housework, argued that the labor of housewives be "counted." Things have not changed much since 1989, as Ann Crittenden outlines in *The Price of Motherhood*. The work of housewives remains invisible in the United States GDP; women are still considered "dependents" if they do not work in the formal economy; and the "head of household" is still understood as the person who earns a wage. The labor of mothering and running the home is not considered "work"; the rationale for this is that women "choose" to be mothers and home-keepers. Of course, many people choose to do their jobs, but just because they choose to do them does not mean they should go unpaid. The assumption that makes maternal work invisible is that women do that work "naturally"—it is not valued as highly skilled labor, because it is women's nature. As Crittenden puts it: "Just because caring work is not self-seeking doesn't mean a person should be penalized for doing it. Just because giving to one's child is altruistic doesn't mean that it isn't also a difficult, time-consuming obligation that is expected of one sex and not the other" (8).

Paradoxically, the economy thrives on this invisible labor. Crittenden cites a spate of new studies that suggests the amount of work involved in unpaid childcare in particular is greater than ever imagined: unpaid household work amounts to "at least half of the hours of paid work in the market," and as much

as 80 percent of that labor is done by women (8). The work of building human character and raising thoughtful, productive members of society has “no place in economists’ equations” (4). Yet, as Crittenden writes,

if human abilities are the ultimate fount of economic progress, as many economists now agree, and if those abilities are nurtured (or stunted) in the early years, then mothers and other caregivers of the young are the most important producers in the economy. They do have, literally, the most important job in the world. (11)

In other words, if producing economically productive people, i.e. “human capital,” is predominately the work of mothers, then the work of homemaking should not be treated as a drag on women’s productivity in the formal sector. Further, the formal sector should become much more supportive of working mothers—not just for altruistic reasons, but for economic ones. Those who care about the GDP need to support mothers and caregivers.

If mothers were paid for this work of producing human capital, estimates suggest they would each earn \$508,700 per year in wages alone. Even conservative estimates set their wage at \$100,000 per year (Crittenden 8). To add insult to injury, a working woman who has children will earn 38 per cent less than her male counterpart over her lifetime (xii). College-educated women forego more than \$1 million over their lifetime if they have children (5). These figures suggest that a “mommy tax” is a significant cause of wage inequality between men and women—and between childless women and working mothers. These numbers also indicate that although the economy is rewarding women in the workplace—a sign of great progress—it has yet to make the adjustments necessary to allow those women to have families as well, at least without great financial and career cost to the woman. Although fathers are increasingly taking on duties of childcare, they too are punished. Recognizing how important families are to the economy would require both encouraging fathers to share more equally in the “second shift” and making the balance of home life and work life more a synergy than a “juggle.” A family-centered home and work life would improve the economy, contrary to the perception that families are a drag on productivity.

The Greening of Motherhood: Eco-Moms as Planetary Heroes

That women’s work as mothers and housewives remains an unpaid, invisible, and undervalued “second shift” makes “greening” motherhood for working women a much more difficult task. Add to the challenges of juggling “real” work and domestic work the very real mental and physical effort of going green, and

mothers (who are responsible for most of that effort) acquire a third, “green shift,” so to speak. The burgeoning market in green motherhood products and discourses assumes that mothers have the time to go green—that they are not already really “working.”

