

# Organization & Environment

<http://oae.sagepub.com>

---

## **Lesbian Separatist Communities and the Experience of Nature: Toward a Queer Ecology**

Catriona Sandilands

*Organization Environment* 2002; 15; 131

DOI: 10.1177/10826602015002002

The online version of this article can be found at:  
<http://oae.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/15/2/131>

---

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

**Additional services and information for *Organization & Environment* can be found at:**

**Email Alerts:** <http://oae.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

**Subscriptions:** <http://oae.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

**Reprints:** <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

**Permissions:** <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

**Citations** <http://oae.sagepub.com/cgi/content/refs/15/2/131>

# LESBIAN SEPARATIST COMMUNITIES AND THE EXPERIENCE OF NATURE

Toward a Queer Ecology

CATRIONA SANDILANDS  
York University

*Queer ecology is a cultural, political, and social analysis that interrogates the relations between the social organization of sexuality and ecology. As a part of this analysis, this article explores the ideas and practices of lesbian separatist communities in southern Oregon. It considers that separatists have, since 1974, developed a distinct political-ecological culture to challenge the heterosexual, patriarchal, and capitalist organization of rural North America. Although lesbian separatism was founded on essentialist constructions of gender and nature, the Oregon communities have developed, over time, a blend of lesbian principles and local environmental knowledge. This has produced a complex tradition of lesbian ecopolitical resistance. Organizing threads of this tradition include opening access to land and transforming relations of rural ownership, withdrawing land from patriarchal-capitalist production and reproduction, feminizing the landscape ideologically and physically, developing a gender-bending physical experience of nature, experiencing nature as an erotic partner, and politicizing rurality and rural lesbian identity.*

## INTRODUCTION: ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE AND QUEER ECOLOGY

In her essay “Ecological Legitimacy and Cultural Essentialism,” Laura Pulido (1998) made an interesting argument about cultural and ecological politics in (some) environmental justice struggles. Describing Ganados del Valle, a Hispano community development project in northern New Mexico, Pulido argued that the group’s deployment of a romanticized connection between Hispano culture and environmental sustainability was an effective strategy to make changes that were both ecologically and culturally beneficial for the community. Set against a dominant Anglo representation of Hispanos as ecologically irresponsible, the counterdiscourse of Hispanos as inherent stewards of nature created what Pulido called “ecological legitimacy” in the political realm as well as a cultural pride important to community involvement with the project. Although Pulido noted that such strategies may reify cultural differences (thereby discouraging cooperation across communities) and downplay cultural dynamism (thereby discouraging innovation), she clearly pointed to the importance of cultural issues for ecological politics and to the potential importance of strategic essentialism in some ecopolitical contexts.<sup>1</sup>

For this article, Pulido’s (1998) analysis suggests two important starting points. First, she demonstrated that the intimate relationship between environmental and cultural issues in late capitalism exists both in the actual organization of communities’ relationships with nature and in the political articulation of environmental with

cultural struggles. For racialized and other communities facing hegemonic cultures and engaged in struggles for environmental justice, this observation is vital. Less obviously, however, Pulido demonstrated that the creative act of weaving a collective identity, from threads of traditional stories and artifacts but also from imagination and new or hybrid possibilities, can have profound environmental significance. In other words, she showed that struggles for environmental justice are not only about achieving particular environmental goals but are also about crafting new cultures of nature in and for marginalized communities.

The leap between Hispano environmental organizing in New Mexico and lesbian separatist land communities in southern Oregon is a large one culturally, geographically, and politically. But in this respect, they share an agenda: They are marginalized communities involved in crafting new cultures of nature against the dominant social and ecological relations of late capitalism. I also, however, make this seemingly unlikely juxtaposition for strategic reasons. Where the growing environmental justice movement has, importantly, called attention to the correlations of power between racism and environmental degradation, there has been almost no attention paid to the possibility that sexuality might also be a dimension of power worth investigating for its environmental significance. In this assertion, I do not claim that power relations around sexuality contribute to the organization of environmental degradation in a similar manner as do those based on class and race. It is abundantly clear that such issues as the location of hazardous production and waste sites are organized economically and especially racially and that sexuality per se has less bearing.<sup>2</sup> Rather, what I propose is that the observation that environmental issues are inextricably tied to organizing social relations be extended to include sexuality. I thus argue that there may then be fruitful collaborations between gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgendered/queer/two-spirited (g/l/b/t/q/t)<sup>3</sup> politics and environmental politics.

To the lesbians who have lived or are living in intentional land-based communities in the southern part of the state of Oregon, this observation is intuitively obvious. At the height of lesbian feminism in the 1970s and 1980s, lesbian "separatists" who moved to rural settings to live collectively away from urban heteropatriarchy had a clear idea about the importance of nature in their culture, and the importance of their culture to ecology. One of the most famous separatist texts of the period, Sally Gearhart's (1979) utopian novel *The Wanderground*, was exemplary of this kind of feminist position on nature. It argued that women are not only naturally allied to nature (in opposition to male-constructed capitalist cities) but that women identified with women living in self-sufficient communities in nature could develop new sensual and social relations that are truly in tune with natural processes. Rural separatism was, at least in part, about developing a distinct lesbian culture of nature.

As a political movement, lesbian separatism gained prominence during the 1970s and 1980s. Its origins are generally traced back to the 1971 founding of The Furies, a group of lesbians who were enraged at the ways mainstream feminists (especially the National Organization for Women) actively distanced themselves from lesbian struggles and purged lesbians from their organizational ranks (see Stein 1997, p. 113). In response—and in the context of a more general radicalization of feminist cultural politics (see Echols, 1989)—separatists sought to establish lesbianism as a radical political position, an active strategy of women's separation from male culture. Borrowing from the nationalist identities and strategies of Black and Aboriginal civil rights movements, lesbian separatists argued that women needed to withdraw support from the heteropatriarchy and develop communities

away from the oppressive influence of men. One popular slogan throughout the 1970s and 1980s was, "If feminism is the theory, lesbianism is the practice"; separatism was a way for lesbians to begin to create a new and transformative culture, to found a Lesbian Nation (Johnston, 1973).

To be sure, separatism had its share of problems. It called on women to prioritize their sexual identity over all others and to choose to break with solidarities that might have been based on race or class but might have tied women to men. As a result, separatism was a largely White and middle-class movement. It also discouraged affinities with gay men's struggles. At its height, lesbian separatism—and here I simplify the complex critiques offered by Stein (1997), Sally Munt (1998), and Dana Shugar (1995), among others—tended toward ahistorical, essentialist, and biologically deterministic analyses of sexuality and identity. It "fixed" women's consciousness in time and space, imagined women as a coherent community sharing primary gender oppression, marginalized earlier generations of lesbians (especially butch-femme couples), and even posited that once freed from patriarchy, women would return to their biologically indicated predilections for nurturance, nonviolence, and mutuality in all things.

As a cultural nationalism, however, lesbian separatism was importantly about creating a liberated space for radical transformation. Although it is, 20-odd years later, customary to condemn separatism out of hand for its more "extreme" and essentialist elements, it was actually a more complex politics than most critiques allow. For example (as some do note, for example, Shugar, 1995), lesbian separatists were among the first White (second-wave) feminists to include explicit analyses of class and race in their visions of feminist politics. In this light, much separatist rhetoric seems of the strategically essentialist kind.<sup>4</sup> With strategic consciousness came also a recognition of diversity that was powerful for the time and place. A closer historical view suggests that in fact, separatism acted in particular times and places as a form of locally specified political culture.<sup>5</sup> It highlighted and responded to particular relations of power with an agenda of cultural, and ecological, feminist transformation.

Although many of the women who continue to live on lesbian community lands and call themselves separatists recognize some of the weaknesses of separatist thinking, they also demonstrate that much has changed in separatist thinking since the 1970s. And just as their ideas on gender and sexuality have changed, so too has their ecological wisdom, even if the desire for a counterhegemonic lesbian culture of nature has not. Thus, essentialist rhetoric (highlighted as ecologically useful by Pulido for environmental justice) is only part of the story of the rural separatist communities of southern Oregon. This article seeks to tell a more complex history of a sexual community's culture of nature and of the relations of power in and against which it consciously struggles. In other words, this is a story about an important sexualized culture—a lesbian culture of nature—that is used to advance queer ecology as a distinct realm of environmental studies.

### QUEER ECOLOGY: "OUT" IN THE FIELD

Queer ecology is a form of cultural, political, and social analysis centrally focused on interrogating the relations between the social organization of sexuality and ecology, akin to environmental justice scholarship on race and ecofeminist thinking about gender. This statement merits some discussion at the outset because I understand queer ecology to be allied with, but not subsumed by, such currents as ecofeminism and environmental justice.<sup>6</sup> Just as environmental justice and

ecofeminist perspectives tend to focus on different sites of ecological power relations, so too do they tend to highlight different kinds of power relations. Environmental justice, for example, has tended to focus analytically and politically on the ways in which racial-ecological relations are manifest in particular kinds of spatial organization, notably on practices of siting and access (see Bullard, 1993; Domagalski, 1999). Ecofeminism has tended to focus its most concentrated attention on the large-scale material and epistemic practices through which women and nature are jointly oppressed in Western culture and history (see Field, 2000; Forbes & Sells, 1997; Warren, 1990). In this context, a queer ecology invites different modes of political response and different forms of cultural creation, preferably including situationally specific and complex structures of power.

The importance of a connection between queer and ecological politics, although seldom discussed explicitly, has already been indicated in at least two distinct ways. First, recent texts that fall under the general rubric of “queer geography” call attention to the ways sexualities are organized spatially, including such issues as queers’ access to—and particular sexual, cultural, political, and other uses of—public spaces (including nature spaces); the discursive-ideological sexualization of ideas of wilderness, urbanity, and rurality; and the importance of particular landscapes for the formation and organization of particular queer cultures and experiences (for a selection of some of the best work in this genre, see Bell & Valentine, 1995a; Ingram, Bouthillette, & Retter, 1997; Phillips, West, & Shuttleton, 2000). Although, to the best of my knowledge, queer geographers have not explicitly argued that a distinct queer interrogation of ecological relations emerges from these specific experiences, it is clear from these texts that the physical and discursive qualities of nature have a considerable and particular impact on queer communities. For example, urban nature spaces have been significant (and often controversial) hives of sexual and other activity for many urban gay men and lesbians and members of other “outlaw” sexual groups. For another, medicalized discourses of nature and “natural” sexuality have had, at least since the late 19th century, a strong impact on the ways in which individuals understand and organize their sexualities in the context of communities, including the creation of ghettos and the frequent flight of rural North American queers from their places of origin (see Ingram et al., 1997).

The second site in which a potential mingling of queer and ecological politics has been discussed is within ecofeminism. Although the topic has by no means been the center of attention in ecofeminist circles, the works of Greta Gaard (1997) and Stacy Alaimo (2000) provide an interesting trajectory. For Gaard, whose article “Toward a Queer Ecofeminism” was among the first to point to the possibility of a conversation between *g/l/b/t/q/t* and ecofeminist politics,<sup>7</sup> the crucial point is that heterosexism and ecological destruction are interrelated and that the conceptual organization of hierarchical dualism in Western thought similarly justifies both the dominance of heterosexuality over other sexualities and the elevation of (rational, disembodied) culture over (erotic, embodied) nature. Showing some of the threads of this oppressive discursive configuration, Gaard thus asserted that “the native feminized other of nature is not simply eroticized but also queered and animalized, in that any sexual behavior outside the rigid confines of compulsory heterosexuality becomes queer and subhuman” (p. 130). Alaimo, building on such insights, demonstrated that literary figures such as Jane Rule actively intervene in this configuration to disrupt—to “queer”—such associations, thereby articulating a textual-cultural politics that articulates ecological with (in this case) lesbian concerns. She noted that Rule’s (1964) influential *Desert of the Heart*, for example, “complicates the natural to such a degree that it can no longer serve as the bedrock of heterosexual-

ity” and “(de)naturalizes the desert, transforming nature into a space for lesbian desire” (Alaimo, 2000, pp. 166-167). As Alaimo astutely recognized, Rule plays with oppressive discourses of sex and nature to transform them into a radically innovative articulation, thus indicating that a new relation between lesbian desire and nature may be possible.

