

# BEYOND MOTHERING EARTH



# BEYOND MOTHERING EARTH

Ecological Citizenship and the Politics of Care

SHERILYN MACGREGOR



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**To my parents, Nancy and George MacGregor,  
for everything**



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# BEYOND MOTHERING EARTH



# 1 Introduction: Earthcare or Feminist Ecological Citizenship?

Women have had no voice, but ecofeminism is a radical new language. Women must provide the moral energy and determination for both the First and Third Worlds. They are the future and hope in the struggle over life.

– Carolyn Merchant, *Earthcare: Women and the Environment*

Ecological feminism has a history of deliberating such difficult questions as: Are women more “naturally” connected to nature than men? Do women’s gendered roles and experiences give them unique insight into human-nature relationships? Why is it that women around the world seem to demonstrate relatively more concern for the quality of their environments than men? Where do the roots of this concern lie? These questions, and the answers they provoke, are the focus of *Beyond Mothering Earth*, in which I critically interrogate “ecofeminist” discourses that make connections between *women’s caring* and *ecological politics*. I question why it is that many ecofeminists assert a special role for women as environmental caretakers without considering their lives as political subjects or what it might mean for women in inegalitarian societies to bear such an enormous responsibility. The position that animates the discussion that follows is that *feminist ecological citizenship* is a more promising, and more radical, language for articulating the goals of ecofeminist politics than the language of care.

In 1996 Berkeley historian and pioneering ecofeminist theorist Carolyn Merchant published *Earthcare: Women and the Environment*. Since Merchant is a big-name environmental scholar, it is not surprising that the book quickly made its way onto environmental studies and women’s studies reading lists.

*Earthcare* contains numerous examples of women's efforts to protect the environment and human health throughout history and around the world. From the "moral mothers" of nineteenth-century New England to the "hysterical housewives" at Love Canal in the 1970s, to the *Planeta Fêmea* tent at the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Merchant celebrates the contributions of women to the struggle for ecological sustainability. In fact, her dedication reads: "To the women who will care for and defend the earth in the third millennium from those who have done so in the recent and deep past." The book offers an important glimpse into discourses of ecofeminism and has inspired my ten-year-long engagement with a dominant line of ecofeminist argumentation about women's role in grassroots environmental movements.

Like many ecofeminist scholars, Merchant places great hope in the myriad material and moral connections that women qua women seem to have to nature. This hope is translated into an ethico-political prescription for change founded on the "intimate knowledge of nature" (Merchant 1996, 16), which comes out of women's daily caring practices and leads Merchant to call for a "partnership ethic of earthcare." The "daily caring practices" part of this assertion is important for many ecofeminists who want to avoid making "essentialist" claims about women's biological nature (i.e., that there are essential qualities that all women share by virtue of being female). Aware that charges of essentialism have long undermined ecofeminism, these theorists emphasize that the link they make is a socio-material and experiential one: women's mothering and caregiving work mediates the relationship between people and nature and thereby engenders a *caring stance* towards nature. This rhetoric of "ecomaternalism," as I call it, is pervasive in much of the contemporary ecofeminist discourse. Some of the best-known ecofeminist scholars draw upon a similar connection between women's caring for people and their environmental concern. For example, Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva (1993) write of the "subsistence perspective" and the "feminine principle"; Ariel Salleh (1997) celebrates the "barefoot epistemology" of Southern "re/sisters"; and Mary Mellor (1992, 1997, 2000) calls for a "Women's Experience (WE) world" and for the development of "materialist ecofeminism" or "deep materialism." Each of these writers presents a picture of ecofeminism that is built not on abstract theorizing but, rather, on what women do – indeed, *have always done* – to survive the vicissitudes of capitalist-patriarchal-colonial development. Explaining her own version, Mellor (2000, 114) argues that "women are not closer to nature because of some elemental physiological or spiritual affinity, but because of the social circumstances in which they find themselves." Merchant defends against the charge of essentialism by claiming her position to be gender inclusive; that is, under the right conditions, men can be earthcarers too. Others contend that even if they may in some ways be problematic, assertions about a feminine socio-material connection to nature are both inspirational

and *strategically useful* for the development of ecofeminism as a political movement (Sturgeon 1997).

