Mother Nature, Father Profit

by

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B.A. (Honours), Queen’s University, 2017

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE AND POSTDOCTORAL STUDIES

(Political Science)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

(Vancouver)

July 2018

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Mother Nature, Father Profit

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the degree of Master of Arts in

in Political Science

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Abstract

Embedded, but rarely made explicit within liberal environmental rhetoric, is a focus on the individual as the primacy locus of change. Proponents of this atomized conception of responsibility suggest widespread environmental degradation— the product of individual overconsumption and poor decision making— can be addressed through individual lifestyle changes. According to this logic, individuals can ‘do their bit’ for the environment by buying ‘green,’ recycling, consuming less, and ‘living lightly.’ Despite the ostensible neutrality, the individualization of responsibility is in fact a deeply gendered notion. The injunction to make eco-friendly lifestyle changes results in an intensification of household labour and responsibility women undertake disproportionately. While there is a body of environmental sociological literature that recognizes this gendered division of eco-labour, there have been few efforts to critically theorize this gender gap. Contributing to these theoretical efforts, I argue that a gender-blind environmental approach based on ‘the individual’ as a homogenous, apolitical theoretical concept, depoliticizes environmental degradation as a space of political contestation. Without acknowledging the variation amongst individuals, the individualization of responsibility obfuscates the power asymmetry built into structures of the status quo, thereby stifling critique and the possibility of necessary structural change.
Lay Summary

One does not have to search very hard to come across advertisements, surveys, or public service announcements that tell us that, as individuals, we need to do our part for the environment. Being an environmentally conscious individual means buying ‘eco-friendly’ products, recycling, buying local and organic, and opting for paper instead of plastic. The notion that individuals are responsible for combating environmental degradation through personal eco-friendly lifestyle changes is called the individualization of responsibility. I build on a wider body of environmental sociological literature that recognizes that the individualization of responsibility is in fact a deeply gendered notion. Calls to make domestic, ‘eco-friendly’ changes in the household result in an intensification of household labour that women undertake disproportionately. The central problem of the individualization of responsibility, I argue, is that it ultimately serves to shield the ways in which patriarchy is built into our solutions for environmental degradation. I argue that any solution to environmental degradation is critically limited if it does not account for how gender impacts an individual’s relationship to the environment.
Preface

This thesis is the original, unpublished work of the author, Gabrielle Matheson.
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Acknowledgements

I offer my gratitude to the faculty and staff in the Political Science Department at UBC, in particular I would like to thank my supervisor Peter Dauvergne, as well as Arjun Chowdhury, Erin Baines, Richard Price, Katia Coleman and Josephine Calazan.

I would like to thank Eleanor MacDonald at Queen’s University, for introducing me to the energetic side of ecofeminism.

Lastly, a very special thanks to my friends and family who keep me going. To Billie, master of local fruit and baked goods. To August, for being both my inspiration and my voice of reason, to Cyrus for being a bro, and to my parents Christie and Rob, for their unwavering love and support.
Dedication

To Vern.
Section 1: Introduction and Overview

1.1 Introduction

Who within particular environmental, feminist and justice movements asserts which imagined futures? Whose voices are silent or silenced in these visions and goals? The elephant in the room is not who has the ‘agency’ to speak but who has the authority to speak— global South, global North, young, old, woman, man, white, black?

Wendy Harcourt and Ingrid Nelson

Recently, as I was exploring the corporate Instagram page of Anian, a Victoria based sustainable clothing company, I was reminded by a photo caption that, “as consumers, you have so much power to enact change . . . all you have to do is purchase that change you want to see.”

It’s so simple— move over Ghandi, I can Buy The Change™ I want to see in the world! If only we, as individuals, make the right ‘eco-friendly’ changes in our day-to-day lifestyles, we can buy, recycle, and consume our way to environmental sustainability. The only catch? We have to do actually do it. We have to make these changes to atone for years of not buying environmentally friendly products — of not recycling or driving an electric car.

Online again, as I was checking the weather, a survey popped up on the side of my browser, and the question read: “what are YOU doing to help the environment?” The options were: A) recycling, B) using reusable bags, straws and bottles, C) spreading the word, or D) cleaning up litter in my neighborhood. The question posed, and the answers provided, would seem to indicate

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that, as an individual, the terms of my environmental political engagement are a simple matter of small lifestyle changes. By recycling, I fulfil the role of ‘ecological citizen.’ I’ve ‘done my bit’ for the environment. Notably absent in this vision of environmental change is any mention of the economic and political institutions or factors of production that actually contribute to environmental degradation. Rather, I’m led to believe that as long as everyone—equally capable and responsible for performing the duties of an environmentally friendly citizen—selects an option on the survey, cumulative individual action will fix the environmental crisis. The irony would appear lost that the CEO of Exxon Mobil and a mother of four, living and working in poverty, could select the same option on this survey. Instead, the message is clear and simple: widespread environmental degradation persists because of individual shortcomings, and must be fixed through individual action—individuals are both the source and the solution of the problem. We have made our bed and now we must lie in it.

If environmentalism is a normative pursuit about what an environmentally sustainable world ought to look like, then our collective approach to managing the environmental crisis is a reflection of power. According to a certain logic of value, those who set the climate change agenda design what environmental solutions look like. The idea that individuals are responsible for turning the tides of environmental degradation through eco-friendly lifestyle changes is what Michael Maniates refers to as “the individualization of responsibility.”\(^4\) The logic that informs this view of responsibility for the environmental crisis is an extension of a neoliberal environmental order. Neoliberal environmental governance — widely recognized in various forms as liberal environmentalism, green capitalism, or free market environmentalism — sees capitalism and the

\(^4\) Michael F. Maniates, “Individualization: Plant a Tree, Buy a Bike, Save the World?” Global Environmental Politics 1, no. 3 (Aug 1, 2001): 31-52.
free market as the most effective means to solving the environmental crisis. According to this capitalist hierarchy of value, production, profit, and the individual trumps equity or the communal.\(^5\) Framing environmental solutions in accordance with this logic of value—in terms of individual, consumptive responsibility—has negative consequences that bears important consideration. What, we need to ask ourselves, are the costs of this capitalist logic of value for women and socio-ecological sustainability?

Following a wider body of feminist literature, my aim in this paper is to pull at the seams of neoliberal environmentalism by the exposing its capitalist and patriarchal underpinnings. Contesting dominant systems begins with the difficult and important work of exposing hegemonic logic in everyday policies and practices. From an ecofeminist perspective, I seek to explore how the logic of the individualization of responsibility is built on, and accordingly sustains, an oppressive patriarchal and capitalist apparatus that “actively maintains power hierarchies, and associated processes of marginalization.”\(^6\) Building on the work of Catriona Sandilands and Sherilyn MacGregor,\(^7\) I explore how the individualization of responsibility—an ostensibly gender neutral and implicitly generalizable notion—is in fact highly gendered. Placing the burden of responsibility for environmental change on the individual through lifestyle changes critically ignores the ‘politics of the personal sphere,’ or the way that domestic labour is gendered.\(^8\) Specifically, to be a ‘green citizen’ and to make environmentally sustainable lifestyle changes intensifies the household labour that women disproportionately undertake.