A proliferation of “how-to” books targeting mothers taps into an implicit guilt for reproducing and consuming but also plays into the notion that, as mothers, they are responsible for saving the earth through their domestic choices. Take, for example, this list of books that target green moms: *The Mom’s Guide to Growing Your Family Green: Saving the Earth Begins at Home*, by Terra Wellington; *Spit That Out! The Overly Informed Parent’s Guide to Raising Children in the Age of Environmental Guilt*, by Page Wolf; *Smart Mama’s Green Guide: Simple Steps to Reduce Your Child’s Toxic Chemical Exposure*, by Jennifer Taggart; *Healthy Living in a Toxic World: Simple Ways to Protect You and Your Family from Hidden Health Risks*, by Cynthia Fincher; and *Survive! A Family Guide to Thriving in a Toxic World*, by Sharon Wynters and Burton Goldberg. These books are perhaps less “environmentalist” (caring about preserving wilderness and wildlife as “nature”) than they are about a particular set of environmental justice concerns. Mothers become environmental justice advocates by caring about the protection of places where we all “live, work, play, and pray.” This is an instrumental environmentalism, stemming from the goal of keeping children safe—a safe environment is a safe child. But these books are no less guilt-producing for that. Their premise is that parents care about the quality of the environment their children breathe, drink, and play in, although mothers are usually the ones tasked with making sure that environmental dangers are avoided. Mothers become the front line for demanding environmental quality, as even a cursory look at the literature on environmental justice suggests, and as activists and ecofeminists have long known, studied, and debated.

This list of “how-to” books that show parents how to survive in a toxic world makes Don DeLillo’s *White Noise* seem like a field trip to Walden Pond rather than an escape from the apocalypse brought about by cumulative, daily exposure to environmental risks, as it has been interpreted by ecocritics. Ulrich Beck’s theory that postmodernity is characterized by fears of the risks of daily life in our environment—that we are a “risk society”—is evident in the discourses of guilt, fear, and worry about the toxic world we live in that pervade mom-focused blogs, books, articles, editorials, meetings, and even scholarship. But those who write about how American society has become a risk society rarely if ever recognize the gender implications of their analysis. Fear that children are at risk creates anxiety and guilt for parents, particularly mothers who are responsible for the day-to-day experiences of children in the environment. To the “risk society” undertone of all of these books can be added the more

traditionally “environmentalist” arguments of books like Richard Louv’s *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder*, and plethora of essays in environmental journals such as *Orion* that tell us how to get our kids out into “real” nature and away from “virtual” videogames, and you can see the basis for a “green” industry that feeds on parental guilt and environmental fears.

The third shift for women today involves the small matter of saving the planet. But enlisting mothers for broader, political causes of a nation is not a new phenomenon. Theodore Roosevelt’s nationalism, which emphasized the importance of “the strenuous life,” had a place for women’s work. Roosevelt’s call to the strenuous life that would save America after the frontier was declared closed was a male duty, as Gale Bederman illustrates in *Manliness and Civilization*. But the various social crises of the early turn of the century, such as immigration and urbanization, were addressed through programs in social engineering that emphasized the role of the mother in building the nation. Bederman reports that Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Margaret Sanger, often seen as feminist pioneers, also promoted the nation’s mothers as the key to a new national strength. In both cases, though, only white, well-to-do women could take on this role to impart hygiene and good reproductive choices to the “masses” of immigrants, “feebleminded” families, and lower classes that were threatening the fiber of the nation. Roosevelt, Sanger, and Gilman all believed that white women of desirable genetic background who did not reproduce were committing “race suicide.” Of course, this view—that mothers are the backbone of a strong genetic line, and by extension, the nation—was taken to an extreme in Nazi ideology. In all of these cases, women’s biological “duty” to reproduce was deployed as her “nature” in the evolutionary game of survival of the fittest.

On the surface, recognizing mothers’ role in defining a nation’s health would seem like progress relative to the invisibility of mothers I have described thus far. But expecting mothers to bear the burden of fixing geopolitical problems—from nation-building to global climate change—by mediating their reproductive and mothering activities is a form of “biopower,” as Michel Foucault would call it—a way for the state to control its population by controlling the bodies of its citizens. Political ecologists Nancy Lee Peluso and Michael Watts summarize this logic: “Foucault showed how a centralized state and its apparatuses made the fostering of life and the care of population a part of a new regime of power that he called ‘biopower.’” Foucault “focused particularly on the body,” Peluso and Watts continue, as the state became increasingly invisible as a form of power over citizens (36). Peluso and Watts call the greening of biopower “green governmentality,” and it is precisely green governmentality at work in making mothers responsible for the “care of population” in these examples. In

other words, upholding mothers as deciders of a civilization's fate is not liberation or empowerment; rather, it is a Foucauldian form of power, an ideology of sociobiology diffused throughout society through various forms of green governmentality. Green governmentality is at work in the cumulative message, in advertisements, scientific studies, and political discussions, to discipline mothers' reproductive, consumptive, and protective activities.