Social research provides empirical evidence to support the claim that women typically demonstrate a higher level of concern for environmental issues than men (e.g., Tindall, Davies, and Mauboulès 2003; Hunter, Hatch, and Johnson 2004). Many feminist scholars make much of the fact that women are often drawn into environmental activism because as mothers they fear for their children's health and feel a sense of duty to protect and restore their environments. Joni Seager (1993, 269) argues, for example, that "women's environmental activism occurs within the context of, and as a result of, their particular socially assigned roles – roles that in many key ways do transcend boundaries of race, ethnicity, and class." Merchant (1996, 13) quotes one activist as saying that women are "'mothers of the earth' who want to take care of it." Examples can be found in the media: a 1999 edition of *Homemakers* magazine featured an article entitled "Nature Made It, Women Saved It" (Bossin 1999); the spring 2001 issue of the Canadian feminist magazine *Herizons* carried the front-page headline "Will Women Save the Earth?" (illustrated by a photographic image of female arms handcuffed around a tree) (Felesky 2001). Both make celebratory links between women's environmental activism and their feminine or maternal instincts.

But what does it mean for a woman to invoke the identity of "mother" to explain her participation in the political sphere? Why see activism as an extension of women's private roles rather than as a conscious choice to engage in public life? Few ecofeminists have addressed these questions because, in spite of their interest in women's grassroots activism, few regard what women activists do as an expression of citizenship. I contend that this is precisely what ecofeminist scholarship ought to do.

Why citizenship? Since the 1990s, for a number of reasons relevant to ecofeminist politics, there has been a renaissance of feminist interest in citizenship. First, in joining conversations about citizenship that have been growing in the social sciences in recent decades, feminists make the important argument that this ostensibly gender-neutral concept is actually deeply gendered (Voet 1998). Second, many feminists analyze the gendered nature of citizenship within the context of societies in which capitalist globalization and a right-wing backlash against the welfare state have led to a decrease in social rights and an increase in individual duties. Rather than accept a right-wing definition of citizenship, some feminist theorists want to reinvigorate citizenship as a political location from which to destabilize the boundaries between public and private and to argue for the collective provision of social goods like care (see, for example, Lister 1997). Third, some feminist political theorists see citizenship as a response to the feminist embrace of an essentializing identity politics that obliges women to present themselves as women in politics

(e.g., Voet 1998). Recognizing that “woman” is an internally diverse concept and that women have multiple and shifting identities, these theorists argue that the political construct of citizen should be seen as an “articulating principle” (Mouffe 1992b, 378) because it can be at once pluralistic and yet unifying enough to foster a politics of “solidarity in difference” (see also Yuval-Davis 1997; Benhabib 1992). From this feminist perspective, fixing a feminine (or maternal) foundation for politics is undemocratic and apolitical because by defining one identity as authentic it shuts down debate among women. Citizenship, on the other hand, provides an inclusive space for the public performances of political subjectivity that destabilize and resist dominant ideologies of gender.

Informed by these feminist approaches to citizenship, and drawing on those ecofeminists who have considered its merit for ecological politics (e.g., Plumwood 1995b; Gaard 1998; Sandilands 1999a, 1999b), I argue for a project of *feminist ecological citizenship*. I believe that it is a project worth pursuing because citizenship, defined in feminist terms, offers a way to develop ecofeminist positions that are non-essentialist, democratic, and oppositional. As a theoretical project it will not provide definite answers, but it may point to a way out of the kinds of questions and debates that Seager (2003) has declared to be counterproductive to ecofeminism.<sup>1</sup> Feminist citizenship has the potential to be a positive political identity that allows women to express their gender-related concerns for environmental quality but that does not forever tie women (in general) to the private sphere of care and maternal virtue. The cultivation of a democratic public culture in which to debate issues of environmental justice – which includes the collective responsibility for human and non-human well-being – is central to this project. Feminist citizenship discourse also provides a common ground upon which ecofeminists may engage in much needed encounters with other branches of ecopolitical scholarship – branches that share their interest in sustainable human-nature relationships and yet have understandings of citizenship that are woefully gender blind.