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\(^7\) See MacGregor 2006, Sandilands 1993.

Beyond pointing out the inequity in the gendered division of labour, the key contribution of this thesis is to locate the gendered division of eco-labour within neoliberal structures, as both a symptom of a neoliberal environmental order and a tool of its perpetuation. I argue that a gender-blind approach based on ‘the individual’ as a homogenizing theoretical concept de-politicizes environmental degradation as a space of contestation. The individualization of responsibility, therefore, ultimately shields the inequity and power asymmetry inherent in patriarchal structures, thereby stifling critique of those structures and the associated possibility of necessary systemic change. I argue we need to re-politicize the individual in our environmental theories by recognizing heterogeneity and inequity amongst and between individuals. Environmental solutions, I maintain, cannot be built on patriarchal foundations.

This analysis of responsibility bridges an important gap in the literature between the gendered division of environmental labour and the process of individualization tied to neoliberalism. That is, while there is a relatively well-established body of environmental sociological literature that recognizes this gendered division of eco-labour, there have been few efforts to critically theorize this gender gap.9 Moreover, while a handful of scholars have explored how neoliberal structures individualize responsibility in gendered ways, the phenomenon has not been expanded to include the responsibility for environmental degradation.10

Although I am calling for systemic change and the overhaul of a neoliberal order, it is not my intention here to prescribe alternatives. Following Harcourt and Nelson, I subscribe to what they refer to as the TAMA principle: “There Are Many Alternatives.”11 What form these alternatives take may vary, but what is critical is the possibility and potential to envision these alternatives. To

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this end, Harris is correct when she says, “[t]o be able to counter hegemonic trends, one has to be able to imagine and articulate alternatives.” 12 Hegemonic logic forecloses the possibility of theorizing and living “the otherwise.” 13 When a system serves one group at the expense of another, it is a system that needs rethinking.

The broader goal of my ecofeminist critique is not only to make visible the asymmetrical power dynamics rooted in tactics of liberal environmentalism, but also to make clear the linked domination of women and the environment by patriarchal, capitalist structures. As Nicole Detraz writes, “[g]ender lenses [. . .] highlight that an individualization of responsibility is never truly about the individual, it’s about the society.” 14 By failing to critically address gender in environmentalism, scholars remain unaware of the important relationship between gender equity and environmental protection, and the ways in which patriarchal systems hinder the development of new, egalitarian environmental futures. 15 As Kennedy and Dzialio point out, “both inequality and unsustainability are exacerbated in contexts of inequity in wealth, power, and labour.” 16 In broad strokes, in other words, this thesis intends to highlight the absence of an option E) on the survey. What am I doing for the environment? I would select option E): contesting a capitalist, patriarchal structure that exacerbates inequality and unsustainability, contesting decision-making as the choice between versions of ‘acceptable’ market-friendly solutions, and contesting the inevitability of the status quo as the only option.

12 Harris, “Hegemonic Waters and Rethinking Nature’s Otherwise,” 159.
13 Ibid., 163.
1.2 Overview

I begin the second section, “Ecofeminism as Method”, by outlining how and why I employ ecofeminism as a framework of analysis in this thesis. Part of doing so requires outlining how different ecofeminist scholars navigate the relationship between women and the environment in distinctive ways. In this section, I touch on the broader importance of the relationship between women and the environment, and the associated challenges of an ecofeminist analysis.

In the third section I outline *liberal environmentalism*. In this section I unpack the individualization of responsibility, and how it fits into the liberal environmental framework. Having explained individualization of responsibility, in section four I explore how it is a problematically gendered concept. I begin this section by outlining how the focus on personal lifestyle changes relates to women’s socialized roles as domestic caretakers, environmental stewards, and caregivers. I explore how these gendered, social expectations give rise to an unequal division of labour where women ultimately undertake a disproportionate burden of environmental labour.

In section five I compare the gendered nature of the individualization of responsibility in the global North and global South. I begin this section by explaining how gender is best understood as a process that shifts and changes across time and space. Building on this understanding of gender, I explore how individualization discourses interact with gendered expectations in different socio-environmental contexts. I use this exploration to highlight similarities in how patriarchal power asymmetries are woven into neoliberal environmental governance.

Section six marks the second half of my analysis, where I critically theorize the gendered individualization of responsibility presented in the preceding sections. In the sixth section I explain how the individualization of responsibility is an operative part of a hegemonic neoliberal system
that de-politicizes the environment as a space of political contestation. I argue that the individualization of responsibility theoretically rests upon an imagined gender-blind notion of ‘the individual.’ Inattention to gender overlooks the ways in which patriarchal systems influence social action, and thus also overlooks the related manifestations of gendered expectations as they play out in reality, such as an unequal division of labour. I argue that by shielding the patriarchal inequity built into the system, the individualization of responsibility stifles true political contestation and the possibility of generating meaningful, systemic change. Politics, I explain, needs to be about imagining new environmental futures.

In section seven, (re)-politicizing the individual, I make the case for introducing ‘messy politics’ into environmentalism. I argue that any approach to managing environmental degradation must be built on the awareness that individuals and segments of populations experience environmental degradation differently. I explain how any environmental theory that fails to adequately acknowledge such variations risk reinforcing the same patriarchal roots embedded in the current system. By acknowledging that people-as-individuals are distinct, and that social expectations structure different lived realities, we re-politicize the individual in environmental theories and approaches.
Section 2: Ecofeminism as Method

Racism, sexism, class exploitation and ecological destruction are four interlocking pillars upon which the structure of patriarchy rests.