As I have described elsewhere in more detail (Sandilands, 2001), it is in the combination of these two currents of movement toward a queer ecology that one can find a useful place from which to think of a queer ecology. Remember Pulido’s (1998) argument: She saw Hispano culture at Ganados del Valle as an active strategic intervention into an existing Hispano social and ecological community aimed at the creation and legitimation of a counterhegemonic culture of nature. Similarly, then, one can posit that there may be a set of experiences of nature that is importantly organized by sexuality—perhaps particularly by the spatial and discursive relations of power shaping nature and sexuality. Moreover, an active cultural politics of “queering” ecological relations may creatively organize communities into challenging the relations of power emanating from heterosexism and ecological degradation. That is, as new forms of culture are initiated, heterosexism and its ecological consequences are revealed and resisted. Queer ecology, then, is not just about representing g/l/b/t/q/t issues in ecological politics and analysis but is also about drawing insight from queer cultures to form alternative, even transformative, cultures of nature. On one hand, then, a queer ecology could be understood as a kindred spirit to a politics of environmental justice focused on challenging spatial-ecological relations of power and addressing such issues as the sexualized organization of nature space. On the other hand, a queer ecology could also be understood as an ally to a more culturally disruptive gender politics. As suggested by Alaimo, this type of politics addresses such issues as the role of images of nature in discourses of sexuality and the development of more playful, novel alternatives. That these two may not be separate projects is indicated, of course, by Pulido: Cultural intervention may, in many cases, have a strong impact in the organization of nature space.

This article brings these analytical elements to an examination of ecology in the lesbian separatist land communities of southern Oregon. Members of these communities have struggled for nearly 30 years to create radical alternative cultures and to generate some of the impacts outlined above. Although these Oregon separatists are not “representative” of a queer ecological culture (or even of lesbians in North America),<sup>8</sup> this study springs from the question, “What do the experiences of Oregon lesbian separatist land communities show us about relations between sexuality and ecology?” In the context of recent condemnations of separatist essentialism, this article also seeks to tell a more complex tale about lesbian separatists’ ideas of nature, including the fact that lesbian essentialism is often also strategic and including the fact that separatism itself has changed a great deal since the 1970s.

#### **CONTEXT AND APPROACH: ASKING LANDDYKES ABOUT LANDSCAPE**

The stories related below span nearly 30 years. From the 1970s until the present, hundreds (if not thousands) of women moved to southern Oregon, as they moved to lesbian separatist intentional communities or “women’s lands” all over the United States and Canada. Many of North America’s landdyke communities were disbanded over the years; others have survived, among other things, publishing a magazine called *Maize*, devoted to rural lesbian living.<sup>9</sup> Despite the persistence of these

communities, few academic works have even recognized rural lesbian separatism, and the few that do—for example, Shugar (1995) and Valentine (1997)—tend to rely almost exclusively for their information on a collection of landdyke writings published by Joyce Cheney in 1985 titled *Lesbian Land*. For all the texture of this collection, it was written at a particular point in time and represents a very narrow range of issues and questions. As I have discussed elsewhere (Sandilands, 2002a), these academic studies were also written at a particular point in time and with a particular political perspective, and Valentine (1997) in particular seemed actively to render rural lesbian separatism as a politics belonging to another age entirely.

This study, in contrast, begins with the premise that the rural lesbian separatist intentional communities are alive and, particularly in the southern Oregon stretch of the I-5 highway between approximately Eugene and the California border, quite well. The “community” of communities is a porous and fluid entity, comprising a variety of lesbians, a variety of separatist and nonseparatist philosophies, and a variety of institutional arrangements. As Summerhawk and Gagehabib (2000) described in one of the very few academic articles on the topic,

the Southern Oregon Lesbian Community is a loose network of intentional, rural collectives and individual women living in the small towns or in the country who consider themselves part of it. The intentional land communities range from a well-organized WomanShare collective, to the individually-controlled Rootworks, to the buy-share arrangement of Rainbow’s End. The community has several gatherings each year to celebrate itself or natural events such as the Equinox, or to produce workshops around a common theme. (p. 115)

By and large, the lesbians to whom I spoke (and the archival and contemporary sources I consulted) during the course of my research in the spring of 2000 agreed that there was a series of “core” lesbian intentional communities plus various other institutions (newsletters, support groups, and educational resources) and individuals (living in small towns or on private rural lands) who had some relationship to this core. The core communities currently inhabited are Rainbow’s End (plus Rainbow’s Other End) and Fly Away Home in Douglas County and Rootworks and Womanshare in Josephine County.<sup>10</sup> Past communities no longer inhabited as collective lesbian land include Stepping Woods and OWL Farm in Douglas County and Cabbage Lane and Golden in Josephine County.<sup>11</sup> The network of rural lesbians and institutions extends south into Jackson County and particularly into Ashland, with institutions such as the Southern Oregon State College Lesbian Support Group, and north into Eugene and even to the We’Moon lands near Portland.

My research focused on the still-inhabited intentional communities but necessarily included a broader historical consideration of the others and of the experiences of some of the women who had left the communities at various points but were still part of the larger southern Oregon network. As noted above, I was primarily interested in asking, “What do the experiences of these Oregon lesbian separatist land communities show us about relations between sexuality and ecology?” Given the fundamental absence of research in this area, the question was clearly an exploratory one, and I admit without apology to a rather opportunistic research strategy designed to elicit themes to bring to a broader queer ecological conversation (i.e., I do not consider this work to be the last one on the topic and hope fervently that other researchers will enter into the ongoing conversation). In the first place, I relied heavily on the extensive archival holdings of both primary and secondary documents collected at the University of Oregon Library.<sup>12</sup> These textual sources, in

addition to a few more readily available published sources such as the book *Country Lesbians* (written by the Womanshare Collective in 1976),<sup>13</sup> provided essential historical material and allowed me to draw a relatively detailed picture of some of the early separatist “ecological” and other imaginaries, in addition to some of the conflicts and negotiations that emerged as the communities grew, shrank, and otherwise changed over time.<sup>14</sup>

In the second place, I was able to contrast the historical perspectives with the considered views of some of the women who currently live in the rural southern Oregon separatist community. In the spring of 2000, I interviewed 11 women at length about their views on separatist ideals, community histories, and ecological relations: 5 long-term residents of separatist communities; 3 local women who had lived on separatist collective lands but, for various reasons, did so no longer (but still maintained strong ties and participated extensively in community events); and 3 more recent arrivals with strong ties to the separatist lands. In addition to sit-down interviews ranging from 2 to more than 9 hours (the longer ones over the course of two or three sessions), some of the women took me on walking tours of their lands and told me stories about personally, culturally, and ecologically significant features along the way. These last activities in particular gave me a tremendously rich sense of how the land itself had influenced and been influenced by the women and their communities; responding to particular landscape features—a garden, a tree, a building partly constructed, a bench rotting into the earth, a depression for a campfire, a clearing now overgrown—allowed many of the women to articulate their answers in a concrete way to questions about the relations between lesbian and ecological politics. This level of detail would not have been elicited by merely posing abstract questions.

The combination of archival, published, and interpretive long interview materials left me with a rich collection of stories, only some of which—those specifically concerning ecological themes—can be reproduced here.<sup>15</sup> Although these stories are clearly not representative of the experiences of all past and present community members (and certainly not of all rural gay men and lesbians or even of all separatists),<sup>16</sup> they do offer a thematic view of some of the conceptual and physical landscape of southern Oregon separatists’ views on sexuality and ecology. For this reason, after a brief historical background, I present the following as a conversational, partial, and thematic description of a local queer community’s changing culture of nature. Because this is a specific community influenced both by broad currents of lesbian culture and by locally particular landscape relations, I do not claim that the themes I present below can be unproblematically generalized to queer ecology. Thus, after a discussion of the locally specified “separatist ecology” that emerged during my research, I present as a conclusion some threads that might be woven into a broader and more inclusive queer ecological conversation.

### A RURAL IDYLL? EARLY SEPARATIST NATURE IMAGININGS

In 1974, three women—Dian, Billie, and Carol—got out of their van in southern Oregon after a long and tumultuous drive and bought “23 acres with two houses overlooking a beautiful view of the surrounding mountains” for \$27,000 (Womanshare Collective, 1976, p. 64). They sought a life on the land, “to live near the healing beauty of nature,” and to have, in a sanctuary carved outside of urban patriarchy, “a safe space to live, to work, to help create the women’s culture [they] dreamed of” (Womanshare Collective, 1976, p. 62). Thus, the Womanshare Collec-



tive was born, physically located in a lovely part of the state, climatically located in a temperate part of the country, politically located in a relatively libertarian rural setting that had already witnessed a range of other intentional communities, geographically located about halfway between Portland and San Francisco, and ideologically located at the cutting edge of lesbian separatism.

From the very beginning, nature had played an important role in lesbian separatist politics. Gill Valentine (1997) noted that the women who moved to the land in the United States drew “upon stereotypical representations of the rural as a healthy, simple, peaceful, safe place to live while also imagining their ‘rural idyll’ in a very different (and very politicized) way from traditional white middle-class understandings of rurality” (p. 109). In early separatist rhetoric, male culture was exemplified by the city, and a movement of women into “new” and more innocent space, a nature not yet written on by male culture, would facilitate the founding of a new lesbian culture. In addition, rural separatists viewed the land as a place that could restore physical and spiritual health to a group of people sickened, literally, by (heteropatriarchal capitalist) corruption and pollution and thus as a sort of paradise on earth to which women could be admitted if they recognized their oppression at the hands, and in the lands, of men.

When Dian, Billie, and Carol arrived at Womanshare, then, they brought with them a desire to create a lesbian existence that articulated these ideas of nature with the politicized tenets of separatism. As their writings demonstrate overtly, the women wanted to exclude themselves from patriarchal institutions, which meant developing as self-sufficient an existence as possible. They wanted to make decisions collectively, in opposition to hierarchical forms of governance. They wanted to own the land collectively despite the fact that they contributed vastly different amounts of cash to the purchase, to transform middle-class financial privilege into working-class women’s solidarity. They wanted to experiment with nondyadic relationships to remove the institution of “ownership” from their sexual and emotional lives. They wanted to share all forms of labor, enabling each woman to gain a diversity of land skills and allowing her time and space for creative pursuits as well as ditch digging. They wanted to grow food organically, live simply, and fulfill as many of their own material needs as possible using simple technologies, to reskill re/productive life, challenge consumer culture, and engage in ecologically appropriate lifestyles. They wanted to include spirituality and “alternative” healing and ritual practices in their lives, including veneration for women’s bodies and cycles. Eventually, they wanted more women to join them on their land and created networks with other local back-to-the-land lesbians toward a goal of accessibility for a broader spectrum of women.