In addition to arguing for feminist ecological citizenship,<sup>2</sup> I explain why over-reliance on the discourses of care, mothering, and subsistence labour is not a good strategic move for ecofeminism. Citing feminist and ecofeminist scholarship from a range of disciplines, I provide reasons why ecomaternalist rhetoric offers little hope for the development of a democratic or feminist ecopolitical movement. One reason is that it does not take into account the cultural baggage of the ethics of care discourse, which claims to be rooted in a feminized and different moral voice. In agreement with feminist moral philosophers (e.g., Bowden 1997; Card 1989; Tronto 1993), I argue that, within the context of a white male-dominated society that constructs and enforces women’s capacity to care, ecofeminism should not romanticize but, rather, *politicize* this capacity. Ecomaternalist arguments that celebrate women’s caring for people and the planet without condemning its implication in oppressive



political economic systems risk affirming sexist notions about women's place in society. And I think they are particularly dangerous in an era during which unpaid caring work is increasingly exploited in order to facilitate economic restructuring and the dismantling of the welfare state. An ecofeminist approach to citizenship, on the contrary, recognizes care as a form of work and a moral orientation that has been feminized and privatized in Western societies and that must be distributed fairly within and between societies if gender equality and sustainability are to be realized.

Nor are ecofeminist claims about women's "earthcare" particularly reliable: they are based on selective readings of a narrow list of empirical examples. For example, the Chipko movement is inaccurately held up by ecofeminists as a women-led conservation movement, while women's involvements in pro-development activism are almost never mentioned, nor are examples of earthcare in which men and women have worked together as equal partners (Agarwal 1998b; Reed 2000, 2003). That women engage in environmental activism at great cost to themselves and often under circumstances that are not of their own choosing is seldom discussed. Because many ecofeminist academics want to downplay the privileged place of Western theory in ecofeminism by listening to voices from the grassroots, the experiences of women activists in grassroots environmental struggles are often appropriated and treated as "truth." But, paradoxically, by invoking experientially and epistemologically based women-nature connections, *even when they are said to be based in material conditions*, many ecofeminists falsely universalize private feminine identities and roles, ignore the complex and shifting contexts within which caring and environmental activism take place, and tread dangerously close to perpetuating racism, sexism, and colonialism. They avoid biological essentialism but fall into the trap of "sociological essentialism" (Sandilands 1999a), or what I would call experiential reductionism.

### **Overview of the Book**

In 1987 British feminist Lynne Segal offered some "troubled thoughts" on a contemporary feminism that appeared to be in the midst of a "maternalist revival" (145). Her critique of cultural feminism in *Is the Future Female?* figures prominently in my thinking about ecofeminism. There are some interesting parallels between the arguments I present in what follows and those that frame Segal's book.

I have already highlighted one similarity: both Segal and I are troubled by essentialism. While hers is a socialist feminist critique of the essentialism and psychological determinism of 1980s cultural feminism, mine is an interdisciplinary critique – informed in part by postmodern feminism and feminist political economy – of the experiential reductionism in the ecofeminism of the 1990s.<sup>3</sup> The persistence of essentializing rhetoric in various branches of feminist theorizing suggests that too much weight is placed on private identities

and experiences and not enough on the public and political dimensions of women's lives – or on how private identity and public appearance are related. Segal contends that the most significant contribution of feminist politics is to put hitherto private issues on the public agenda and to demand that “caring, sharing, and loving” no longer be regarded as sentiments exclusive to the family. In agreement with Segal and other feminist scholars, I think ecofeminism, too, needs a “calling back to politics” (Dietz 1991, 250). I present this argument in three stages, in Chapters 2, 3, and 4.