Sheila Collins\textsuperscript{17}

In the introduction to *Gender and the Environment*, Detraz begins by explaining that her book is founded on the notion that “environmental, social, economic, and political processes are all gendered.”\textsuperscript{18} By *gendered* Detraz refers to socially constructed ideas of what it means to be a man or a woman, which emphasizes the distinction between biological sex and gender roles and expectations.\textsuperscript{19} Building on Detraz, I likewise ground my analysis in the notion that our relationships to the environment are gendered. I argue, furthermore, that the gendered nature of these relationships is often rendered invisible. Much mainstream environmental scholarship is grounded in the assumption that environmental degradation is a gender-neutral phenomenon.\textsuperscript{20} Accordingly, solutions to the problem are also gender-blind in ways that, as Detraz argues, “mask the complexity of human-nature connections as well as the opportunities for effective and just environmental politics.”\textsuperscript{21}

Ecofeminism takes root at the intersections amongst identity politics and eco-politics. In its simplest form, ecofeminism makes a connection between the domination of women and the domination of nature in patriarchal systems.\textsuperscript{22} A core contention of ecofeminist thought is that the

\textsuperscript{18} Nicole Detraz, *Gender and the Environment* (Chichester: Polity, 2017): 8.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 9.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 1.
\textsuperscript{22} Karen J. Warren, “The Power and the Promise of Ecological Feminism,” *Environmental Ethics* 12, no. 2 (Jul 1, 1990): 126.
dual oppression of women and nature are linked “conceptually, historically, materially but not essentially.”23 That is, historical and material forms of oppression stem from socialized constructions of gender: oppression is not linked to any biological or essential character of women. Recognizing the related oppression of women and the environment expands the realm of traditional feminism to include ecology, and provides “a framework for developing a distinctly feminist environmental ethic.”24 In this sense, the inclusion of gender in an environmental analysis focusses on power relations between men and women, and considers how socially-constructed, hegemonic narratives of masculinity and femininity shape how we speak about, understand, and interpret the environment. 25 As an analytical framework, ecofeminism is particularly valuable in bringing to light what is naturalized in the status quo. Ecofeminist frameworks expose how dominant discourses create and sustain particularized ideas of the environment, our role in its degradation, and the concomitant modes of addressing the environmental crisis.26

There is a significant degree of variation within the ecofeminist discourse and literature. Ecofeminism, per Sandilands, can be “simultaneously innovative and reactionary, energetic and moribund.”27 The literature is perhaps most clearly divided by perspectives of essentialism underlying ecofeminist frameworks. Essentialism is the idea that in pursuit of the broader goal of liberating women and the environment, some ecofeminist literature constructs, and thereby perpetuates, a narrow and depoliticized frame of identity for women.28 This literature relies on

25 Sherilyn MacGregor, “‘Gender and Climate Change’: From Impacts to Discourses,” Journal of the Indian Ocean Region 6, no. 2 (Dec 1, 2010): 228.
26 Harris, “Hegemonic Waters and Rethinking Natures Otherwise,” 160.
“ontological claims to an essence,” that is, the idea that there is some essence of ‘woman’ that is distinct and particular to women. 29 MacGregor argues that the debate surrounding essentialism has produced two separate groups of ecofeminist discourse. 30 One group celebrates women’s supposed spiritual, biological, and/or psychic closeness to nature, while the other views these claims as “disconcertingly essentialist.” 31 This schism within ecofeminist literature aligns with a similar division in second-wave feminist literature that includes “female essentialists” who praise essential female characteristics, while “poststructuralists” argue that gender is subjectively produced in a range of different contexts. 32

Given the contradictions in these discordant ideas, what is the value of an ecofeminist analysis? My answer, simply put, is that “[e]cofeminism demands we stop and think.” 33 Basic ecofeminist epistemological principles dictate that gendered relations lie behind all knowledge-making practices. 34 Reflecting on this theory of knowledge production requires interrogating how gendered ethics and politics underpin everyday work and life. A look at the politics of the everyday invites important, critical reflection on how lived experiences are produced through patriarchal, capitalist hegemonic systems. Ecofeminism, employed in this analysis, is largely about planting seeds for necessary structural change.

It can be difficult to address the charges of essentialism in ecofeminist analyses because, paradoxically, challenging gendered discourse demands reifying some universal component of

29 Ibid.
30 MacGregor, Beyond Mothering Earth, 19.
31 Ibid.
32 Ibid.
women’s lived experience.\textsuperscript{35} I have sought to distance myself from charges of essentialism in this analysis by aligning with the second camp of ecofeminist scholars who explore how societal processes are tied to the environments in which they are produced. Gendered environmental discourses are not static, and cannot be universalized, but rather are continually produced and reproduced by contextualized social forces.\textsuperscript{36} Far from a fixed entity, gender is better conceptualized as a dynamic process that varies across space and time.\textsuperscript{37} This kind of analysis allows us to recognize what Bina Agarwal refers to as “regional patterns of gendered differences in divisions of labour, property ownership, and power.”\textsuperscript{38}

Finally, it is important to note that a gender analysis is not synonymous with an analysis of women. The focus of this analysis is based on women’s experiences. The inclusion of other genders, valuable though it would be, is beyond the scope of this paper. In this sense, this thesis is not simply a gender analysis, but an exploration in variations amongst female roles. This analysis is not intended to hold true for all women. Rather, I intend to explore how gender and the environment are co-constructed within neoliberal contexts, and what the broader significance of this might be. Seyla Benhabib maintains that the “task of feminist critical theory” is to cultivate a theory that is “emancipatory and reflective, and which can aid women in their struggles to overcome exploitation and oppression.”\textsuperscript{39} In uncovering the ways in which \textit{environmental} systems are \textit{gendered} systems, I link the task of feminist critical theory to environmentalism in pursuit of imagining new, egalitarian environmental futures.

\textsuperscript{36} Detraz, \textit{Gender and the Environment}, 19.
\textsuperscript{37} Detraz, \textit{Gender and the Environment}, 9.
Section 3: Neoliberalism and the Liberal Environmentalist

This is lifestyle advertising at its finest: where consumers once waged war on dirt, we can now buy peace with Mother Nature.

Catriona Sandilands

At the risk of understating our current predicament, suffice it to say we are in an environmental crisis. The concentrations of carbon dioxide, methane, and nitrous oxide in the atmosphere are higher now than at any point in the last 2.5 million years. The ice shield is melting daily, and rising sea levels are exposing coastal communities to severe flooding. Bangladesh is slowly sinking. In many ways, the scale of this disaster is incomprehensible. Confronting this reality might reasonably validate a sense of impotence in our collective ability to fix the environmental crisis. Indeed, how do we confront a problem of this magnitude, and at this stage? How can we begin to ‘fix’ environmental degradation if we fail to understand what it is? Proposed solutions are determined by how we understand the problem. To those searching for a ‘pragmatic’ fix, finding solutions to what appears as a problem of incomprehensible scale is a question of conceiving climate change as a problem for which there is a solution.

Liberal environmentalism offers a ready-made solution to environmental degradation: “[i]n order to make live, one must make economic.” Liberal environmentalism is a method of

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42 Ibid.
43 Ibid.
addressing the environmental crisis through the capitalist, individualist, and economic foundations of society. This form of environmentalism is premised on the notion that environmental ills can be marketized. In commodifying environmental failures, internalizing environmental externalities, people can curb exploitation so that “human life can continue and prosper.”  

Liberal environmentalism in its contemporary form is a variation on the compromise of sustainable development that was created at the 1992 The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio di Janeiro. In essence, sustainable development captures the efficient power of market solutions, offering a win-win path to prosperity, whereby it is possible to simultaneously “save the planet” and develop and accumulate capital. Steven Bernstein argues that the Rio summit “institutionalized the view that liberalization in trade and finance is consistent with, and even necessary for international environmental protection, and that both are compatible with the overarching goal of sustained economic growth.”