These were complex goals based, on one hand, on a belief that removing the chains of urban heteropatriarchy would allow women’s collective consciousness to emerge and, on the other hand, on a desire to invent a women’s collective consciousness out of the experience of actually practicing alternative forms of living and working. Part of the separatist desire for land was as a space of freedom for women to become themselves; another part was for land as a space of experiment in which women could become something else. In either case, separatist land collectivity was a consciously chosen and deeply political struggle. “Collectivity,” as Billie wrote in one of her contributions to *Country Lesbians*,

means learning to build and fix things, to make a garden, to make money without oppressing myself or other women. If I am to do all the physical things I want to do, including making myself healthier and stronger, I must have other women to help,

teach and encourage me. Collectivity means sharing money and learning about class oppression, the power of sexual relationships, and the collective process. (Womanshare Collective, 1976, p. 128)

Difficult though it was, this separatist desire for rural collectivity proved popular in the 1970s and 1980s for many (mostly White) women. Partly because of the social and physical climate, partly because the growing publicity of the lands generated by publications such as *Country Women* and *WomanSpirit*,<sup>17</sup> and partly because of the nearby existence of like-minded communes, other women began to move to southern Oregon either to look for land or to join existing communities. By and large, if they came to Oregon they moved to Douglas and Josephine Counties (there are exceptions) and stayed fairly close to the interstate (I-5) highway. Cabbage Lane, founded as a gay/bisexual mixed-sex commune in 1972, was divided in 1973 into a 60-acre women's parcel and a 20-acre "men's parcel up the hill" (Nelly, as cited in Corinne, n.d., p. 6). In a less friendly split, Jean and Ruth Mountaingrove—who were already publishing the popular feminist magazine *WomanSpirit* on a shoestring—left the mixed-sex commune at Golden unwillingly and founded the smaller Rootworks (7 acres) in 1975.<sup>18</sup> Further north, a couple took possession of the 47 acres, farmhouse, and mobile home that became Rainbow's End on January 1, 1976. Halfway in between and after a difficult search by Bethroot Gwynn and Hawk Madrone, Fly Away Home (40 acres at the top of a mountain) became women's land in 1976. And, perhaps most important, the Oregon Women's Land Trust (OWLT) established the 147-acre OWL Farm as "open wimmin's land" in 1976 (they saw it as the first of many such purchases). As an information pamphlet from that period described,

*Oregon Woman's [sic] Land* is a non-profit corporation, founded to acquire land for women and preserve it in perpetuity. Women need to have the time and space and resources to develop their own culture. Recognizing that most women are confined in cities with no access to land, we are attempting to acquire and provide access to land in as many ways as women want it. . . . We want to acquire land collectively, thus eliminating owner/tenant power divisions among us. We want to be stewards of the land, treating her not as a commodity but as a full partner and guide in this exploration of who we are. (OWLT, 1976)

By the late 1970s, these "core" southern Oregon lesbian communities had been joined by other communities and properties. In addition, a complex network of lesbian relationships and institutions had begun to form around the lands, ranging from the editorial collective of *WomanSpirit*, now produced at Rootworks; to aspiring- or ex-landdyke individuals living in nearby towns; to workshops drawing women to Womanshare from San Francisco and Portland (among other places); to frequent rituals, dances, and potlucks; to a writers' group and photography seminars (Corinne, n.d.; Summerhawk & Gagehabib, 2000). In short, the community as a whole was culturally vibrant, to the extent that the I-5 corridor between Eugene and the California border came to be known as the "Amazon Trail."

At the same time, the communities were conflict ridden; many of the collectively held lands went through intense and painful struggles over issues ranging from racism, classism, sexual jealousy, and personal property to hygiene, drug use, and water shortages. OWL Farm erupted quickly; the vision of land open to all women, the equal valuing of all labor, and the commitment to collective decision making proved a particularly incendiary combination. Other collectives found that

no amount of well-intentioned lesbian labor could compensate for a poor water supply in August and/or a lack of knowledge about production gardening (on the part of many women who did not grow up rurally). Still others were torn apart by interpersonal jealousies, financial difficulties, and lack of commitment. The difficulties of experimenting with nonmonogamy were intensified by constant interaction.

Thus, Valentine (1997) was correct when she argued that “lesbian separatist attempts to establish ‘idyllic’ ways of living appear to have unraveled because, in common with traditional white middle-class visions of ‘rural community,’ attempts to create unity and common ways of living also produced boundaries and exclusions” (p. 119). But she was not correct in proclaiming the dissolution of the communities; the Oregon lands have survived, albeit in much changed forms. In my view, these changes and tensions—and not just the opening rhetorical gestures—make these communities important. Although separatist principles continue to be important, the experiences of women living as separatists in particular landscapes show not only how cultural intervention creates an ecological politics but how particular lands, places, and ecological interventions create a dynamic culture.

### RAINBOW’S END?

After 27 years of Oregon women’s lands, not a single lesbian I spoke to in the course of my research subscribed to a view of the women’s lands as a utopia on earth. This is not to say that utopian elements do not persist, only that they have been rearticulated with a variety of other ideas and practices of nature. In fact, the separatist community as a whole can be characterized by an ongoing dynamic between a separatist utopian ideology and an everyday practice of subsistence culture located in a particular place. This dynamic is especially important when describing the community’s ecological views; it is not that reality has, somehow, shown separatism to be impossible but that separatist principles have been rethought and reworked in the particular places and activities that are the everyday life of the community.

Apart from the influential sociopolitical specificity of the place, it is fair to say that the fact Billie, Carol, and Dian chose southern Oregon had an ecological impact on the communities’ development. The relatively mild weather allowed considerable latitude in building design and quality, meaning women with little experience could build their own dwellings. The hot summers and mild winters allowed year-round agriculture, but the relatively poor soil necessitated a creative array of soil augmentation technologies (especially for those women who refused nitrogen-producing animal agriculture). The dry summer climate spelled water shortages, meaning that a reliable and accessible water supply was crucial to a community’s survival. The mountains allowed for a greater sense of isolation and privacy than would be possible in a flatter landscape, thus affording a much greater freedom to engage in visible and audible displays of lesbian sexuality and culture (even with the abundant poison oak). Precisely this isolation created problems of access for women with disabilities and—crucially now—for women who were worried about aging. There are many opinions about the appropriate balance between naturalized and farmed areas, about cutting trees for firewood, about the degrees and kinds of intervention that are appropriate to nature-friendly lesbian landscapes, and about the relative importance of ecological science and feminist aesthetics in the organization and management of different properties.

These environmental factors were not just background noises against which the culture developed. Rather, the landscape has had a profound influence on the ways

in which separatism became a political-ecological culture. There were many reasons for this. First, separatist philosophy actively included a philosophy of nature and promoted a particular awareness of the landscape and ecological relations that has grown over the years. Second, the physical rigors of life on the land intensified conflicts but also brought the women who stayed on the lands into particular kinds of contact with natural processes that many women—including many rurally born women—were not familiar with; these interactions allowed for “new” experiences of nature. Third, the land itself became a tie that bound community members when separatist ideology came apart; in the absence of utopia, the realities of survival came to occupy an important role in collective life. Out of these nature-culture interactions, a sophisticated series of social ecological principles and practices has emerged.

Drawing from both archival and interview sources, the following sections of the article outline (but do not exhaust) some of the key ecological themes articulated by lesbian separatists in rural Oregon. Although not all tenets are shared by all community members—there are plenty of ongoing disagreements—they cohere as a living and changing political-ecological tradition, a distinct body of separatist ecological culture, as will be discussed in the final section. Once again, I emphasize that the thematic picture I paint is a partial one, a contribution to what I hope will be an ongoing conversation about queer landscapes rather than a static empirical portrait of a group at a single place and time.

#### **OPENING RURAL LAND TO ALL WOMEN BY TRANSFORMING RELATIONS OF OWNERSHIP**

Rural separatist politics was founded on the idea that land should be made accessible to as many women as possible. OWL Farm was explicitly “founded to acquire land for women who would otherwise not have such access” (OWLT, 1976) and sought to remove the criterion of property ownership from the possibility of living a rural life. Nearly all of the communities began with this desire: to acquire rural spaces and invite women of all classes and races to come and stay, thereby (a) allowing women to live in nature as equal members of a women’s community (and not as a man’s “property”) and (b) removing class and race privileges from this nature experience.

There is of course an irony here: The women had to become legal landowners to be able to participate in the rural political economy in the first place, meaning that by and large only women with some money could homestead. This created conflicts, such as one at Womanshare about Dian’s considerably greater contribution to the down payment. This is also why OWL Farm was so important; it was the only land that had no owner residents, even if—as some residents pointed out in situations of conflict—many of the governing Land Trust members were property holders from other lands. In fact, many women were amply aware of these contradictions. Apart from seeing themselves as using their privilege for a feminist redistributive good, they wanted to “remove” the effects of relations of ownership from the land and thus enshrined their classless vision of nature in formal lists of rights and responsibilities for women who may not have been part of the land’s purchase but who could still be equal members if they contributed equally in other respects.

Some communities were never quite so classless; on others, new forms of inequality emerged over time; and on yet others, there remains (or has been created)

a class division between owner members and visitor-new arrivals. Yet although none of the communities succeeded in removing class from the landscape, all of them varied and modified collective ownership practices and have allowed women to own land who probably would not have been able to otherwise. All of them have allowed other women to live on the lands for periods of time for little or no rent. And all of them have demonstrated that class is a foundation of relations of power through which perceptions of nature are organized.

The women remain committed to this strategy. An early OWL brochure spoke of the need to buy the land to promote recognition “that land is a sacred heritage and resource, belonging to all people” (OWLT, 1976), that is, beyond ownership. More recently, Bethroot<sup>19</sup> stated that

women’s land, lesbian land . . . [is] land that women have purchased and are living on or [is] in a Land Trust context. It is intended to serve lesbians, not only the ones who live here, and it is intended to be lesbian land evermore. It’s not imagined that someday it will be bought and sold and it will be on the open market again. It’s land that we always have assumed other lesbians will live on after we go.

Beverly added that

in some ways [Womanshare] really was like a lesbian national park. I love that analogy. It was very cheap; it was safe; there was a tremendous amount of access but there were enough rules to give it structure, and a level of sanitation that people didn’t get sick, and it was consciously creating access for working-class women.

Conflict over power and ownership has made many women hyperaware of the ways ownership breeds a sense of entitlement to the (commoditized) landscape and the ways the experience of the landscape is shaped by class. These women have thus developed great insight about the effects of capitalism on the physical, emotional, and spiritual experience of rural nature, centering precisely on the fact that the experience of freedom in nature is, in this context, a paradox. On one hand, the system of private land ownership destroys the ability of the land to be “free” from class. On the other hand, ownership may prompt an investment in developing intimacy with a place, including a desire to protect it from exploitative uses such as logging and industrial agriculture. This may “free” the landscape in other ways. These women thus criticize a rural property system that carves the landscape into privately owned and experientially diminished chunks by being property owners who persist in keeping the land open to other relations and experiences. In turn, this persistence of openness prevents any individual from being an “owner” without the tempering influence of others, thus inserting at least an element of embodied lesbian<sup>20</sup> opposition into the rural land use mix. As Robin<sup>21</sup> commented,

It’s not my place. I don’t consider it to be my place. It’s owned by the collective. Nobody’s name is on it. Everyone that’s living here has contributed equally and I haven’t put in—including the down payment—any more money than anybody else. In the beginning some people put in more money than others but it’s all been equalized; as soon as we paid off the bank we sort of equalized everyone’s financial input into it. I don’t think I’d want to own my own place. . . . I can go away, and . . . I don’t want to have sole responsibility to take care of it. . . . That changes your relationship.