In Chapter 2, “The Roots and Rhetoric of Ecomaternalism,” I provide an overview of some of the antecedents of contemporary ecomaternalist discourse. Two periods in the history of feminist movements are particularly interesting to my discussion: (1) when maternalist arguments were used to justify women's demands for equal citizenship in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and (2) when these arguments were invoked by 1970s cultural feminists to promote women's special – that is, morally superior – approach to politics. In Chapter 3 I provide examples of celebrated grassroots activism in the South (the Chipko movement) and in the North (the Love Canal Homeowners' Association) in order to demonstrate how ecofeminists regard women's private identities as the bases for public engagement and political empowerment. This chapter, which is entitled “‘Down among the Women’: Ecofeminism and Identity Politics at the Grassroots,” also provides a critical interrogation of what looks to me like a “grassroots turn” by locating it within the debates over identity politics and strategic essentialism. I then argue in Chapter 4, which is entitled “From Care to Citizenship: Calling Ecofeminism Back to Politics,” that there are political risks in celebrating women's association with caring (as both an ethic and a practice) and in reducing women's ethico-political life to care. While there are important aspects to ecofeminist valuations of women's caring, I think a greater degree of scepticism is in order. I develop this position by drawing on the work of feminist philosophers, political economists, and political theorists who have argued that the positive identification of women with caring ought to be treated cautiously for it obscures some of the negative implications of feminized care and narrows our understanding of women as political actors (e.g., Dietz 1985, 1998). In Chapter 4 I also explain why ecofeminists would be better served by using feminist theories of citizenship to understand and interpret women's engagement in ecpolitics.

One of the reasons Segal criticizes the essentialist discourse of cultural feminism is that it stands in the way of much needed solidarity between feminist women and men in the labour and socialist movements. Troubled by the sexism of leftist men and by how women's caring and community service work is taken for granted by socialist thinkers, Segal (1987, 242) calls for a rethinking of politics that begins with the question: “How do we provide for the needs of all, and not at the expense of women?” “Unless and until” the left starts to

take this feminist question seriously, she argues, there will be little hope of building an inclusive counter-hegemonic coalition or creating a society that allows all people to live full and creative lives. But it will be difficult for men to take feminism seriously if it relies on “us versus them” identity politics and female supremacist arguments that call on women to save the world while blaming men for endangering it.

I too find reason to question the new (and greening) left’s receptivity to ecofeminist analyses at the same time as I am dissatisfied with ecofeminists’ response to being left out. I have been frustrated on many occasions by the disregard of gender inequality as a relevant issue in left-green discussions about ecopolitical alternatives to unsustainable capitalist and political systems. Therefore, in Chapter 5, “The Problems and Possibilities of Ecological Citizenship,” I place my analysis of ecofeminist discourse against a backcloth of current green political (or ecopolitical) thought, a field that is at once exciting and unimaginatively patriarchal in its visions. Within this body of literature, “sustainability” and “environmental citizenship” have become popular concepts throughout the 1990s and into the 2000s. The growing awareness of environmental degradation and the belief that human societies are fast approaching the biophysical limits of our inhabitation of the planet has prompted environmental scholars and policy makers to focus their attention on what it means to live sustainably (or less unsustainably).<sup>4</sup> Concerns about sustainability have informed proposals for a range of dramatic changes to current systems – economic, regulatory, and political – that would improve the quality of life of current populations while ensuring similar chances for survival of subsequent ones. However, because sustainability is a contestable concept, and because moving towards a sustainable society will require such dramatic and sweeping changes in individual human behaviour and collective and institutional social practices, many ecopolitical theorists argue that it is necessary to democratically involve people in the process not only in order to promote justice but also in order to ensure the consent and ongoing active participation of all concerned. In addition to positing it as the most appropriate means of articulating this green democratic involvement, many see citizenship as a way to change individual behaviour, to foster values of stewardship and ecological virtue in local places and in global civil society (e.g., Curtin 1999; Dobson 2003). This green writing on citizenship offers valuable challenges to those theorists (feminists included) who make little room for ecological questions in their understandings of citizenship. Hartley Dean (2001, 491) sums up these challenges nicely:

Green thinking has impacted on our understanding of citizenship in at least three different ways. First, environmental concerns have entered our understanding of the rights we enjoy as citizens. Second, the enhanced level of global awareness associated with ecological thinking

has helped to broaden our understanding of the potential scope of citizenship. Third, emergent ecological concerns have added fuel to a complex debate about the responsibilities that attach to citizenship.