Global climate change is certainly not accepted as a dominant theory among those in power in the United States, so I am not suggesting that the government uses mainstream environmentalism to discipline the bodies of mothers today in the same way as Nazis did, or even in the same ways that Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Margaret Sanger, and Roosevelt wanted to. Yet it is profoundly unfair to dismiss the work of mothers as unproductive on the one hand (as a function of her own selfish desire to be a "dependent," that is, a kept housewife/mother), while at the same time demand that she fulfill her role of saving the nation and the planet, or even her child's school and neighborhood. It is contradictory to treat the work of mothers as "natural," a waste of time, or meaningless on the one hand and invest it with the weight of saving the world on the other. The greening of motherhood extends a long tradition of deflecting a state's responsibility onto women.

Ecofeminism: Women and Nature as Externalities

The stake advertisers have in forms of environmental activity such as recycling and buying green appliances merely greenwashes consumerism, and fails to address the structures—including patriarchy—that make consumerism so bad for the environment in the first place. What is missing in the dominant environmental rhetoric of reducing everyday household-level impact is a deeper analysis: why is the environmental movement framing the problems and solutions in this way? What other structures—capitalism, patriarchy, and even national identity—does this discourse serve? What kinds of gender roles does this discourse assume and reinforce, often using ecofeminist characterizations of motherhood and nature, and how are these roles paradoxically environmentally unfriendly? In a society in which women's work of care is undervalued, invisible, and discounted, yet fundamental to the functioning of the economy, treating the household as the source of our environmental crisis greens the issue without addressing either the gendered division of labor or identifying the structural sources of environmental stress.

An ecofeminist analysis suggests that behind all of the urgency to raise our babies green lies a more ideological imperative to reinforce the gender status quo and obscure the structural problems that create the environmental crisis in the first place. An ecofeminist analysis suggests that the same forces—pa-

triarchy, laissez faire capitalism, and the military-industrial complex, for instance—that permit the exploitation of nature also permit the exploitation of women, and especially *mothers*. These forces rely on finding and exploiting the cheapest natural resources and the labor to extract them. But they also rely on women’s labor—most of all the unpaid, invisible labor of mothers. This occurs, of course, at the cost of mothers, children, and nature, and on both a resource-producing “Mother Nature” and women’s “natural” home-making and child-rearing roles.

It is therefore striking that Ann Crittenden refers to maternal love as a “natural resource” (9). She is using the term metaphorically, intending to suggest that women’s emotional connection to their children has value, but I am suggesting that conflation of mother’s labor and environmental goods more than metaphorically provocative: there is a material connection here. In her 1995 film, *Who’s Counting: Sex, Lies, and the Global Economy*, Marilyn Waring makes a direct connection between the invisibility of environmental externalities (costs that the environment bears, while the economy benefits) and the invisibility of women’s labor, both domestic and in the informal economy. Similarly, Noel Sturgeon finds a material connection between the ways that women’s labor and environmental resources support the economy in invisible ways:

The caring work that had been socially assigned to women in many cultures becomes an externality in the capitalist economy, just as nature is an externality. Just as air, water, biodiversity, and ecosystem health are reified as externalities to the economy (such that the exploitation, pollution, commodification, and overuse of them as natural resources do not have to be paid for or accounted for), so too has the work assigned to women—the work of daily human maintenance, of feeding, of cleaning, of changing diapers, of elder care, of cooking, of loving, of celebrating, of teaching the young—been treated as an externality, with much of it separated off from the economy as though it were not part of sustaining life ... because it is seen as women’s natural skill and duty Nature is expected to be all bountiful and usable, as women are expected to be all nurture and availability. (165)

Making something an “externality” not only makes its value invisible, it hides its exploitation. Waring and Sturgeon outline the very material ways in which women are related to nature. This is not an essential connection, as the “Mother Earth” logic would have it, but a material one; that is, political economy treats both women and nature in similar ways. The economy benefits from exploiting both nature and women, which bear the costs. Mothers are

like nature in that they each are expected to “give” and “care” out of their own nature, without charging for it or counting up their contributions.