### WITHDRAWING THE LAND FROM PATRIARCHAL-CAPITALIST PRODUCTION AND REPRODUCTION

From its beginnings, the separatists understood that the rural landscape was a site of domination. On one level, they sought to alter the subjection of women to capital (through wage labor) and to men (through daily reproduction) by enabling women to choose a life free from both modes of exploitation and to live a self-sufficient rural existence with other women. On another level, separatists also sought to alter the relations by which rural nature is dominated in capitalism, by privileging relations to nature outside of commodity production and exchange. Even in the 1970s, country lesbians were concerned about the increasing organization of agricultural lands by corporate interests, the exploitation of farm workers, the effects of chemical farming, and the massive loss of diverse knowledges of agricultural and natural processes. Wresting control of farmland from agribusiness was a gesture of refusal; working that land in noncorporate ways offered to create a landscape—and a women's culture—in an alternative mode.

This anticapitalist agricultural ethic was quite clearly indicated in *WomanSpirit* in the late 1970s, partly because many rural separatists were developing a response to the accusation made by some urban political lesbians that going to the country was a form of retreat from front-line separatist politics. Whereas some country lesbians responded that building women's rural culture was political in and of itself, others developed their arguments within a more distinctly socialist framework. "I see moving to the country as a beginning," wrote one.

The goals are: wanting to create an economic system that produces real goods that meet real needs and being able to provide for ourselves so that we are not forced to work jobs that reinforce a system that destroys the earth and our oneness with it. (Hall, 1977, p. 21)

The communities continue to practice subsistence agriculture as part of their anticapitalist intention. Growing food for community use rather than for sale shifts the land from site of commodity production and consumption to site of subsistence.<sup>22</sup> Although on such a small scale this shift has little effect on surrounding corporate practice, it does have an effect on the women's culture as a microcosm of possibility. For example, growing their own food has changed the ways many women think about and live in the landscape. Nearly all of the women I spoke to understood gardening as a crucial practice of coming to respect and understand the land; certainly, part of their craft was born of necessity, but it also became a visceral pleasure and ethical principle. As La Verne described,

We started immediately to pick over the garden because the women [at Golden] had just let it go, they were too busy to do the garden. So [my partner] and I started caring for the garden. . . . I enjoyed it, getting my hands in the soil. . . . I had a certain respect for the land [before I came] but I learned more when I was there.

As part of their commitment to challenging productivism, most communities relied on labor-intensive, low-technology farming. All the communities practiced organic agriculture, partly in opposition to agribusiness, partly out of concern for the health effects of pesticides and chemical fertilizers, and partly out of a principle that food

needs should be balanced against the other needs of the earth. A number of women mentioned that land should be able to lie fallow in resistance to capitalism's tendency to extract maximum value in the short term. In general, the women associate capitalism with violence and used metaphors of rape and coercion to describe the ways rural lands are subject to corporate extraction. In the resulting metaphorical connection, they draw an equivalence between withdrawing women's bodies and creativity and the land's body and creativity from capitalist patriarchy. Although perhaps this connection was once understood more literally, the metaphor remains important: Women's communities on the land become a form of retreat and healing from, and public opposition to, various connected forms of violence. In a poem playing on this connection, Julie Hopp (1986) wrote in a self-published poetry collection,

Soon, the shotgun's blast  
The flurry of wings  
The buckling of does  
Will not be enough:  
A worthier opponent will be sought  
One who'll comprehend the pointed nuzzle  
And frenzied eyes,  
One who'll beg and scream and fight  
And then upyield her essence, her force of life  
All that gun steel lacks and such men's lives (pp. 14-15)

Most lands allow no firearms; many now allow no alcohol or drugs.<sup>23</sup> More broadly, many women are adamant that their separatist practice is as much about freedom from the threat of male violence as anything else. Rootworks, for example, will only allow men on the land during "safer" daylight hours (*Fly Away Home* does not allow men at all). Similarly, violences against the land are discouraged. Although not all of the women are vegetarians, they understand living lightly on the land as a way to develop nonviolent relationships between women and nature. For some, more intensely, nonviolence is a lifelong quest, a spiritual principle of ecological respect, a personal statement of connection to the land. My favorite example concerns Jean Mountaingrove, who refuses to fuel an antagonistic relationship to the poison oak that is one of the banes of southern Oregon existence. Rather, she welcomes the plant into her spirituality through contemplation and ritual, into her body by ingesting small but progressively larger amounts of it to increase (along homeopathic principles) her body's acceptance of the poison, and into her life by learning to think of poison oak as much a part of the landscape as herself.

The principle of withdrawing the land from capitalist patriarchy is also a pressing political concern in the face of the mounting presence of resource extraction: Southern Oregon is embroiled in watershed-by-watershed conflict over logging. The lands around *Fly Away Home* have been cleared; the ridge behind *Rainbow's End* belongs to Roseburg Forest Products, which also has an access corridor across the women's land; the land adjacent to OWL Farm has been logged very recently, which, apart from destroying habitat, opens up the land to all terrain vehicle access and destroys the farm's cherished privacy. One of the lesbians I interviewed, Robin, is a forest activist whose lifework is now preventing the sale of Bureau of Land Management lands to private logging companies; her intimate knowledge of appalling Oregon forest practices has translated into an intense desire to manage the

lands she lives on in radically different ways, and her relationship to the land is strongly influenced by her awareness of the destructive impacts wrought by human extraction and development.

Given this range of commitments to resist capitalist patriarchy by withdrawing the landscape from its influences, it is hardly surprising that there are differences of opinion about how best to do so. For example, Robin noted,

I also sometimes worry [about] other lesbians in the back-to-the-land movement. They have their good intentions about the land and its sacredness but they lack the knowledge about what's already been done to it, how to preserve it, and how to restore it. Just recently there was a proposal to do some building at OWL Farm and they wouldn't cut down any live trees, only the dead trees. They thought this was a good thing, their way of being nice to the land. . . . To a layperson, it takes an awful lot of knowledge to get to that point [of knowing the ecological value of standing dead trees].

To others, feminist principles and spiritual conversations are at least as important to the health of the landscape as scientific wisdom; they understood that freedom from violence necessitates social and cultural and not just environmental wisdom. Still, as an ecological practice, the disagreement and conversation about how best to connect feminist with environmental positions on the landscape reflect a very high level of commitment to maintaining a southern Oregon landscape outside of the worst ravages of capital; the conflicts are sharpened, perhaps, as a result of the immediacy of the problem (see Brown, 1995).

#### **FEMINIZING AND REACULTURING THE LANDSCAPE, IDEOLOGICALLY AND PHYSICALLY**

By creating a life world apart from capitalist ownership and with distinctive re/productive relations, rural separatists mark a space that strives to be apart from capitalist organization. But their resistance is also about reinscribing gender and sexuality, about living a life among women and for women that could conceivably allow new forms of gender to come into being alongside nature.<sup>24</sup> Although it would be entirely wrong to suggest that the Oregon separatist community has leaped joyously into the world of postmodern fluid identities, it is fair to say that landdykes have long cherished a sense of gender experiment. The utopian elements of its earliest articulations were not just ideological statements about the ecological future that would come into being if only women ruled the world; they were imaginative leaps that opened the world to the possibility of living gender and nature differently. In this sense, early separatist essentialism was highly strategic and was oriented to inserting a possibility into the world that was not there before. And a vital part of this creative possibility concerned nature. Women could see themselves differently when they saw their own creative reflections in a natural world and could see nature differently when it was part of differently gendered interactions.

Valentine (1997) might argue that this image of nature suggests a tabula rasa on which women's culture could be written. Certainly, separatists began their experiments in community with the sense that nature was not yet fully incorporated into patriarchy and that lesbians could thus create a new and more innocent world in this relatively new and more innocent space. But that is only one thread. It is important, for example, that none of the lands was a "wilderness" before the women arrived; in all cases, they understood themselves as taking over an already "damaged" land-



scape. For some, the sense of responsibility for positive change extended beyond the boundaries of lesbian land. Beverly was quite clear about this:

I began to get again more interested in how the social, agricultural, and natural resource issues intersected. . . . By then [1978] I was a pretty political person and . . . people were all saying, "You're abandoning politics going to the country." But not for long because there were these drill rigs up behind us, and we soon discovered those were connected through a circuitous route to Anglo-American South Africa and United Technologies and [that] there's a 6 billion dollar cobalt deposit in southern Josephine County. So we got very involved in the whole complex of what that meant in a rural community and who had information and who didn't and the state and other folks being very much in collusion with the mining companies and not letting any information out to the local communities even though there could be huge environmental impacts.

Apart from the physical changes to the landscape wrought by low-impact agricultural and living practices, there was also a definite "feminizing" trend in the aesthetic organization of the lesbian lands. Some of these interventions are obvious. Rootworks has a vulva-shaped garden, there are assorted goddesses placed in strategic locations at Fly Away Home, and there is a decided preference for simple, low, roundish buildings (yurts, round houses, hexagons). At OWL Farm, the cleared land happens to take the shape of a dancing woman; the map of the land posted on the front of the main house is thus also a portrait of the spirit the land is to evoke. True, there are fences (to keep out deer, to keep in chickens, and to mark property boundaries against neighbors with different visions of the land). But there are also places where boundaries are intentionally blurred: a garden specifically for the deer, outdoor kitchens and outhouses, inedible flowers in the same patch as food, markers of human life in the middle of the wildest patches of the land, and traces of the wild in those most humanized.

On one level, these elements suggest that the women wanted to see their own iconography organizing the landscape, rather than the straight lines and corners they associated with the heteropatriarchal world. On another, they also wanted to see themselves when they looked at the natural world around them, to find familiar symbols and memories of their own creation integrated into the landscape. Thus, they blended feminist aesthetics with natural processes. This happened on the lands themselves and also in representations of land; a 1985 series of visual images published by Tee (Corinne & Time'sChild, 1985)<sup>25</sup> titled *A Theory of Art*, for example, blended photographs of women's genitalia with landscape depictions, pubic hair becoming cedar boughs and labia forming the ridges of bark and rock.

In this feminization, the women demonstrate that nature is a "like" place or actor, not an other to be tamed or feared but a friend, a sister, a lover (not to mention a workplace, a home, a refuge, and on some days a nuisance). In a Euro-western cultural context, simply understanding nature as feminine is not at all subversive. What is, perhaps, is understanding and respecting the femininity of nature as a merging part of, rather than an opposition to, the self. In addition, although the women understand the "nature" of their landscapes as feminine, actively intervening into the land with feminist iconography suggests an interesting space in which the femininity of the land is something that needs to be achieved rather than being always already present in nature. Once again, then, there is an important thread of rural separatism as creating an alternative culture in and of a landscape; in this case, femi-

nism is something to be written into nature to see what emerges, rather than something that blends with nature innately.

In turn, of course, nature has written into feminism; the trees at OWL encroach on the dancing woman, changing her shape; the goddess in the garden is barely visible above the undergrowth; cleared land is reclaimed by encroaching root systems. Many women cherish these changes (despite some deleterious impacts on food production); for many, having spaces where nature can actively change the culture of the place is both intentional and important. For example, at Rainbow's End, the residents are thinking about taking out trees that they planted in the mid-1980s; where they once thought they might help reforestation along by planting conifers in the clearings, they now realize that the white oak savannah might prefer to be left alone even though oak tree seedlings will not grow to any size during the women's lifetimes.