In the second part of Chapter 5 I critique ecopolitical approaches to citizenship from a feminist perspective. My assessment leads me to conclude that, as in many periods before this one, blind spots where gender is concerned significantly weaken contemporary left-green analyses. It seems that the new linkage of environmentalism and democracy leaves many questions unanswered and often unasked. As Carole Pateman (1988) would say, “only half the story is told” in ecopolitical discourse: there is silence in this androcentric (or male-centred or masculinist) discourse about the specificity of gender. And once again there is denial of the inescapable relationship between the realm of politics and the *realm of necessity* – the foundations of political analysis upon which most feminist political theorists stand. I argue that blindness to gender specificity and gender asymmetries undermines the promise of ecological citizenship, for a society that has not addressed the unequal division of responsibility for sustaining life will surely not be very “sustainable” – socially, politically, or ecologically. Although only a few ecofeminists have engaged in conversation (in print, at least) with the “green men” (they are predominantly men, as I show in Chapter 5), ecofeminist critiques of ecological citizenship provide important contributions to this project.

I am in agreement with Segal’s argument in *Is the Future Female?* that one of the biggest problems with a feminism based on women’s moral superiority is that it does as much to support a right-wing as it does a left-wing vision of social change. Segal notes that, throughout the 1980s, socialist men in Britain were not the only ones to take women’s caring labour for granted: the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher called on women to resume their place in the so-called traditional family and turned left-wing discourse of self-reliance back on itself to support the dismantling of the welfare state. Thatcher even called upon “women’s special qualities to suggest *her own* greater integrity, sincerity and depth of feeling” (Segal 1987, 246, emphasis mine). As Steven Best and Douglas Kellner (1991, 198) point out: “under the direction of Thatcher and Reagan/Bush, the right has appropriated and monopolized moral and political discourse to its own advantage, defining democracy in a way compatible with the destruction of the welfare state and a return to *laissez-faire* capitalism and atomistic individualism.” Similar neoliberal policy developments have become increasingly evident in Canada in the 1990s and into the first decade of the 2000s (the temporal and cultural context of this book). So, just as Segal observed in 1980s Britain, in 1990s and present-day Canada women are being implicated in the campaign to remove responsibility for social service from the state and put it back into the household where it purportedly belongs.

Simply put, the 1990s were a period of neoliberal economic and political restructuring within nation-states – a restructuring that was seen as part and parcel of the increasing globalization of capitalism.<sup>5</sup> As multinational corporations grew less loyal to national economies, national and subnational (e.g., provincial) governments in the developed world were prompted to implement neoliberal economic policies that could attract investment back from the more investment-friendly countries of the South. This move amounted to a race to the bottom, in that the lowest common denominator of minimal regulation became the international standard by which competitiveness was judged. In advanced capitalist countries like Canada, this shift has resulted in the dismantling of the welfare state and the gradual privatization of social services, the deregulation of industries, the erosion of environmental and labour standards, the weakening of local governments, and the creation of free-trade agreements (e.g., the North American Free Trade Agreement) (Teeple 1995). All of these changes have occurred in the province of Ontario (where my research takes place), spearheaded by the new right government of Premier Mike Harris, whose Progressive Conservative Party was elected in the summer of 1995, re-elected in 1999, and then, after a brief post-Harris period under Premier Ernie Eves (Harris' minister of finance), defeated by the equally neoliberal Liberal Party in 2003. My research for *Beyond Mothering Earth* was completed before the Liberal Party, led by Premier Dalton McGuinty, came to power late in 2003. At the time of writing it is impossible to say what impact this new Ontario government will have on a province still coping with the legacy of Harris' Common Sense Revolution. There are thus far few signs of real changes in economic or social policy. I shall therefore refer to the neoliberal agenda in the present tense.

While feminist scholars generally accept this explanation of the dominant forces guiding global economic restructuring, they are critical of analyses that focus strictly on changes in the relations and modes of production, retaining the male worker as the main protagonist and overlooking the realm of social reproduction (including caring and necessary labour) and gender divisions altogether. Many feminists have noted that there has been a lack of attention to the deeply gendered aspects of changes in the global economy (e.g., Bakker 1996a, 1996b; Adam 2002). Looking at new economic realities through a feminist lens gives rise to several concerns about recent changes in the conditions of women's lives and their role in the organization of caring labour both within and among nations. These concerns include the dismantling of social welfare and a redefinition of citizenship.