Liberal environmentalism stems from a neoliberal economic and social order that is based on the primacy of the individual. As an economic system, neoliberalism is committed to the shrinking state, privatization, unfettered investment of capital, and market reliance. This economic system’s operation hinges on the individual as rational consumer. Reliance on government, according to neoliberal logic, is inefficient and costly, and support from the state hinders individual initiative. The logic of neoliberalism, or what Paul Wapner calls a “[t]echnocratic, scientific,

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46 Ibid.
50 Ibid.
51 Ibid.
and even economistic character[,]” demands that we evaluate society according to a particular capitalist metric of value. The neoliberal “good life” is one characterized by “[e]conomic growth, control over nature, and the maximization of sheer efficiency in everything we do.”

3.1 The Individual

As a figurative appendage of the neoliberal order, the individual is likewise central to liberal environmentalism. Noel Castree argues that in a liberal environmental system “[t]he state might make formal efforts to encourage citizens to take personal or communal responsibility for the ‘goods’ and ‘bads’ that arise from nature’s neoliberalization.” Indeed, as if created to validate Castree’s argument, the Government of Canada’s 1990 Green Plan is based on the unambiguous position that “[t]he government cannot achieve its sustainability goals without the participation of the population.” Further still, the plan claims that “self-regulation is better than government regulation, and that voluntary action is the most effective way to achieve enduring results.”

As mentioned, Michael Maniates dubs this process of shifting environmental obligations “the individualization of responsibility.” The individualization of responsibility is the idea that individuals have the means to change environmental degradation by making informed or enlightened lifestyle choices as consumers, by ‘buying green,’ recycling, and/or choosing paper over plastic. Individuals who care about the environment will purchase green items, shift to

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53 Ibid.
56 Ibid., 145.
57 Maniates, “Individualization: Plant a Tree, Buy a Bike, Save the World?” 32.
58 Ibid.
energy efficient appliances, and compost. The emphasis on consumer power hinges on the idea that consumers “vote with their pocketbook”: individuals can purchase the change they want to see in the world.\textsuperscript{59} In this sense, as Maniates points out, the individualization of responsibility demands that individuals imagine themselves as “consumers first and citizens second.”\textsuperscript{60} Ascribing importance to individual choice as a factor of change elevates individual acts of green consumption to the level of moral and/or political action.\textsuperscript{61} As Maniates argues, “[a]s individual consumers and recyclers we are supplied with ample and easy means of doing our bit. Not through bold political leadership or citizen-based debate within enabling democratic institutions — but rather via consumer choice: informed, decentralized, apolitical, individualized.”\textsuperscript{62}

The individualization of responsibility, however, suggests that although individuals are the key to the solution, they are also the source of the problem. Valourizing consumers’ power to positively affect the environment affirms environmental degradation as the result of “individual shortcomings.”\textsuperscript{63} In the 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm, the “philosophical statement of planetary concern” called for “loyalty to the earth that recognized planetary interdependence of all life, the adoption of global (as opposed to national) responses to environmental problems, and \textit{massive changes in over-consumptive lifestyles of the wealthy.”}\textsuperscript{64} The focus on the individual in this official rhetoric solidifies the idea that individual action is both the source and the solution of environmental problems. On individualization, Timothy Luke writes:

\begin{itemize}
\item[]{\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., 40.}
\item[]{\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., 34.}
\item[]{\textsuperscript{61} Sandilands, “On ‘Green’ Consumerism; Environmental Privatization and ‘Family Values’,” 45.}
\item[]{\textsuperscript{62} Maniates, “Individualization: Plant a Tree, Buy a Bike, Save the World?” 41-42.}
\item[]{\textsuperscript{63} Ibid., 32.}
\item[]{\textsuperscript{64} Bernstein, “Liberal Environmentalism and Global Environmental Governance,” 3. Emphasis added.}
\end{itemize}
In an ideological turnaround, which was ironically aided and abetted by some groups of ecological activists, it became clear that some of the worst environmental offenders no longer are simply dirty polluting factories or hungry lumber mills, but rather allegedly are individual consumers. With the regulatory fig leaf provided by EPA regulations and federal environmental law, the rhetoric of ecological responsibility slowly shifted from a vernacular of “Big business is dirty business” to dialects of “Factories don't pollute. People do.”65 Conceptualized as such, the current environmental crisis is interpreted as the collective product of a series of poor individual lifestyle decisions.66

Scholars such as Luke, Maniates, and Sandilands argue that the individualization of responsibility depoliticizes the environment as a space of political contestation. This depoliticization, they contend, operates in a number of ways. Firstly, following the logic of individualizing responsibility, exaggerated focus on the individual limits a critical analysis of institutional culpability for environmental degradation.67 ‘Domesticizing’ the burden of responsibility and placing the onus on individuals shifts the blame away from states, corporations, and other institutions that contribute to environmental degradation.68 This logic focusses on what Val Plumwood argues is “the wrong end” — factors of consumption that obscure production.69 Likewise ignored is what Maniates refers to as “the historical baggage of mainstream environmentalism[:]. . . the core tenets of liberalism, the dynamic ability of capitalism to commodify dissent, and the relatively recent rise of global environmental threats to human

prosperity.”  

No aspect of being an environmentally friendly individual requires the individual to “challenge capitalist economic growth,” or to consider seriously how “social relations and actions have brought about our current crisis.”

Secondly, the ‘domestication’ of responsibility limits the potential that meaningful action will be taken to address environmental degradation. Sandilands argues that the notion that individual action can save the earth “turn[s] attention away from subversive or collective public solutions.” Individuals need not take drastic action or promote radical reforms because they can ‘do their bit’ for the environment through relatively small changes in their personal lifestyle. Thus, Maniates argues, there is now widespread support for environmentalism largely because “the public increasingly understands it as an individual, rational, cleanly apolitical process that can deliver a future that works without raising voices or mobilizing constituencies.”