These movements of nature into lesbian culture are not simply physical but spiritual, metaphoric, and creative. Many of the women have names, for example, drawn not from their fathers' heritage but from the natural world: Mountaingrove, Madrone, Bethroot. Others talk to trees, partly as a reflective act and partly because they hear something back. The most visible "eruption" of nature, however, is into the women's cultural productions. The Southern Oregon Women Writers' Group, Gourmet Eating Society and Chorus emerged from a 1980 writers' workshop in Grants Pass, and the group has met in some form or another ever since. Although certainly not the only reason for the community's considerable literary output, this group has generated both conversation and reflection among the women on the land. A clear theme in the collective written works of the community, perhaps not surprisingly, has been nature (another has been sex), and just as feminism has been written into the physical landscape so too is the landscape an actor in the women's writings. Nature appears as a friend, a place of familiarity, a lover, a home.

Nature also often appears as itself, as an active and unpredictable entity and not just a stand-in for abstract principles or desires. In an agricultural context, such perceptions of nature's agency are hardly unusual. They speak of a de-romanticization born of contact with natural actors as an ordinary part of daily living. What is unusual is that these voices are then represented poetically and that the poetry is also so strongly feminist, indicating an experiential ecological feminist poetics. In the physical landscapes of the lesbian lands, feminist icons share space with compost piles in an amalgam of biology and ideology, sacred and profane. Similarly, in the creative landscapes, the juxtapositions, overlaps, and interminglings of lesbianism, feminism, nature, and ecology provide for some unique and striking nature writing. To give one example, recent Rootworks arrival Helen invokes in her poem "bare" the idea of nature as a space of sensual pleasure and renewal alongside a feminist "we" that gestures toward struggle and solidarity:

can't you see?  
 we *deserve* this—to have  
 april rain greet our skin  
 bare as tulips  
 shot from darkness into  
 this tender light—  
 knowing spring  
 fat with promise—

where can we go?  
 not only to expose  
 our largest organ—giving  
 permission for skin  
 to meet delicate mist  
 or sunlight gently  
 entering beauty begetting  
 beauty, undiminished  
 by layers—protection become  
 prison—but to release  
 pores to blue jay shrieks  
 to humming  
 bees, connecting with  
 nectar, to allow  
*all* our cells roses,  
 pinesap overflowing bark—  
 where *will* we go? (Laurence, 2001, p. 5 [printed with permission])

These productions suggest an active feminist reacculturation of the creative and ecological landscape. The women take feminism into the landscape and, in turn, draw from an active landscape new ideas about gender. What many have managed to do is create a life world in which the boundaries between culture and nature are not experienced so sharply, in which the active agency of nature is vitally part of everyday physical and poetic awareness (trees do answer back), and in which, after years of physical and representational effort, the primary metaphoric and practical language of nature reflects a consciously feminine creative experience.<sup>26</sup>

#### **DEVELOPING A HOLISTIC AND GENDER-BENDING PHYSICAL EXPERIENCE OF NATURE**

Many women demonstrated a complex understanding of how the separatist community's reorganization of mainstream gendered divisions of labor actively changed experiences of living on the land, and perceptions of nature as a result. Their insistence on lesbian identity as a challenge to prescribed gender roles, combined with the particular physical rigors of living on the land without elaborate infrastructure, led to a situation in which even women who were not previously adept at tree felling and mechanical repairs developed skills in these areas. As each woman was expected to participate in multiple forms of work, each was exposed to physical experiences of the landscape in a way far less gendered than is typically the case in mixed-sex communities. Indeed, some of the women articulated a belief that separatists had a richer and more complex understanding of the natural environment for the simple reason that they had a richer and more complex working knowledge of it. More generally, they understood that their knowledge of the land derived from physical work, creative production, and spiritual reflection. These were and are understood as part of an integrated life in nature.

This is not to say that there were no divisions of labor in the communities, that gender "roles" were irrelevant to their experiences (some suggested a covert butch/femme dynamic), or that there were never any issues about power attached to work. Rather, in the long term, many of the women who had lived for extensive periods of time on the lands felt they had come to a fuller physical experience of the natural

world because the life they had chosen demanded that they take on a broad range of activities, and especially physical activities that put them in particular kinds of contact with natural elements. As Bethroot described,

I mean, I was not born with a pipe wrench in my hand. . . . I grew up inside a femme mold at least in terms of physical work . . . and then you live on the land and that is absolutely the necessity of daily life and water and heat and firewood. . . . Being a femme in that situation was really a struggle and a struggle often with Madrone whose facility with tools was more natural. . . . But it's part of my pride . . . how many femmes have *built* their kitchen, how many women who grew up like me end up living like this? . . . Moving to the country stretches who a lesbian is.

Madrone added (speaking as much to Bethroot as to me),

This thing about being a lesbian is . . . [that] it is not the case that, 24 years ago, we started out with "I know how to use tools and you don't" and, 24 years later, we're still "I know how to use tools and you don't." Twenty-four years later you *did* build that house, you *do* use tools. . . . This land has called forth from you your strength as a lesbian. It has given you the location and the opportunity to explore those other parts of yourself. It could do that for a straight woman as well, but . . . that might be the rarity. . . . If you are companioned by a woman who has greater facility with tools there isn't a whole culture standing over you saying, "And she *should be* the person who knows better than you."

Both ideological and physical factors were at play, including a feminist commitment to extend women's lives beyond mainstream gender roles, the fact of subsisting on the land without a socially supported model of male expertise, a lack of easily available services for hire, a commitment to low-technology living, and the presence of a community of like-minded women offering resources and guidance. NíAódagaín told a wonderful story about her first major building project at OWL Farm: replacing the heavy beam that supported the porch roof on the main house. She avoided the task for weeks, afraid of the beam and not confident that she could fix it if she tried. Committed separatist though she was, she admitted that "if there had been a man there, he would have done it. . . . But there was only me and when I finally did it, it was one of the greatest accomplishments of my life." Similarly, she told me that another woman who had lived at OWL Farm "was elated because she had cooked a pot of beans on her own stove with wood she had cut herself and water she had hauled in buckets."

Some of the women indicated they were able to "become" lesbian more fully on the land than they would have in a city, meaning that their identities as lesbians were strongly tied to their transcendence of gender roles and that such roles were more likely broken on the land.<sup>27</sup> Even many of the women who did not maintain this connection, however, recognized that living on the land as part of a same-sex universe changed one's experience of nature. In part, this was a question of choosing, as an antipatriarchal feminist, to live simply and consciously on the land; NíAódagaín described it as "women coming down to their simplest place: Do you understand the relationship between your life and the land, what it does to the earth, where the water and wood come from?" In part, however, this was also a question of using one's body differently as a result of experience: more diversely, in the (relative) absence of a gendered division of labor in nature. Indeed, some women attached enormous import to this "full and honest" experience of landscape for lesbian and

ecological identity; for them, debates about infrastructural development on the lands were not just about technology but fundamentally concerned the essence of their lesbian identities.

Others felt that their spiritual work was as important to knowing nature—and lesbian identity—as their physical work; living on the land could engender different kinds of spiritual practice, for example, through linking physical labor and spiritual reflection with a feminist thread. This feminist, nature-based spirituality was a dominant theme of *WomanSpirit* throughout its publication. Some, like Jean, understood working the land as a spiritual act and reflection as part of the necessary work of the land. Indeed, after 25 years, she noted that this multifaceted spiritual-material work on the land had physically changed her:

I think I feel more part of things because I can hear them. I feel a richness because instead of shutting things out I can see them. I've learned to watch where I walk, and then I can appreciate the paths and when things are around I also look at them. I think that feeling sensually open just makes life very real around here; I get pleasure in many more ways.

### EXPERIENCING NATURE AS AN EROTIC PARTNER

For some of the separatists, one of the most significant ways the land shapes their lesbian identity—and their lesbian identity to the land—is in the weaving together of sexual-erotic with rural-natural elements. Still, there are enormous complexity and variation in this realm. Some women have actively appropriated a normative idea of “nature” for a lesbian sexuality societally deemed “unnatural.” For others, this has involved carving out an idea of “natured” female sexuality in defiance of what they see as an urban-masculine patriarchal sexuality. The demarcation of land as lesbian only has created for others a safe space for outdoor sexual activities that would be extremely risky elsewhere; some emphasized the affirming importance of a nature space where lesbians could have sex in semipublic without the risk of violence, and others saw outdoor sex as a particular way of connecting with nature. Indeed, some women actively eroticized the land itself and saw sex as an important environmental practice alongside organic gardening.

The idea of nature as a normative ideal for a rural lesbian sexuality is widespread and carries with it some interesting inflections. One of the most self-conscious proponents of this view is Tee, who has spent much of her artistic career advocating for and creating representations of lesbian sexuality in which lesbian sex is beautiful because natural. Although she is also a writer, she is probably best known for her romantic photographic presentations of lesbian sex (and also of a diversity of lesbians having sex romantically) and for her realistic and precise depictions of women's genitalia (especially in *Cunt Coloring Book*). These representations allow lesbian “nature” to be “art” against aesthetic conventions that would insist on, for example, shame or perversion. She understands this “wholesomeness” specifically against other representations of lesbian sex that celebrate, for example, sexual roles, self-conscious perversity, and fetishism; she stated,

I have sought to present lesbian sexuality as loving, lovely and natural. In thinking about this I considered how “unnatural” many of the images in [the lesbian erotic journal] *On Our Backs* appear and how this shift in goals from early lesbian feminism (1970-1985) coincides with a shift to images of dildo sex, bondage, flagellation, et cetera.<sup>28</sup>

Others of the lesbians I spoke to were aware that they were not discovering a “natural” sexuality in a pristine natural space but were actively creating a lesbian sexuality in and for their communities in this time and place.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, although Tee’s presence certainly mobilized the community’s erotic conversations and literary outputs in the 1990s, the Oregon separatists considered sex an important dimension of existence from the outset. Nonmonogamous, nonpossessive sex was one of the grand experiments with which the communities began; even if this ideal did not produce anything like a total sexual revolution, it certainly inspired a willingness to experiment with erotic possibilities as an important part of living in the separatist landscape.

For some women, the most important relationship that transpired between sexuality and landscape was about safety. Simply, lesbian land engendered the possibility of outdoor and (semi-)public sex in a relatively safe setting. As Bethroot put it,

one of the wonderful things that lesbians have been gifted by when they come to this land is that women have made love with themselves in the great out of doors or they’ve made love with each other in the great out of doors and you can’t do that except on lesbian land and know you’re in a safe place.

The fact of publicity reaffirmed the naturalness of lesbian sexual expression. Given the separatists’ ongoing emphasis on the importance of sexual expression, outdoor sex offered a public way of sexualizing space, thus reflecting back a community-based image. In addition, removing the threat of violence allowed features of the landscape to appear as part of a sexual geography. On top of lesbian land as a public space in which sex was possible, particular elements of particular lands could be demarcated as particularly lesbian sexual spaces. The politicized possibility of lesbian public sex combined with long personal histories of sexual experience allowed some women to hold clearly erotic maps of their lands.

For a few, this process included eroticising natural elements. Although the sexualization of nature is hardly unusual, either within feminist aesthetics or society as a whole, for a number of the women the process of eroticising the landscape was focused more on the ways in which a rural life “in tune” with the sensual apprehension of nature engendered and affirmed a sexual expression of that apprehension. As Madrone described,

I make love with myself out on the land. I don’t go out with the intention of doing that, but sometimes in the summertime I’m on the knoll and I’m so moved by the beauty of the trees that I want to make love with myself. Sometimes I’m on my deck and I’m so enthralled by the sunset that I want to make love with myself. So I have the experience of making love with the land, that the land is my lover, and that lovemaking is a lesbian lovemaking with herself and it is very specifically inspired by the landscape. . . . I am very aware that I do have that erotic experience and that it is very specifically inspired by something that’s happening on the landscape. This would never happen to me in the city. . . . I’m talking about making love because the landscape is asking me to. . . . The trees are watching me make love, the sky is listening to me, the earth is holding me, and we’re all having this experience together and we’re all full of joy.