Canadian political theorist Janine Brodie (1995, 1996a, 1996b) observes that, with the dismantling of the welfare state, feminists are in the paradoxical position of having to defend a system about which they are ambivalent (to say the least) because the immediate implications of cutbacks in social spending for women's lives are severe. Feminist researchers have documented the impacts

of cuts to all aspects of social welfare on women as recipients or clients of state-funded services (Cohen 1995; Calder 2003). The erosion of social programs has resulted in increased rates of poverty and decreased quality of life among women and, if they are parents, their children. Perhaps the most notable theme in feminist literature on social policy and economic restructuring in the 1990s is the analysis that women are expected to act as the “shock-absorbers” (Brodie 1995, 19) of privatization by filling in for lost state-provided services with their own unpaid, caring labour in private households and through volunteer work in communities. The feminist critique of the concept of “community care” was especially prominent in the early 1980s in Margaret Thatcher’s Britain (Finch and Groves 1983; Finch 1984, 1990) and has become highly relevant in the Canadian context since the mid-1990s (see, for example, Brodie 1996a; Bakker 1996b; Evans and Wekerle, eds. 1997). Governments often promote this strategy as a way to provide better, more personalized care to dependent people while at the same time saving taxpayers millions of dollars per year. The basic feminist criticism of community care policies is that the state is exploiting and intensifying unpaid caring labour ostensibly in order to reduce social spending at the same time that it is obscuring this reality with the euphemistic language of “community.” It has been established, in numerous feminist studies, that women do the vast majority of unpaid caring labour. As a result, it is clear that community care policies promise to further entrench the unequal gender division of caring labour and women’s social subordination (Stinson 2005). Brodie (1996a) refers to this as the “re’-privatization of care” to highlight the underlying assumption that it is being returned to its rightful place in the home and in the hands of mothers, daughters, and wives.

The globalization of capitalism and the progressive erosion of the nation-state (as it is conventionally understood) have contributed to a redefinition of citizenship. Brodie (1996b, 130) observes that “it has become increasingly apparent that the new neoliberal state marks a distinct shift in shared understandings of what it means to be a citizen and what the citizen can legitimately ask of the state.” Her work is part of a growing body of feminist public policy research that seeks to uncover the gender subtext of recent changes in shared understandings of citizenship (see also Pateman 1992; Jenson 1996).<sup>6</sup> Under the Keynesian welfare state social citizenship entitled people to a basic standard of living regardless of personal status because it was recognized that structural forces could constrain opportunities and create economic instability. Further, there was a consensus that the state had a responsibility to safeguard the basic well-being of individuals. Feminists in the West have long supported an approach to citizenship that emphasizes social rights so that women may participate equally and avoid being burdened with an unfair share of responsibilities. However, with the implementation of a new right agenda there has been a marked shift away from social citizenship towards a definition of citizenship that is conditional and exclusive. Janine Brodie (1996a,

19) writes: “The rights and securities universally guaranteed to citizens of the Keynesian welfare state are no longer rights, universal, or secure. The new ideal of the common good rests on market-oriented values such as self-reliance, efficiency, and competition. The new good citizen is one who recognizes the limits and liabilities of state provision and embraces the obligation to work longer and harder in order to become more self-reliant” (quoting Drache 1992, 221).

In addition to criticizing the effects of this shift on women, feminists have noted that the new right’s reassertion of community responsibility and the virtues of self-reliance and volunteerism as conditions of citizenship coincides dangerously with the left’s focus on an increased role for civil society. The progressive left-wing discourse that sees self-help, mutual aid, and civic participation as foundational to the democratic system (with which the paternalistic and disempowering welfare state interferes) dovetails neatly with a neoliberal disdain for government intervention. An analysis of the co-optation of left discourse in facilitating economic restructuring is important in light of my interest in ecological citizenship and in light of my examination of the role women’s caring labour plays in the search for sustainability. The analysis becomes especially challenging when one notes the similarity between the ecopolitical discourse of green virtue and the “environmentality” of governments that seek to discipline people into being good green citizens in order to shift the focus away from the state’s responsibility for environmental quality (Darier 1996; Luke 1997). Recognizing the disciplinary power of the notion of “care for future generations” leads me to wonder whether women are more implicated than men in the ecopolitical discourse of sustainability. I address this issue in Chapters 5, 7, and 9.