The assumptions undergirding the individualization of responsibility and the implications of this de-politicizing narrative do not stop there, however. There is a further danger in the notion that solutions to the current crisis depend on individual action. By shifting responsibility onto the individual, the logic of individualization suggests that ‘saving the environment’ is contingent on the degree to which individuals make the right kind of environmentally friendly lifestyle changes. To be ‘environmentally friendly’ requires buying and using green products, recycling, and avoiding plastic bags. To affect real environmental change, we are told making domestic lifestyle changes is a ‘must,’ as though every individual bears the burden of the responsibility equally. In the next section, I critique this supposedly neutral dialogue and demonstrate how the

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70 Maniates, “Individualization: Plant a Tree, Buy a Bike, Save the World?” 32.
72 Ibid., 45.
73 Maniates, “Individualization: Plant a Tree, Buy a Bike, Save the World?” 41.
individualization of responsibility is in fact a deeply gendered notion.
Section 4: The Gendered Individualization of Eco-responsibility

Ecofeminists are vocal in highlighting the ways in which environmental politics and policies are gender-blind. Following this trend, I begin by identifying how gendered assumptions are built into the supposedly neutral concept of the individualization of responsibility. Individualizing narratives construct an idea of what it means to be an ‘environmentally conscious’ or ‘green’ citizen. What does one have to be or do to be recognized as environmentally conscious? Perhaps, put most simply, what kind of individual is liberal environmentalism built for? In the following sections I address what scholars have largely overlooked in their critiques of the individualization of responsibility by highlighting how it is a fundamentally gendered concept. Building on the work of Sandilands and MacGregor, I highlight how women are ultimately made to bear a disproportionate burden of the domestic labour supposedly required to combat environmental degradation.74

The danger of the individualization of responsibility is that it is constructed on the basis of a gender-neutral-citizen with gender-neutral-citizenship obligations. This environmental approach, therefore, relies on an unproblematic assumption that the concomitant forms of labour associated with environmental citizenship are undertaken equally. When environmental degradation is framed as a private issue to be addressed by personal life-style changes, however, environmentalism becomes entangled in the reproduction of a gendered division of labour, where women bear a disproportionate amount of environmental responsibility.75 Calls for individual action increase the labour of domestic sphere activities that are already unequally divided amongst men and women.76

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76 MacGregor, *Beyond Mothering Earth*, 100.
As Sandilands points out, “[h]ousehold labour becomes intensified in the environmentally friendly household: it takes work to flatten the tin cans, sort the garbage, forsake the clothes dryer, and scrub with baking soda rather than let the ‘tiny scrubbers do it for you’.”

The individualization of responsibility privileges the domain of the household and valourizes the sphere of the personal as the primary locus of change. Luke aptly refers to individualization as the “domestication” of more radical forms of environmental action.78 Good environmental citizens “recycle, reuse, reduce, self-provide, and make green ethical consumer choices on the home front (i.e., buy things that are organic, nongenetically modified, cruelty free, locally made, fairly traded, minimally packaged, recyclable, and so on).”79 Private sphere environmentally friendly behaviour includes, for example, “using environmentally friendly cleaning products, hanging laundry to dry, [or] growing food.”80

The household or the private sphere is “traditionally” women’s domain.81 Women are thought to be “the keepers of family sanctity” and the “doers of family work.”82 Women’s socialized domain of the private is intimately tied to the duties associated with being a “maternal caregiver,” responsible for taking care of children and the home.83 The idea that women are maternal caregivers responsible for the domestic sphere coincides with how women are positioned in relation to their role in the environment. Indeed, the relationship between the domestic and the environment has been discussed at length by ecofeminists who unpack a great deal of significance

79 MacGregor, Beyond Mothering Earth, 100.
80 Huddart and Dzialo, “Locating Gender in Environmental Sociology,” 928.
81 See Sandilands, Good-Natured Feminist: Ecofeminism and the Quest for Democracy, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).
83 Ibid.
in the fact that the Greek root of the word “ecology” means “home.”\textsuperscript{84} MacGregor uses the term “ecomaternalism” to make explicit the links between the environment and “women’s mothering and caring disposition and their unique propensity\textsuperscript{85} to care for others.”\textsuperscript{86} Some ecofeminists craft this link by arguing that women care about the environment because they care for others, so it is the responsibility of women to actively combat environmental degradation to ensure the quality of life for their children and the next generation.\textsuperscript{87} Other ecofeminists maintain that women’s ‘propensity to care’ extends more broadly to include the realm of the environment— women as caretakers have unique environmental agency and the obligation to ensure their families are living environmentally responsibly.\textsuperscript{88} In both regards, for women, environmental action is thought to be an extension of domestic duties and experiences as nurturer and mother.\textsuperscript{89}

For women, the socialized obligations tied to ‘domestic caretaker’ and ‘environmental steward’ become linked and compounded in the discourse of the individualization of responsibility. Individual eco-friendly behaviour largely overlaps with household duties, such as cooking, cleaning and laundry, that are typically characterized by a great gender gap.\textsuperscript{90} Social expectations, therefore, collectively work to position women as uniquely and disproportionately responsible for the duties of being a ‘green citizen’ as defined by green capitalism. While men, no doubt, care about things like the environment or domestic sphere duties, men are not socially

\textsuperscript{84} Wapner, “Toward a Meaningful Ecological Politics,” 21.
\textsuperscript{85} This is a point of contention for ecofeminist scholars— whether women should embrace, or leverage this essentialized maternal “closeness” with nature to further conservation efforts, or whether to contest essentializing discourse and the associated maternal roles of women as special caretakers of the environment to push environmental change on different terms.
\textsuperscript{86} MacGregor, Beyond Mothering Earth, 20.
\textsuperscript{87} Ibid., 60.
\textsuperscript{89} Sandilands, \textit{Good-Natured Feminist: Ecofeminism and the Quest for Democracy}, 167.
\textsuperscript{90} Huddart and Dzialo, “Locating Gender in Environmental Sociology,” 921.
required to do the associated labour. There is perhaps no better validation of women’s socialized expectations than the surge in green commercialization that is primarily targeted towards women as the domestic caretakers. In the media, advertisements for ‘green’ commodities targeting women not only convey the message that the ills of the environment can be solved through consumption, but likewise that women are to be held responsible for the work required to do so. To recall Castree, a gendered division of labour would indicate it is not so much individuals generally, but women specifically, who must take responsibility for the ‘bads’ of nature’s neoliberalization.

4.1 Empirical Proof

Consistent findings in quantitative and qualitative studies in environmental sociological literature empirically support the existence of a gendered division of environmentally-friendly labour. In Canada, cross-national research supports the claim that women do more unpaid household labour than men. These reports find that women do significantly more environmentally-oriented work in the household (e.g., recycling, pre-cycling) than men. Additionally, in consumptive terms, a study conducted in the USA finds that “[w]omen in the USA are responsible for 80% of all household consumption.” In Political Consumerism Stolle and Micheletti provide an empirical basis to support the claim that this consumption is environmentally

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91 MacGregor, Beyond Mothering Earth, 59.
94 Lori M. Hunter, Alison Hatch and Aaron Johnson, “Cross-National Gender Variation in Environmental Behaviors,” Social Science Quarterly 85, no. 3 (Sep 1, 2004): 677-694.
95 Ibid.
motivated. Stolle and Micheletti explore the socio-demographic characteristics of the ‘political consumer’ to explore whether this form of political activism— if you can call it that— exhibits the same gender gap that characterizes other acts of political participation. The findings of their analysis indicate women are typically more engaged in political consumerism than men, leading to what they refer to as “the reversed gender gap.” Stolle and Micheletti cite a study of consumers in the US where researchers concluded that women are more likely to choose “certified” products, whether that certification is environmental, ethical, or otherwise.