In this way, some of the women considered that eroticism was an important mode of environmental knowledge as well as self-knowledge: a celebration of life in a spiritual sense, an embodied recognition of the agency of nature, a field of cultural significance that could be given specifically lesbian meaning in a number of

ways. Although not all of the women chose to imagine or pursue a personally erotic connection between their sexuality and environmental knowledge, most perceived that some kind of nature-sexuality connection was a significant cultural element that distinguished their rural lesbian politics and lifestyles from what they understood as urban lesbian practices and priorities.

I should add, here, that the experience of erotic safety and the ability to imagine nature sexually were racialized by the particular dominance of normative and naturalized Whiteness in rural southern Oregon. As La Verne explained poignantly,

I loved the land. . . . After I arrived, I couldn't stand clothing on my body. It felt like I was wearing armor. So I went nude a lot. I ran around with the air, the breeze, the sky—it was just wonderful. Until this Black man up in California got shot—one guy said they thought he was a bear. After that I started wearing shorts and t-shirts. They weren't about to mistake me for a bear.

### **POLITICIZING RURALITY AND RURAL LESBIAN IDENTITY**

The final separatist ecological theme this article takes up concerns a common and long-standing commitment among the Oregon communities to the politicization of rural space and rural identity. One of the clearest early articulations of these views was published as part of a debate in the pages of *WomanSpirit* about the relationships among separatism, spirituality, and “material” political struggle. In 1976, five women (Cohen, Yarabinee, Norwood, Tinder, & Mendelsohn, 1976) wrote a series of reflections about the tensions between feminist spirituality and radical feminist politics. In the next issue, Sally Gearhart (1976) responded by explicitly tying spiritual politics to rural separatism. In an argument about the need for both rural enclaves of lesbian community and urban political struggle, she argued that a rural separatist community is the only place where what she called “politicized psychic energy” (p. 43) can be gathered. Although this construction of rural space reifies it as a space “away” from the front lines of the battle against the patriarchal enemy, it also politicizes rural space by arguing that rurality engenders particular kinds of political practice. This sort of construction became quite common; rurality was a specific kind of political space in which its social and spiritual (pastoral) uniqueness was turned to political ends, rather than a place of retreat. In this articulation of pastoral with revolutionary ideals, rurality is constructed as a realm of lesbian political freedom. The assumed articulation of patriarchy with urbanness creates a position in which Gearhart understood rurality as an alternative place where a politically oriented separatist culture can be built, to both fuel and “move beyond” the antisystemic politics of urban lesbians.

The charge that rural separatists were withdrawing from political life is one that many of the women resisted by pointing out the particular relations of rural capitalism against which the women resist in a variety of ways. Beverly, one of the women most strongly committed to the politicization of lesbian rurality, insisted on disrupting more Arcadian ideas of rural nature and emphasized the prior existence of multinational resource corporations in the region and the damages wrought by agricultural monocultures. She also indicated that there were uniquely “lesbian” inflections to some of the communities' resistances to these political and ecological issues:

There were conflicts between the environmental community and some of the rest of us who wanted to look at it from a social perspective. . . . [T]he lesbians were definitely on the social side. . . . I'm not sure if it's because we were lesbians, but because we had a network we were talking to each other and the social links overlap and become very important. It happened that the heterosexual environmental network there was involved in traditional environmental organizing in the Northwest—single issue, lobbyists, lawyers, those things—whereas we were trying to find a way of involving the whole community of people, the social aspects of the problem.

Although none would now, I think, argue that lesbians are the only or even best resisters to rural environmental devastation (and this makes a very big change from Gearhart's early lesbian ecorevolutionary vanguard), many of the separatists have kept their political desire for the land and thus are highly skilled at seeing politics where it lies in other facets of life. To the extent that the Oregon separatists are political animals, they are more able and likely to respond politically to the particular conditions of their rural lives. Once again, we have a situation in which rural separatist political ideals have settled into the particular landscape of southern Oregon, creating a situation in which many lesbian separatists are among the more politically visionary members of the rural Oregon community and in which a history of critical ability has manifested in an ongoing politicization of the landscape.

In addition, events such as Oregon's Measure 9 (an antigay referendum on the 1992 ballot) have caused many of the women to become committed to publicizing the historical and ongoing presence of gays and lesbians in rural Oregon as a way of fighting a homophobic construction of rurality. The Southern Oregon Country Lesbian Archival Project (SO-CLAP), for example, was a grassroots effort (now in partnership with the University of Oregon Library) to collect and create a detailed and visible history of the communities as ways of disrupting assumptions about rural Oregon's essentially heterosexual character. Documenting and publicizing the history of lesbian separatist communities in southern Oregon are a way of demonstrating the presence of lesbian ruralities against both heterosexist assumptions about the "place" of gays and lesbians in cities and homophobic policies that would effectively render lesbianism invisible and publicly illegal. Combined with the development of coalitions between the separatists and some of the rural gay, transgendered, and other queer folk, SO-CLAP provoked in rural voters some awareness that the proverbial 1 in 10 rural Oregonians was gay and also indicated that the gay community was not going to rest content with individualist invisibility.

SO-CLAP; the Southern Oregon Women Writers' Group, Gourmet Eating Society and Chorus; and other community activities should also be understood as creating a rural lesbian public sphere. The rounds of potluck discussions, poetry and art sharing, and Land Trust board meetings are important sites through which the community comes to constitute itself as distinct. Community discussions operate to clarify opinions and disagreements; histories are shared, along with ideas, aspirations, and concerns, allowing individual troubles to become community issues and knowledges. In turn, these community knowledges support individual endeavors; important as the presence of a gay/lesbian rural network may be, the presence of a discernible community with shared public traditions also gives life and legitimacy to the existence of a lesbian rural community. This community is currently negotiated through a discussion, creative activity, and disagreement as much as it was, in



the past, negotiated through more personal and ideological commitments to an ideal of community in lesbian feminist solidarity.

In addition, the idea of a distinct rural lesbian tradition had a great deal to do with the fact that many of the women understood their relationships to nature as central to their identities. Some women saw their particular rural locations in agricultural, natural resource, and other environmental issues as shaping their lesbian identities differently from urban lesbians. For some, this meant a carefully worked-out understanding of the role of rural Oregon in world capitalism; for others, this meant a thorough knowledge of forestry issues in the region; for others, this meant an aesthetic or spiritual orientation to the Oregon landscape; for others, this meant a strong connection with agricultural cycles and traditions. In all cases, these centrally rural elements of identity were woven into the idea of being a lesbian so much that some women felt they had very little in common with urban lesbians, even of the same generation. As Tee put it,

I think my life on the land has kept me from getting involved with the intellectual controversies that heavily influenced [lesbian] artists in the 1980s and 1990s. I have done what I wanted to do. Not much pay, but a great sense of joy, and that joy is fed every time I look out a window or walk out of doors.

That there was no particular agreement about the shape of the connection between rural nature and lesbian identity was, interestingly, a departure from earlier, more singular formulations such as Gearhart's idea of nature as a site for lesbian "re-sourcement" in transcendence of the patriarchy. Although some commentators might take the absence of a singular, unifying principle of lesbian ecology as evidence of the absence of any, I found instead that different elements and emphases of rural lesbian culture were woven together through the strong presence of a lesbian public sphere in which disagreement was cultivated and accepted (and even enjoyed). The presence of a distinct network of lesbians supported the presence of diverse views and opinions, which seemed a healthy development.

### **CONCLUSIONS: SEPARATIST ECOLOGIES AND QUEER NATURES**

The six themes discussed above by no means exhaust the potential ecological-political threads running through the stories of the southern Oregon lesbian separatist communities. They are not to be read as a portrait of a community's experience. My stance is not neutral; just as Shugar's (1995) and Valentine's (1997) discussions of separatist rurality are located in particular political and intellectual desires, so too is this work. Theoretically, my work is organized—in disagreement with Valentine in particular—by a nonapocalyptic view of lesbian separatism, by a desire to see its ongoing traditions as contributing to (rather than opposed to) contemporary "queer" cultures, including cultures of nature. Empirically as well, my observations are organized by a conversational rather than representational desire. As I made clear earlier in the article, my research strategy was opportunistic and my stance interpretive. Despite the fact that the archival, interview, and observational materials offer, from my view, quite a coherent picture of a local culture, I fully expect that others—including members of the communities themselves—would offer different stories to a public conversation about separatist-ecological themes.

Given the limitations of the study, then, how can we understand these distinct threads of a southern Oregon lesbian "culture of nature" as contributing, conversa-

tionally, to a broader discussion of the relations between sexuality and ecology? The first and most obvious conclusion I would draw from the women's stories is thus the fact that their mode of living as lesbians has had a definite impact on the way they know and experience nature but that this relationship is neither simple nor fixed. In some cases, a consciously political understanding of resistant lesbian identity has been instrumental in shaping the landscape. In others, a particular collectively developed cultural frame has had an enormous impact on the evolution of the meaning and of the landscape. In yet others, the social organization of a lesbian community, either within individual landholdings or across the network of Oregon country lesbians, has influenced the perception and the experience of the land. It would be a mistake to point to a defining difference that "being a lesbian" makes to either the Oregon separatists' relationships to their landscape or, more broadly, that sexual orientation makes to ecological practice. Just as the community shows no particular agreement on what it means to be a lesbian, so too is there no particular consensus on how that identity influences the (natural) world. Ironically, the women's accounts of their nature relations lead away from thinking about an essential lesbian ecology and toward thinking about rural Oregon separatism as a particular culture of nature that combines separatist principles with local ecologies. In fact, the culture, despite its essentialist origins, is a flexible one, and the thing that holds it together is a sense of conversation and community over shared interests and perspectives.

It would also be a mistake not to point out that this rural separatist culture is crafted from other relations of power. The community is largely White. This fact reflects the racialized relations of rural Oregon and of lesbian separatism. It also reflects, and shapes, the views of nature appearing in the communities. Although an earlier lesbian feminist view of nature as a more feminine/innocent space on which a utopian women's culture can be created is no longer the predominant one in the communities, it is still present in spiritual, material, and other forms. As many commentators have pointed out (see Shuttleton, 2000), this view of nature is highly racialized; such pastoral understandings of rurality as a space of innocence and freedom ignore the racial and class exploitations that have organized rural life (e.g., slavery, the decimation of Aboriginal communities, the exploitation of migrant farm workers). Lesbian separatist ruralities, even if they have shifted, thus reflect a founding, racialized view of nature. As much as many of the women have learned this and struggle in their own lives to think through the race and class relations of rural Oregon, it remains that the communities themselves are highly particular in their understandings and practices of politics, nature, and community.

So the Oregon separatists demonstrate that their culture of nature is both shifting and particular, both complex and limited. In other words, it is a living and situated tradition. But how does one speak, from this particularity, of a separatist ecology? A queer nature? I would like to suggest that this lesbian culture not only demonstrates the contextually specific intersection of the power relations of sexual orientation with ecology (entwined with but not reducible to race, class, and gender) but also the importance of politicizing these relations to understand and transform social ecological relations.