Feminist critics have argued that the most significant overlap between left-wing and right-wing visions of welfare reform involves their blindness to gender. They are rightly sceptical of these visions on the grounds that few are based on an understanding of the gendered division of unpaid caring labour or on an adequate assessment of the diverse needs and interests that exist in families and communities. For example, Fiona Williams (1989, 124) notes that, like neoconservative governments, when the left ascribes a significant role for “informal networks of care,” they assume “the availability of women to provide not only the unpaid informal care, but probably also the voluntary work and the low paid domiciliary work.” Few have acknowledged the possibility that a greater role for civil society will intensify demands on women (who in many countries make up the majority of unpaid community volunteers and activists), and few have considered the social implications of doing caring work without pay.

Given that neoliberal governments are downloading the responsibility and work of caring onto the private sphere at the same time as ecological citizenship proponents are envisioning a greater role for individuals, what does this

mean for caregivers who participate in the public domain as citizens? Perhaps changes in social policy have resulted in an intensified burden of caring responsibilities while making it more difficult for citizens to find time for civic engagement. In Canada the final report of the 2000 National Survey of Giving, Volunteering, and Participating (released in 2001 to coincide with the International Year of the Volunteer) found that about one million fewer people reported volunteer activities in 2000 than in 1997, and it recorded a noticeable decline in the rate of civic participation in Ontario. Although the report does not provide a detailed analysis of the change, it does conclude that volunteering and civic participation have been affected by a “deepening time-crunch within Canadian families” (Hall, McKeown, and Roberts 2001, 55). In other words, the demands of work and family, combined with other economic and social factors, make it difficult for people to find time for civic activities. This point leads to the second part of *Beyond Mothering Earth*, where my theoretical analysis of ecopolitical and ecofeminist scholarship in Part One is complemented by empirical research. I empirically explore the implications of the convergence of new right and new greening left agendas through in-depth, qualitative research into the lives of thirty Ontario women. These women engage in public caring work through being active volunteers in environmental campaigns and organizations, and they engage in private caring work through being mothers. I interviewed them from September 1999 to July 2000, at the beginning of the Harris government’s second term.

I begin Part Two with Chapter 6, “Conversations with Activist Women: Towards a Counter-Narrative,” which introduces my empirical research and the context within which it took place. I explain the feminist methodological principles that informed my research and then provide a brief overview of the research process. (Readers with an interest in qualitative research can turn to the appendix for a more detailed account of the research design and methods.) I think it is important to include a discussion of methodology in any work that includes empirical inquiry so that readers may gain insight into the researcher’s motivations and commitments. In Chapter 6 I make clear that my aim is to disrupt the approach, common in many ecofeminist texts, that places “lived experience” in a privileged position vis-à-vis theorizing in a way that both reifies experience and fails to see theorizing as a political activity. I argue that it is important to grapple with, rather than dismiss, the problems associated with theorizing the contested concepts of “women,” “identity,” and “experience” that have been discussed by postmodern feminist scholars (e.g., Riley 1988; Alcoff 1988; Scott 1992; Sandilands 1999a). My research critically interrogates the activist-academic relationship and takes a provisional and conversational approach towards the interpretation of women’s experiences. I call for the development of a different kind of theoretical politics for ecofeminism, one that forges a democratic and reflexive relationship between women who, as activists and theorizers, work on environmental issues. There



is much to learn from those feminist scholars of epistemology who recommend less reductionistic ways of interpreting women's experiential knowledge. Modelling this approach in my interviews with thirty women activists in the greater Toronto area I show that the women's analyses of their own experiences "speak back" to ecofeminist scholarship in interesting ways.