While it is undoubtedly significant that empirical findings support the claim that there is a gendered division of environmental labour, empirical findings matter less than the wider acknowledgement and understanding that patriarchy influences environmental action in significant ways. To simply demand parity in domestic environmental labour would not solve the deeper structural inequity that gives rise to a gendered division of labour. In this section, I have sought to illustrate some of the consequences of the gendered dimension of environmental action. Any gender analysis, however, would be critically undermined without adequately acknowledging that gendered roles and expectations are not static. In the next section, I expand the scope of this analysis to consider multiple gender subjectivities. Specifically, I explore how social and geographical contexts play into the construction of women’s roles in relation to environmental spaces conditioned by neoliberal power relations.

99 Stolle and Micheletti, Political Consumerism, 92.
100 Ibid.
Section 5: “Globalizing” the Individualization of Responsibility, and Gender as a Process.

While women do experience changes/disasters differently it is not because they are women per se, but rather because of the structural inequalities they endure, and those pictures and broader narratives silence their voices, knowledge and lived experiences.

*Wendy Harcourt and Ingrid Nelson*¹⁰¹

In my efforts to focus on which individuals are meant to bear the burden of environmental responsibility, it is important to address how context and socio-environmental conditions play into an unequal environmental responsibility. An observant reader may have already picked up on what many might call an important gap in Maniates’ theoretical premise. Maniates’ conceptualization of the individualization of responsibility is couched in a framework that is focused on global North lifestyles and the tools the *Western liberal* individual has to solve the global environmental crisis. If women are made to bear a disproportionate burden of responsibility for saving the environment, how are these expectations managed by women living in poverty, or by women in the global South?

Part of expanding the scope of this analysis requires exploring how gender roles and expectations vary across a backdrop of diverse political, cultural, and economic backgrounds. As this variation pertains to women’s relationship with the environment, the ways in which ‘femininity’ is constructed creates differences in how women are held responsible as caregivers, green consumers, and environmental stewards. Andrea Nightingale explains that “[w]hen gender

is conceptualized as a process, the complex interplay between gender, environment and other relevant aspects of social and cultural processes can be analyzed.”102 Following Nightingale this analysis creates the opportunity to explore how gender subjectivities are constituted in relation to the environment through neoliberal processes in a variety of socio-cultural settings. Together, these subjectivities constitute different forms of individualization that operate to position women as ‘responsible’ for solving the global environmental crisis in different ways. In view of multiple and varying gender subjectivities, I explore how femininity — in relation to the environment — is constituted differently in the everyday lives of women in the global North and global South.

5.1 The Global South and the Global North

A fairly significant body of ecofeminist literature is dedicated to exploring the co-construction of gender and the environment, and variations in women’s relationships with the environment in the global North and the global South in particular. Predominantly, this literature has focused on examining how women in the global South are uniquely and disproportionately affected103 by climate change.104 Such scholarship argues that in the global South many women — in particular women in poverty — rely intimately and directly on the environment to fulfil gendered roles and expectations, such as fetching water, shopping for food, or collecting fuel.105 Thus, the often acute

103 Sherilyn MacGregor (2010) points out that the focus on the effects of climate change on women can lead well-intentioned scholars into a ‘discursive trap’ that entrenches a unidimensional understanding of women in the Global South as vulnerable victims of climate change.
effects of environmental degradation felt by women in the South are more immediately tied to how they navigate gender subjectivities.\textsuperscript{106}

In this strand of ecofeminist literature, Roberta Hawkins compares gender subjectivities in the North and South in relation to individualizing neoliberal discourses. Hawkins suggests that in both the North and South women are positioned as “mothers responsible for the wellbeing of their children in the face of environmental threats,” but with important differences that are mediated by social forces in their environments.\textsuperscript{107} Hawkins argues that in the North women’s “everyday lives are constituted as separate from natural environments except through consumption choices,” which she contends is “a dangerous idea that constitutes the market as the only route to ‘participate’ in development interventions, caring, and environmentally responsible actions.”\textsuperscript{108} Supporting Maniates’ critique, Hawkins argues women in the North are reduced to consumers rather than active, politicized, collective citizens.\textsuperscript{109} Conversely, Hawkins argues that narratives represent women in the South as “responsible for being ‘heroes’ in the face of environmental threats through the use of individualized technologies (e.g. bed nets and PUR packets) but ignore the more structural elements of these threats in the first place.”\textsuperscript{110} Women in the global South, from this perspective, are “saviours” who are uniquely well equipped to “use their special knowledge of the natural world or their sense of duty to care for others to help vulnerable communities adapt to climate change.”\textsuperscript{111}

\textsuperscript{106} Maskia, “Editorial,” 4.
\textsuperscript{107} Hawkins, “Shopping to Save Lives,” 755.
\textsuperscript{108} Ibid., 758.
\textsuperscript{109} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{110} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{111} MacGregor, “‘Gender and Climate Change': From Impacts to Discourses,” 233.
Though often discursively constructed as victims of climate change, women in the global South are clearly not immune to neoliberal individualizing discourses. In the global South, individualizing discourses can be built into development programs designed and implemented by ‘industrialized countries’ that are intended to simultaneously alleviate poverty and mitigate environmental degradation. A prime example of such a development program is the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM). The CDM was introduced in the Kyoto Protocol in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change Co-operation (UNFCCC) as one of three flexible mechanisms for promoting sustainable development and mitigating greenhouse gas emissions in developing countries.112 Individuals in developing countries can develop emissions reduction projects to earn certified emissions reduction (CER) credits.113 Small or large scale, these projects include making eco-friendly adjustments in areas such as agriculture, small-scale forestry, waste management, and household energy. 114 The credits earned can be traded and sold to industrialized countries, so that these countries can hit their Kyoto target emission.115 This glorified system of offsetting allows the carbon market to arbitrate an outcome that will both maximize profit and minimize environmental degradation.