For one thing, the Oregon women challenge the essentialized narrative by which rural, pastoral nature has been heterosexualized in North American culture. Although, as Shuttleton (2000) has written, there is a diverse queer history to rural sexuality including a distinct gay pastoral tradition,<sup>30</sup> there remains a pervasive assumption that all gay culture is urban and that all rural culture is straight. Apart from the self-fulfilling quality of this assumption,<sup>31</sup> the lack of a strong representa-

tion of queer rurality impoverishes both ecological and g/l/b/t/q/t culture and reinforces an articulation of queer-urban-artifice against straight-rural-nature. Country lesbians, who are publicly queer and rural and have a well-developed sense of their collective presence, disrupt the articulation.

In addition, they also disrupt conventional understandings of rurality by practicing alternative forms of family, community, and ownership. Environmental justice advocates have pointed to the inequalities and exploitations of rural life and challenged the ways they are hidden behind a screen of pastoralism. Although these critiques have focused on race and class, the rural idyll also perpetuates a heterosexual narrative that affects both queers and others whose lives are constrained by a monolithic rural heterosexuality. Focusing attention on the sexual diversity of rural communities draws attention to the conditions of sexual organization in rural communities and demonstrates that there are ways of living one's life sexually in rural nature that do not replicate heterosexism. (On the flip side of the same coin, of course, rural lesbian communities also demonstrate that there are ways of living as a queer that are not directly tied to urban institutions.) In addition, of course, the presence of a culturally active community that is consciously organized around rural political issues and sees these as strongly tied to lesbian identity inserts a political articulation into rural discourses that offers a solid challenge to more dominant ones linking private property, capitalist extractive industry, and heterosexual nuclear families.

Second, these women have lived their lives as an experiment in queer vision: What does rural nature look like when it is seen and experienced in a very self-consciously lesbian way? The fact that this culture has ended up as a hybrid of lesbian feminism and particularized local knowledge is not just interesting; there are also normative implications. On one hand, the particularities of place have intruded on the utopian aspirations of lesbian feminism. On the other hand, the intentions of lesbian feminism have intruded in the unfolding of the landscape. In fact, the Oregon separatists themselves understand the precept that nature is a realm of interaction among a variety of human and nonhuman actors. That their separatist aspirations have changed in and for the place and remain separatist principles suggests a tremendous openness to the influence of the land as well as an affirmation of lesbian politics. In other words, the active organization of nature that has accompanied rural lesbian separatism has historically and continues to include a sense of the articulation between feminist and nonhuman voices.

Stacy Alaimo (2000) insisted that one of the most promising avenues for feminist and ecological politics lies in reconceptualizing nature as an active presence in the world, which allows feminists to join women with nature in a way that does not condemn women to the status of object and resource but that offers, instead, a profound challenge to western hierarchical dualisms (p. 12). The separatists, in attending to both lesbian feminist politics and the voices of the nonhuman actors by whom they are surrounded in their daily lives, demonstrate that ecological knowledges derived from particular bodily experiences of nature can actively influence a political project without losing the elements of the political project itself. At the same time, they also show that ecological knowledge is influenced by social location, by political vision, and by the material and cultural organization of productive, spiritual, and erotic life. In other words, theirs is a profoundly dialectical understanding, an understanding cultivated in practices that facilitate the development of more and more complex knowledges of nature.

The final element I would like to emphasize concerns the importance of a public realm to the negotiation of sexual and ecological identity. The communities were

founded with a central idea of publicity. However impossible the original vision of processing and consciousness raising might have been, this tradition of “public” discussion has continued in a variety of ways. These have variously included potlucks, theater projects, and Land Trust meetings; critically, throughout the communities’ history, these traditions have cultivated a collective identity and culture beyond the individual and even beyond the particular land, a public tradition. I understand this rural lesbian public sphere as a crucial component of the communities’ survival. It is a mode through which their ideas of sexuality, identity, creativity, ecology, and nature are presented and contested as a central dimension of their lesbian culture. Their identity and history as lesbian separatists call them together as a meaningful and distinct group, but the meaning of that group shifts and changes—creating a living culture—because that culture has a series of built-in mechanisms through which to negotiate its ideas.

This ongoing negotiation of rural lesbian culture included a variety of definite disagreements over nature and ecological politics. One clear disagreement concerned the relative merits of a scientific understanding of forestry versus an animistic understanding of trees as individuals experiencing pleasure and pain. Another concerned the relative merits of a more materialist view on agrarian capitalism versus a more spiritual one on women’s empowerment in land communities. In addition to these active disagreements, it is clear that “nature” in general is an important topic of conversation in and for the rural lesbian community. Knowledges of nature are shared from remedies and recipes to profound spiritual and erotic relationships. The systemic degradation of rural nature is also an ongoing subject of discussion, and the sharing of information across the lands helps to map the social-ecological impact of extractive industry.

In general, then, this study contributes to the development of a queer ecology by noting the ways Oregon separatists have actively inserted the social relations of sexuality into the spatial relations of rural North American society, consciously developed a lesbian nature episteme that includes the varied and active influence of non-human natures, and negotiated ideas and opinions about nature as part of the public realm of a lesbian community. But it is also the case that the Oregon separatists offer interesting insights about questions of culture, ecology, and “strategic” essentialism beyond the specificities of a queer ecological politics. In particular, I would like to suggest that the transformation of rural separatism over time—especially its hybridization of ideological elements with local cultures and ecologies—demonstrates the considerable significance not only of cultural creativity in the success of alternative ecological communities but also the limits of an overfocus on strategic essentialism as a conception to describe the political dynamics of culturally based ecological movements.

To be sure, many of the rural lesbian separatists of southern Oregon maintain elements of a strongly essentialist feminist politics, and proudly so. One can see its traces in the idea that one can contribute to withdrawing a landscape or community from patriarchy by limiting male access, in the idea that there are feminine aesthetic forms that are more harmonious with natural environments, in the naturalization of particular modes of sexual activity, and even in the homoeroticization of a female nature. One can also see it in certain images of nature. There are, however, many women who specifically resist romantic linkages of women and nature, whereas others hold on to elements of a feminine Arcadian rurality despite years of working and living on the land in less-than-idyllic conditions. Essentialist understandings of gender and nature were strongly present in 1970s rural lesbian separatist ideolo-

gies, and some are still strongly imbricated in the women's ongoing negotiations of gender.

Indeed, it is certainly appropriate to consider many of the separatists' essentialist understandings of gender and nature "strategic" in the most politically precise sense of the word. Particularly given the shift that I have noted above (from an early understanding of rural separatist lands as site for the enactment of an essential feminine connection to nature to one of the lands as a site for lesbian community experimentation), there seems a fairly clear and self-aware orientation among some of the women to essentialist principles as modes of intervention. In other words, as many of the women gave up the idea that women were (if only left alone) nurturant and peaceful beings, they maintained separatist organizational principles by rendering them strategic, by declaring them to be necessary conditions for the creation—not the discovery—of a nonalienated women's mode of being in the world and in nature. In fact, many of the women to whom I spoke alluded to this kind of gender understanding: If gender is a social relation (essentialist), separatist practices are social relations that change gender. As La Verne put it, for example,

The word *separatist* is not our word. . . . For us, I think we need another name. But I do believe we need our space. . . . [so] I have to call [separatism] a tool because a tool is something you fix something with. . . . I haven't given up on it.

As many elements of the preceding discussion suggest, however, rural lesbian separatism at the turn of the millennium does not entirely resemble the vision that inspired Dian, Carol, Billie, and so many others to try their hand at utopia building in the heyday of 1970s lesbian feminism. Not all of the ideas that inspire the Oregon separatists are essentialist, and it is a mistake to thus homogenize them. Instead, separatist elements have been shaped by particular experiences of landscape just as much as the landscape has been actively organized by "lesbian" practices. In this respect, it is no longer appropriate to speak only of a strategic essentialism; the lands are, I think, better understood as hybrids, as sites of a living practice of queer ecology that marries a desire to create a new lesbian culture with a recognition of the ecological and social specificity of that culture in its particular "place."

To be sure, the revolutionary fervor of the 1970s has died down. The communities did not create a separatist utopia. The women living on the land in 2000 are mostly White (not all), mostly well educated (if they were not when they arrived they are now), and mostly not engaged in "revolutionary" feminist or ecological action (there are exceptions). There are very few women left living on the collective lands. It would be a stretch to speak about "open" women's land with the same passionate belief in its possibility as was expressed in the 1970s. But the women were successful in generating a life based on a principled attention to the dynamics of power, gender, and nature in late capitalism and also on an experiential recognition of the sustaining material importance of nature in everyday life, particularly through the experiences of work, sexuality, creative production, and spiritual reflection. Part of this success derives from the personal reflexiveness that separatism has always demanded. Part of this success derives from the vibrancy of the cultural institutions they have created because of the particular rural community in which they live. Part of this success derives from the skill with which many community members have taken on the worlds of written and artistic creative production. In these successes—and in the failures as well—the lesbian separatist communities of southern Oregon offer a rich and interesting ecopolitical tradition that challenges us—queers and others—to think about and live differently the relations of sexual-

ity, gender, and nature on which the tradition bases its principles and practices. In the end, its contradictions give it life and relevance. As Beverly put it, “it’s an awkward place to be, but then, living on the planet is awkward as well.”

## NOTES

1. In feminist, antiracist, and other circles, the word *essentialism* refers to a belief that a category of things or people, for example, women, shares an essence, whether that essence is biologically or socially inscribed. Feminist antiessentialism refers to an epistemic and political stance that challenges the presumption of a female essence as part of the mechanism by which women are oppressed. “Strategic” essentialism, then, refers to a political stance that recognizes the power relations of essentialism, for example, does not subscribe to the view that there is an essential connection among women, but works with essentialized categories nonetheless as a way of achieving particular political goals. For an extended discussion of feminist essentialism and antiessentialism, see Fuss (1989).

2. Although, to the extent that lesbian families are economically less privileged than (White) heterosexual families by virtue of women’s relatively lower income, there is a question of class/gender at play.

3. Even though it can also be read as homogenizing what are, in fact, conflicting experiences and perspectives, I use this unwieldy term to highlight the diversity of views and positions within the queer political community. Transgendered folk and lesbian separatists, for example, disagree hotly on issues of gender; two-spirited persons are also distinctly racialized in ways that other queers may not understand.

4. Most queer theorists assume that lesbian separatists were and are simply essentialist. My argument is that their deployments of essentialism were and are uneven and often highly strategic.

5. For an excellent example of a detailed historical work on a particular separatist political community, see Ross (1995).

6. Of course, women lead many environmental justice struggles, and ecofeminists have become increasingly attuned to racial issues over the years. Both movements are developing a solid consideration of class and colonial relations. But race and gender are primary to their respective politics. Some ecofeminists have mentioned sexual orientation in their analytic frameworks, but few have followed through with a detailed analysis. No published work of environmental justice, to the best of my knowledge, has ever acknowledged homophobia as an issue (although the topic has been broached at environmental justice gatherings).

7. The first discussion of “queer nature” in this sense was actually in the Canadian journal *Undercurrents* (May 1994).

8. For one thing, many lesbians are actively hostile to the moniker “queer.” Many separatists refuse ideas of political alliance with gay men and transgendered folk and see themselves as feminists first. At the other end, many queer thinkers are among the most vocal critics of lesbian philosophy and politics. The alliance is not an easy one; like gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgendered/queer/two-spirited politics in general, affinity prevails over identity.

9. *Maize* began publishing in 1983 and includes articles ranging from analyses of agrarian capitalism to recipes for manure tea. One of the women I interviewed called it “the landdykes’ *Martha Stewart Living*.”

10. Out of respect for their privacy and safety, I will not give more precise geographic details about these communities in this article. In addition, I will refer to the women I interviewed by their first names only, except for those who have specifically given me permission to use their full names and except for the one woman who preferred to remain anonymous and to whom I have given a pseudonym.