Environmental cultural studies scholars such as Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands, Giovanna di Chiro (see Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson), and Noel Sturgeon also argue that the focus on the household naturalizes unsustainable family structures. In *Environmentalism in Popular Culture*, for example, Sturgeon argues that the popular environmental representation of the nuclear family is evident in children’s shows like *Captain Planet*, in animated films such as *The Lion King* and *Happy Feet*, and even in nature documentaries such as *March of the Penguins* (to name only a few of the examples Sturgeon provides), where the environmentalist message hinges on the harmony of the family—mother, father, and children—as the means to harmony in nature. These examples “offer the nuclear family as the answer to environmental disruption” (108). The “restoration of natural harmony and the restoration of the two-parent, suburban family” is equated, “naturalizing the nuclear family” (110). In turn, nature is deployed to reinforce “heterosexist patriarchal family forms as the only means to healthy reproduction,” and, as Sturgeon adds, this “points to our dominant culture’s constant confusion between ‘nature’ and the naturalization of social inequality” (112), an elision that is also clearly illustrated in the paradox of green motherhood.

I am not suggesting that we reject the nuclear family, but the focus on the family as the answer to environmentalism’s problems deserves closer scrutiny, particularly because the gendered aspects of that focus are conveniently omitted from the dominant discourse. Further, any focus on the family must consider the ways in which the family—in its current configuration—is ecologically unsustainable. Sturgeon clarifies:

In the present contemporary U.S. context, the suburban American family that is most frequently portrayed in our popular culture and our political arguments as ‘natural’ depends on women’s unpaid domestic labor, particularly in the areas of child care and elder care; the use of non-renewable fuel-intensive transportation such as cars and long-distance shipping of consumer products; and the promotion of women as “shoppers” who buy all of their food, clothes, and consumer goods in stores that are involved in globalized production and distribution chains dependent on the exploitation of the labor of the poor, often in the Global South, often women. (125)

Holding up the suburban American family and its “shopping” mother as the problem reifies troubling gender myths, ignores broader structures that have formed and idealized the contemporary American nuclear family, and give

the structures which cause greater environmental harm than the family an environmental pass.

Rather, as Jennifer Grayson reminds us, in “How to Deal with Green Guilt,” we need to “work to make a difference on a larger scale.” She suggests that “you’ll feel more empowered if you work to enact political change, say, to require testing for toxic chemicals in cosmetics rather than harassing your husband to give up his favorite deodorant.” Grayson’s troubling gendered rhetoric adds a further dimension to this analysis: being a green mom can be perceived as “harassment” to other members of the family, as mothers become Green Nags. The key is not to put the responsibility on individual mothers, but to seek green regulation; in other words, it’s the policy, not the mom, stupid.

Conclusion

I still believe that I should use cloth diapers and line-dry my laundry if I can. I still wince at all the environmental sins I commit because I live in Juneau, Alaska, where it is difficult to be a “locavore” unless I hunt and fish, and where shipping recycling back to the lower 48 is not really any better for the environment than filling the landfill. Line-drying my laundry is a challenge, as is growing my own vegetables. I am deeply compelled by the imperatives to make my lifestyle greener and to “raise my baby green.” I have stressed the gender biases of “greening,” not because I believe mothers—and everyone else too—should stop trying to live green.