As an extension of a liberal environmental approach, the CDM is centred on the individual in the global South as the focal point of change. The program is designed to wed individual initiative to environmentalism. In a program based on the individual, however, there is notable silence on how these programs may implicitly rely on, and thus tacitly reproduce, gendered relations. Indeed,

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113 Ibid.
much of the work required by these development programs targets change in places of daily life that increase an already gendered division of labour. For example, many of the CDM projects are focused on energy efficiency.\textsuperscript{116} In the context of the global South—poor rural areas in particular—women are traditionally responsible for dealing with household energy, including buying or collecting the fuel necessary for cooking and lighting the home.\textsuperscript{117} Thus, changes to the ‘energy efficient’ household can actually be a greater burden on women. As the authors of a CDM gender analysis report note, “poorly designed bio-gas stoves can increase, rather than decrease women’s workload.”\textsuperscript{118} In this CDM gender report\textsuperscript{119} prepared for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Finland, the authors in fact explicitly argue that “[o]bservers agree that there is evidence of targeting women in rural CDM projects such as household energy, agricultural and food processing and forest management.”\textsuperscript{120}

The CDM is not the only development program that operates on a dual process of individualization and gendered exploitation. According to some scholars, such as Maskia and MacGregor, many development programs in the global South are designed to be taken on by unpaid women on a volunteer basis.\textsuperscript{121} These programs are based on the assumption that “rural women are predisposed to taking an environmental care-tending role.”\textsuperscript{122} Maskia argues that “the expectation of women’s role as selfless earth-givers continues to translate into initiatives that place

\textsuperscript{116} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{117} Ahonen, Laine and Sinnemaa, “Gender and the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM): Opportunities for CDM to Promote Local Positive Gender Impacts,” 14
\textsuperscript{118} Ibid., 15
\textsuperscript{119} By and large the gendered elements of the CDM are widely overlooked in academic scholarship. For those who have considered gender, not all take a critical tack. Some scholars (See Maskia 2002) argue that the CDM may offer new opportunities for gender-redistribution initiatives.
\textsuperscript{120} Ibid., 13
\textsuperscript{121} MacGregor, “‘Gender and Climate Change’: From Impacts to Discourses,” 233.
\textsuperscript{122} Ibid.
greater burdens on women’s time and labour without reward and do not provide them with the inputs (education, information, and land right they require).” 123

In the North and the South neoliberal individualization narratives mobilize a link between women’s perceived propensity to care and the work required to address or mitigate environmental degradation. In the South, individualizing narratives compound the work for women who are meant to assume the responsibility for mitigating both environmental degradation and the felt effects of this degradation in their community. Dani Maclean summarizes this best, arguing “[i]n short, we’re letting some women both take the blame for climate change and bear the brunt of it.”124

The feminization of environmental labour associated with the individualization of responsibility substantiates a core contention of ecofeminist thought: capitalism and patriarchy are inextricably linked. Widening the scope of this analysis to explore the variation in women’s experience is not to hint at the existence of some universal relationship between women and the environment. Again, this argument does not and is not intended to hold true for all women everywhere. Rather, exploring variations in how women’s relationship with nature are constituted in neoliberal contexts solidifies the claim that some forms of patriarchal inequity are systemic. Neoliberal systems operate through inequality and patriarchy in a range of socio-environmental contexts.

This relationship between patriarchal systems and capitalism is deeply problematic in a number of respects, not least of which is the injustice of a largely ignored gendered division of

environmental labour. Beyond this inequity, however, women’s association with the domestic sphere, through the individualization of responsibility, reifies notions of what women’s engagement with environmental issues looks like. Women’s relationships to the environment become inextricably linked with unequal, gendered expectations, which then becomes naturalized. In the following sections, I critically theorize this gendered division of labour by illustrating how a gender-blind environmentalism depoliticizes environmental degradation as a space of contestation.

125 MacGregor, Beyond Mothering Earth, 101.
Section 6: De-politicization and the Post-political Environment

*Politics becomes something one can do without making decisions that divide and separate*

A.J.P. Thompson.126

Catriona Sandilands unwittingly sets the stage for this section when she writes: “[t]here seems to be a relationship between the ways in which environmental issues have become routinized, bureaucratized, and individualized and the ways in which they have become de-politicized.”127 In this section, I make the relationship Sandilands hints at explicit by locating the gendered division of environmental labour within a neoliberal process of *de-politicization*. Maniates argues that the individualization of responsibility is an appendage of a neoliberal hegemonic system that operates to naturalize (and thereby sustain) a neoliberal order through depoliticizing environmental policies. In this section, I expand on Maniates’ claim to highlight how an inattention to gender in the individualization of responsibility discourse is an alternate form of de-politicization. Specifically, I argue, the individualization of responsibility de-politicizes the individual as a way of naturalizing patriarchal, capitalist relations.

The process of de-politicization discussed in this analysis is the dissolution of a particular form of ‘the political.’ The political, according to Paul Kythreotis, is “a space of contestation through which citizens enact the right to dissent, the right to argue against a particular consensus, the right to engage in antagonistic relations, the right to be alternative.”128 In this regard, true *political* action

challenges the system and oppressive stasis. Maniates’ concern regarding the de-politicization of the environment aligns with anxiety expressed by number of philosophers who argue that we are living in a “post-political” system.\textsuperscript{129} The post-political system is structured around the naturalization of capitalism and market economies as the \textit{inevitable social and economic order}.\textsuperscript{130} As Erik Swyngedouw explains: “[p]ost politics refers to a politics in which ideological or dissensual contestation and struggles are replaced by techno-managerial planning, expert management and administration, whereby the regulation of the security and welfare of human lives is the primary goal.”\textsuperscript{131}

Appreciating the gravity of the de-politicization of environmentalism is tied to understanding that environmentalism is a potential platform for radical social and economic upheaval. Thus, the de-politicization of environmentalism means “climate change policies ultimately reinforce [. . .] the socio-political status quo rather than, as some suggest and hope, offering a wedge that might contribute to achieving socio-ecologically more egalitarian transformations.”\textsuperscript{132} In our current post-political environmental condition, democratic dispute and debate on environmental policies is tolerated — and in fact actually encouraged — so long as the general frame is not contested.\textsuperscript{133} Vocal opposition and debate is quelled by the tweaking or rearranging of institutions of the status quo: we are left with capitalism, but with a green veneer.\textsuperscript{134}

\textsuperscript{131} Ibid., 225.
\textsuperscript{132} Ibid., 214
\textsuperscript{133} Sandilands, \textit{Good Natured Feminist}, 154.
\textsuperscript{134} Swyngedouw, “Apocalypse Forever?: Post-Political Populism and the Spectre of Climate Change” 22.
The de-politicization of environmental degradation is, in Maniates’ appraisal, prolific and central to liberal environmentalism more generally and the individualization of responsibility specifically. As was touched on earlier, the crux of the issue with the consumer-as-citizen, as Maniates and others argue, is the supposition that individual acts of green consumption or recycling constitutes some sort of moral or political act.\textsuperscript{135} In the post-political system, choosing between eco-friendly brands, or choosing to buy a product from a company with a better corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiative, is considered a political act or expression. Maniates argues that consumption as “political” action actually \textit{contributes} to a distancing from “traditional understandings of active citizenship.”\textsuperscript{136} Specifically, he argues that individualization imparts a perception that action outside the realm of the private and consumptive is irrelevant and ineffective.\textsuperscript{137} Thus, individualization acts as a barrier to “empowering experiences and political lessons of collective struggle for social change.”\textsuperscript{138} In this sense, the individualization of responsibility is “both a symptom and a source of waning citizen capacities to participate meaningfully in processes of social change.”\textsuperscript{139} If, as many suggest, true politics is antithetical to sustaining neoliberal hegemony, the role of politics in environmentalism is to create opportunities for constructing radically new environmental futures.\textsuperscript{140}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Sandilands, “On ‘Green’ Consumerism: Environmental Privatization and ‘Family Values’,” 45.
\item Ibid., 38.
\item Ibid., 38.
\item Ibid., 44.
\item Ibid.
\item Swyngedouw, “Apocalypse Forever?: Post-Political Populism and the Spectre of Climate Change,” 228.
\end{enumerate}
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6.1 Gender and De-politicization