11. By the winter of 2001 and after a long “sabbatical” (their term), OWL Farm had attracted a new generation of inhabitants. Because of its physical and symbolic importance to the rural Oregon separatist agenda, I made sure I spoke to one of the women who had lived at OWL Farm the longest and whose life was most tied up with its past and future.

12. Linda Long, the special collections librarian, has spent many years convincing the communities to deposit their collected papers at the University of Oregon. That she did so successfully is no mean feat, given the separatists' skepticism with patriarchal academic institutions. The collection now includes the papers of many of the individual women involved with the communities, including Jean and Ruth Mountaingrove, Tee Corinne, and Sally Gearhart, in addition to a large archive of official documents from the Oregon Women's Land Trust and an extensive collection of the publications both produced and traded by the communities.

13. Many of the women involved in the southern Oregon communities have published essays, stories, and poetry in various collections that do not specifically treat rural or separatist themes but that shed light on these questions nonetheless. See, for example, Corinne (1992).

14. For a more extensive narrative of the histories of these communities, see Sandilands (2002b).

15. An earlier draft of the article was sent to all of the women who participated in my research for comment and correction. I present this article as "partial" not because the women expressed disagreement with the themes I pulled from our conversations—those who responded were generally very pleased with the quality of my representation and with the themes I chose to highlight—but because it is not my desire to represent this research as a transparent or complete picture of the "whole" of a complex community's views. In this, I understand my research as interpretive (see Schwandt, 1994); my aim is to converse, not represent.

16. There were and are lesbians in rural southern Oregon—and gay men—who have no significant relation to the land communities, and there are significant differences between "back-to-the-land" queers and those who have grown up and choose to stay in rural communities (although some rurally raised Oregon lesbians became part of the rural separatist community). For a fuller discussion of rural queers, see Bell and Valentine (1995b), Riordan (1996), and Phillips, West, and Shuttleton (2000).

17. *Country Women* (1972-1979) was not a lesbian publication, an ideological difference that became quite important by the mid-1970s. Although officially a feminist publication and including a wide range of written works, its focus was largely on the more practical aspects of rural living. *WomanSpirit* (1974-1983) wasn't exclusively lesbian either, officially, but its primary editors (Jean and Ruth Mountaingrove) were, and separatist arguments were an important part of its content.

18. At Golden (which *Gay Manifesto* author Carl Whitman co-owned and whose aunt later donated \$5,000 toward the purchase of OWL Farm), Jean and Ruth lived in a 10-foot by 10-foot shelter.

19. All quotations identified with a first name in the rest of the article are from the women I interviewed in the spring of 2000. The quotations are derived from tape recordings of our sit-down interviews. I have chosen not to include demographic details systematically (age, employment, etc.). Weighing epistemic import against privacy concerns, privacy won in all but a few cases.

20. The Land Trust and other formal mechanisms effectively de-heterosexualize property relations. So long as the women have specified that the land will revert to the Land Trust or to the other owners, then the priority of biological kin as inheritors is disrupted.

21. "Robin" is a pseudonym.

22. On the importance of subsistence practice to ecological consciousness, see Mies and Shiva (1994).

23. This is a recent development and is part of a general move toward therapeutic temperance among this generation of lesbians.

24. In this respect, the Oregon separatists can be considered cousins to ecofeminists. Although I am quite averse to labeling "ecofeminist" any and all activities in which women and nature are linked together, I think that there is some justification in this case because (a) lesbian separatism shares a philosophical origin with ecofeminism and thus some elements of its nature philosophy, and (b) many of the Oregon separatists are interested in ecofeminist

ideas even if they don't take on the label for themselves. On the origins of ecofeminist ideas of nature in U.S. radical feminism, see Sandilands (1999, chap. 1).

25. Tee Corinne is strongly associated with, but has never actually lived on, separatist communal land, although she considers the property (Poppyseed) she shares with her partner as lesbian land.

26. This language is not entirely western, White, and middle class. Although, as La Verne pointed out, White community members tended to selectively forget the many contributions of women of color, many White women sought out influences from outside western anglo-Christian traditions (of course, appropriation is also a thorny issue). It remains, however, that none of the women I spoke to mentioned how their lives on the land might have been influenced by the first peoples of the region, and none—except the one Black woman I spoke to—volunteered any analysis of the racialization (including anti-Semitism) of the social and ecological landscape of southern Oregon.

27. This statement involves the particular idea of lesbian identity as an achievement of years of work to transcend dominant gendered enculturation. Like elsewhere in lesbian North America, however, there is no consensus among the Oregon separatists about just what a lesbian is; for some women, lesbianism simply describes a primary erotic attraction to other women. The women who understood their sexuality and gendered activities as strongly linked tended to see the experience of working the land as directly contributing to their lesbian identity, whereas for those who understood their lesbianism as a primarily sexual phenomenon, this idea of a cultivated “lesbian strength” was either nonsensical or, at least, not at all tied to rural living.

28. This issue is a hot one for the community and echoes a much larger “sex war” in North American lesbian circles over such issues as sadism and masochism, pornography, and sexual role playing.

29. I should note that some of the women saw no connection whatsoever between sex and nature. Of all the themes I have discussed in this article, this one is the least consensually held. I include it because those women who hold to a lesbian erotic view of the landscape do so very intensely and very publicly.

30. Shuttleton (2000) discussed a distinct gay male Arcadian literary tradition, to which I would add that there is a distinct lesbian counterpart that includes such authors as Vita Sackville-West and Sarah Orne Jewett. Indeed, lesbian separatism drew on precisely this tradition in its formulation of nature as a creative space for the formation of a harmonious lesbian culture.

31. This assumption is one in which rural gays and lesbians feel they must go to urban areas to experience what it “really” means to be gay and urban queers feel that the country has no gay culture in it so they avoid it except for well-publicized resorts and tourist destinations, or visit with the expectation of being closeted the whole time.

## REFERENCES

- Alaimo, S. (2000). *Undomesticated ground: Recasting nature as feminist space*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Bell, D., & Valentine, G. (Eds.). (1995a). *Mapping desire: Geographies of sexualities*. London: Routledge.
- Bell, D., & Valentine, G. (1995b). Queer country: Rural lesbian and gay lives. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 11(2), 113-122.
- Brown, B. (1995). *In timber country: Working people's stories of environmental conflict and urban flight*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Bullard, R. (1993). *Confronting environmental racism: Voices from the grassroots*. Boston: South End.
- Cheney, J. (1985). *Lesbian land*. Minneapolis, MN: WordWeavers.
- Cohen, S., Yarabinec, A., Norwood, L., Tinder, T. C., & Mendelsohn, J. (1976). A view of the moon from the city streets. *WomanSpirit*, 3(9), 17-21.
- Corinne, T. (1975). *Cunt coloring book*. San Francisco: Pearlchild.



- Corinne, T. (Ed.). (1992). *The poetry of sex: Lesbians write the erotic*. Austin, TX: Banned Books.
- Corinne, T. (Ed.) (n.d.). *Community herstories: Living in southern Oregon*. Sunny Valley, OR: Author.
- Corinne, T., & Time'sChild, P. T. (1985). *A theory of art*. Sunny Valley, OR: Author.
- Domagalski, T. A. (1999). Contaminated water and leukemia in Woburn, MA: The failings of a civil action [Review of the book *A Civil Action* and review of the motion picture *A Civil Action*]. *Organization & Environment*, 12(3), 332-338.
- Echols, A. (1989). *Daring to be BAD: Radical feminism in America*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Field, T. (2000). Is the body essential for ecofeminism. *Organization & Environment*, 13(1), 39-60.
- Forbes, L. C., & Sells, L. (1997). Reorganizing, the woman/nature connection. *Organization & Environment*, 10(1), 20-21.
- Fuss, D. (1989). *Essentially speaking: Feminism, nature and difference*. New York: Routledge.
- Gaard, G. (1997). Toward a queer ecofeminism. *Hypatia*, 12(1), 114-137.
- Gearhart, S. (1976). Another view of the same moon from another city's streets. *WomanSpirit*, 3(10), 41-44.
- Gearhart, S. (1979). *The wanderground: Stories of the hill women*. London: Women's Press.
- Hall, D. (1977). Country politics. *WomanSpirit*, 3(11), 20-21.
- Hopp, J. (1986). *The tinker and more: Poems*. Roseburg, OR: Author.
- Ingram, G. B., Bouthillette, A., & Retter, Y. (Eds.). (1997). *Queers in space: Communities/public places/sites of resistance*. Seattle, WA: Bay Press.
- Johnston, J. (1973). *Lesbian nation: The feminist solution*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Laurence, H. (2001). bare. *Women and Environments International Magazine*, 52/53(Fall), 5.
- Mies, M., & Shiva, V. (1994). *Ecofeminism*. London: Zed Books.
- Munt, S. (1998). *Heroic desire: Lesbian identity and cultural space*. New York: New York University Press.
- Oregon Women's Land Trust. (1976). *Oregon women's land* [Information sheet]. Eugene, OR: Author.
- Phillips, R., West, D., & Shuttleton, D. (Eds.). (2000). *De-centring sexualities: Politics and representation beyond the metropolis*. London: Routledge.
- Pulido, L. (1998). Ecological legitimacy and cultural essentialism: Hispano grazing in the southwest. In D. Faber (Ed.), *The struggle for ecological democracy: Environmental justice movements in the United States* (pp. 293-311). New York: Guilford.
- Riordan, M. (1996). *Out our way: Gay and lesbian life in the country*. Toronto, Canada: Between the Lines.
- Ross, B. (1995). *The house that Jill built: A lesbian nation in formation*. Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press.
- Rule, J. (1964). *Desert of the heart*. Tallahassee, FL: Naiad Press.
- Sandilands, C. (1999). *The good-natured feminist: Ecofeminism and the quest for democracy*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Sandilands, C. (2001). Desiring nature, queering ethics: Adventures in erotogenic environments. *Environmental Ethics*, 23(2), 169-188.
- Sandilands, C. (2002a, forthcoming). Rainbow's end? Lesbian separatism and the (ongoing) politics of ecotopia. In J. Larkin (Ed.), *Feminist utopias: Visions for the millennium*. Toronto, Canada: Inanna Press.
- Sandilands, C. (2002b, forthcoming). "This land has called forth from you your strength as a lesbian": A separatist ecology? Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto, Institute for Women's Studies and Gender Studies.
- Schwandt, T. (1994). Constructivist, interpretivist approaches to human inquiry. In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 118-137). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

- Shugar, D. (1995). *Separatism and women's community*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Shuttleton, D. (2000). The queer politics of gay pastoral. In R. Phillips, D. West, & D. Shuttleton (Eds.), *De-centring sexualities: Politics and representation beyond the metropolis* (pp. 125-146). London: Routledge.
- Stein, A. (1997). *Sex and sensibility: Stories of a lesbian generation*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Summerhawk, B., & Gagehabib, L. (2000). Circles of power: Issues and identities in a lesbian community. *Bulletin of Daito Bunka University*, XXXVIII, 115-137.
- Valentine, G. (1997). Making space: Lesbian separatist communities in the United States. In P. Cloke & J. Little (Eds.), *Contested countryside cultures: Otherness, marginality and rurality* (pp. 109-122). London: Routledge.
- Warren, K. (1990). The power and the promise of ecological feminism. *Environmental Ethics*, 12(2), 125-146.
- Womanshare Collective. (1976). *Country lesbians: The story of the Womanshare Collective*. Grants Pass, OR: Womanshare Books.