Sandra Steinberger elegantly insists that it is not the parents’ duty to make sure their children exist in healthy environments; it’s the duty of the legal, governmental, and, by extension, corporate bodies to keep that environment healthy. Speaking to both the dominant environmental movement and to corporate and governmental audiences, she echoes my frustration:

So don’t give me any more shopping tips or lists of products to avoid. Don’t put neurotoxicants in my furniture and my food and then instruct me to keep my children from breathing or eating them. Instead, give me federal regulations that assess chemicals for their ability to alter brain development and function *before* they are allowed access to the marketplace.... Give me chemical reform based on precautionary principles. Give me an agricultural system that doesn’t impair our children’s learning abilities or their futures. Give me an energy policy based on wind and sun.

Here, Steinberger outlines the regulatory solutions to environmental problems, in direct contrast to casting parents—mostly mothers—as the “natural”

gatekeepers of the health of both nature and children. Highlighting the hard work mothers already do, she continues:

I can do the thinking and research associated with making the right school choice for my children. I can help them with multiplication tables and subject-verb agreement. I can pack healthy school lunches. But I can't place myself between their bodies and the two-hundred-plus identified neurotoxicants that circulate freely through the environment we all inhabit.

Like Steinberger, I am not arguing that parents should be excused from doing the “thinking and research” themselves. But there is only so much that mothers can do, and expecting them to save their children and save the planet ignores the ways in which broader political economic systems both degrade the environment and disempower women.

The solution to greening motherhood is not in consumerism at the household level. It is not in turning mothers into Green Nags during their “third” shift. It is not in sending them the contradictory message that their work as mothers is simultaneously economically invisible and environmentally sinful. It is not in deflecting blame from industries and policies that favor corporate productivity over human capital. Rather, the solution is an environmental movement that recognizes that domestic questions of care and housework are as central to the mission of protecting the environment as saving wildlife and protecting beautiful places. Indeed, in this sense, we need an environmental politics that updates and greens the powerful insight that second-wave feminists gave us—“the personal is political”—by acknowledging how power relationships in the domestic sphere are inextricably linked to ecological and economic sustainability.

I use the term “mainstream environmentalism” throughout this paper to make it clear which environmentalists I am referring to. Mainstream environmentalists can be understood in terms of the mission and membership of the “Big 10” organizations, such as Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth, Worldwide Fund for Nature, The Nature Conservancy, etc. Joni Seager uses the term “eco-establishment” for this same brand of environmentalism. There are many environmentalists who are much more nuanced in their agendas than mainstream environmentalists, and so I do not want to paint all environmentalists with the same brush. At the risk of creating a “strawman,” I want to identify the strand of environmentalism that insists that issues of gender and divisions of household labor are simply not the purview of the environmental movement. Environmental justice advocates

and ecofeminists, for instance, critique the dominant environmental movement for failing to recognize the ways in which power and social inequality are central to understanding environmental problems.

²While many ecofeminists critique the essentializing of women as mothers and the contradictory ways in which society simultaneously values and undervalues motherhood, they recognize the rhetorical power of maternal identity politics, and find a political voice as mothers in environmental justice arenas. See Noel Sturgeon (*Ecofeminist Natures*), for an assessment of this phenomenon.

³See Kari Norgaard, *Living in Denial*, for example.

⁴Tracing Ehrlich's populationism and the feminist critique is beyond the scope of this paper, but it is important to note that the population argument created an unresolved division between mainstream environmentalists and environmentalists who saw themselves as working for social justice issues as part of their environmental agenda. The purpose of including this brief description of the debate is to illustrate how important reproduction is to understanding U.S. environmental politics, and to document the most significant way in which feminists have critiqued environmentalism.

⁵The evolution of Ehrlich's thinking is famous among environmental scholars. In particular, he debated Barry Commoner in 1971 about the theory that population was the primary cause of environmental degradation, and it is partly this debate that caused him to revise his model, although he continued to insist that population was the dominant source. For the original source of the I=PAT equation, see Ehrlich and Holdren.

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