In Chapter 7, "The Private, the Public, and the Planet: Juggling Care and Activism in Daily Life," and Chapter 8, "Activist Women Theorize the Green Political," I present an analysis of my interviews with women who juggle multiple roles in their everyday lives. My conversations with them were animated by two interrelated questions, both of which come out of my analysis of ecofeminist and ecopolitical literature: First, what is life like for women who combine the work of caring in the private sphere with that of active civic participation on issues of environmental quality? Second, what is the relationship between the prescriptions and portraits found in ecofeminist and ecopolitical literature and the perceptions of the women who come close to emulating them? The accounts given by the women are significant to the development of both ecofeminist and ecopolitical theory because they help highlight relationships among gender, care, citizenship, and environmental change. Drawing on direct quotations from the women I interviewed, I discuss numerous findings that complicate the profiles of the "housewife activist" and the "eco-citizen" that are offered in the academic literature to which I am responding.

A focus on women's grassroots activism on quality-of-life issues provides a link to another body of literature that has informed the development of my argument. There is a growing political movement that addresses the environmental quality of inner-city neighbourhoods and low-income communities: the environmental justice movement (Hofrichter 1993; Taylor 1997; Gosine 2003). Such struggles have been on the rise throughout the 1990s as increasing evidence is found to support the analysis of "environmental racism" (Bullard 1990). The globalization of capitalism has meant that multinational corporations are not held responsible for the clean-up of industrial pollutants that contaminate the local environments inhabited largely by poor and racialized people. Paradoxically, the very people who are most active in the struggle for environmental justice face the greatest obstacles to citizen participation. It has been well documented that women constitute the majority of activists in local anti-toxics struggles. They are the ones who have made the links between environmental contamination and health problems such as cancer and asthma (Taylor 1997). As some researchers have argued, the prevalence of women leaders in the environmental justice movement has a great deal to do with "the gendered division of environmental risks" (Rocheleau, Thomas-Slayter, and Wangari 1996). The women in my study also find that women dramatically outnumber men in local quality-of-life campaigns, which, for them, include such issues as pesticide use, lead and water contamination, waste

management, and industrial emissions. I suggest that their work in urban and suburban communities comes under the rubric of environmental justice, even though many of the women do not use the terminology or resemble the environmental justice activists typically celebrated in the literature.

Finally, both Segal and I argue as we do because we want to contribute to moving an important intellectual and political movement in a more promising direction. Segal, a long-time feminist activist and academic, offers an imminent critique that she hopes will strengthen rather than undermine feminist politics. Although I have not been involved in an “ecofeminist movement” per se, I am committed to many of the goals and analyses of an ecologically oriented feminism. I have been involved in urban environmental issues since my graduate studies in urban planning and take an active role in raising feminist-environmental concerns within activist-academic circles. Insofar as my theoretical perspective is informed by Canadian traditions in feminist sociology and political economy and feminist urbanism, I consider it to be distinct from, and certainly having no particular loyalty to, American ecofeminist scholarship.<sup>7</sup> And I am less interested in whether it is called ecofeminism, feminist environmentalism, feminist political ecology, and so on (there may be more varieties by the time this book goes to print) than I am in the kinds of debates that the convergence of feminism and environmentalism can inspire. My theoretical perspective, activist-academic involvements, and social location as a white middle-class, fifth-generation Scots-Canadian (once a Torontonian but now living in rural northwest England) come together to inform an analysis that comes from within, but goes against the grain of, contemporary ecofeminism. As I explain in my concluding chapter, “No Motherhood Issue: The Project of Feminist Ecological Citizenship,” the central point of *Beyond Mothering Earth* is to create a space for fruitful consideration of issues that need more discussion and debate among ecofeminists and between ecofeminists and other green theorists. I hope that it will contribute to the ongoing development of these theories and practices in ways that foster new arguments and that offer possible resolutions to some long-standing contradictions.

PART ONE

# Theoretical Interrogations



### **Women are emerging as leaders**

and guardians of life-centred cultures, economies and policies. Movements to defend water are being led by women. Movements to defend biodiversity are being led by women. Movements for food and water rights are being led by women. While overcoming their marginalisation, women are emerging as guardians of life and the future.

– *Vandana Shiva, "Women and Religion in the Context of Globalization"*

### **Having stood up to fight**

for a sexless society, we now find ourselves entrapped in the familiar deadlock of "woman is wonderful."

– *Monique Wittig, One Is Not Born a Woman*