Maniates’ call for proper political action intersects with a foundational tenet and normative aim of ecofeminist literature: environmental and social problems are structural, and dismantling this structure is necessary for meaningful social change. Structures that stifle dissent, discussion, or contestation, that homogenize the individual or operate through systemically excluding the voices of some, are fundamentally antithetical to both emancipation and to imagining new environmental futures. Building on this intersection of ideas, I maintain that an ecofeminist perspective provides a vital complement to Maniates’ claim regarding the ways in which the individualization of responsibility obfuscates necessary structural critique.

To push Maniates’ point further, I argue the individualization of responsibility depoliticizes environmental degradation through homogenizing ‘the individual.’ As a theoretical framework, the individualization of responsibility rests upon an apolitical, neutral notion of “the individual”—an approach to environmentalism I have referred to as ‘gender blind.’ Environmental responsibility is located in the domain of ‘the individual,’ as though the burden of environmental degradation is shared by all equally. As a theoretical concept, the individualization of responsibility glosses over important differences and variations amongst individuals that mediate discrepancies in environmental responsibility. In actuality, environmental responsibility is not undertaken equally by all; rather, it is divided along lines structurally entrenched by patriarchal relations.

The depoliticized individual that is the cornerstone of the liberal environmental project is a symptom of a larger neoliberal framework based on an aversion to true politics. Liberal environmentalism is sustained by the narrative that environmental degradation is a question of science — technocratic solutions make ‘messy’ politics superfluous. In this scientific conception of the environment, there is no space for incorporating multiple and competing subjectivities. As
Vandana Shiva writes, “[c]apitalist patriarchy has substituted the sacredness of life with the sacredness of science and development.”¹⁴¹ In the conceptual or theoretical terms of the individualization of responsibility, neutrality extends to the individual; operationally speaking, the individual exists in this framework as a neutral statistic. In the individualization of responsibility, the people, or individuals, are called upon as supposedly political citizens capable of remaking an environmental order, yet, ironically, the variation, difference, and heterogeneity that fuels debate does not factor into the analysis. Calling upon citizens without acknowledging difference is a way of de-politicizing the individual. Indeed, as Swyngedouw argues, it is “the recognition of radically differentiated if not opposed social, political or ecological desires [that] calls the proper democratic political into being.”¹⁴²

By de-politicizing the individual in environmental theory, we accordingly gloss over how patriarchy is a form of de-politicization. That is, it is certainly possible that the feminization of environmental responsibility that results in increased labour and unpaid work for women could avert important time and energy away from the kinds of collective, truly political forms of environmental action that Maniates and others emphasize. As MacGregor argues, “[c]itizenship, understood as being about active participation in the public sphere, is by definition a practice that depends on ‘free time’; it is thus not designed for people with multiple roles and heavy loads of responsibility for productive and reproductive work.”¹⁴³ In this sense, the collective body of citizens that forms the basis of properly political public action may be a collective of sorts, but it is not one that is representative, and it is certainly, therefore, not democratic. If it is this kind of public, collective acts of citizenship that are necessary to construct a new environmental future,

how is it possible to call these acts truly political if they are not made by democratic bodies? Shiva argues that “[t]he power by which the dominant knowledge system has subjugated all others makes it exclusive and undemocratic.” To take Shiva’s point, properly political contestation of hegemonic systems, by very definition, cannot be built on exclusion.

It is important to note that although the individualization of responsibility is a process that perpetuates and exploits women’s unpaid labour, this is most certainly not to say that women are apolitical objects of their circumstances. On the contrary, women have agency in remaking and re-politicizing the terms of their political engagement. Private sphere actions, ‘environmentally friendly’ housework, can be an important factor in environmental change. The problem is not that domestic duties are irrelevant factors in combating environmental change; rather, at issue is the uncritical association of private sphere concerns with women’s work, and the possibility that these duties replace ‘proper’ political action.145

An ecofeminist analysis makes clear that any gender-blind environmental solution is antithetical to true ‘politics.’ In the construction of any new environmental agenda, it matters which individuals are responsible for climate change, which individuals set the climate agenda, and which individuals are tasked with the work required to make change happen. Following Swyngedouw, “[w]e must reassert the specificity of the political before we can even begin to imagine alternative futures”146 or to conceive what he calls “different stories” that confront the neoliberal frame.147 In this sense, as I argue in the next section, theoretically re-politicizing the individual is necessary

144 Vandana Shiva qtd. in Stephen Bede Scharper, For Earth’s Sake: Towards a Compassionate Ecology, (Toronto: Novalis 2013): 105.
147 Swyngedouw, “Apocalypse Forever?: Post-Political Populism and the Spectre of Climate Change,” 228.
for dismantling oppressive power relations and for democratically constructing an environmental solution founded on principles of equality and justice.
Section 7: (Re)-politicizing the Individual

Does it matter that the definition of climate change as an existential threat, the research being done, and solutions being devised, rest principally in the hands of an elite group of mainly male, mainly white European and Anglo-American scientists from the affluent West?

Sherilyn MacGregor148

To those familiar with the liberal tradition, it should be of little surprise that liberal environmentalism has become a question of individual change. Giving in to thinly-veiled narcissistic and anthropocentric leanings, we have increasingly bought into the idea that not only can humans change the tide of environmental degradation within existing social and economic structures, but in fact it will be the individual—predominantly as consumer— that will do so. Given how prolific the individualization of responsibility is within environmental discourse, one might be led to believe that individual action—however gendered it may be— is an effective mode of making real environmental change. However, Luke writes,

The essential irony of this entire approach to ecology change by green consumerism is that it actually has been at work daily for many years in many millions of households and thousands of firms, at least since the energy crisis of 1973, as a form of do-it-yourself world-watching that has sustainably developed a green consumer industry. And, after decades of careful ecological concern, more campaigns for recycling, many days of rational shopping, and much thinking about source reduction only have left the biosphere still

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ravaged by intense ecological exploitation. The earth is not greener or safer but deader and more endangered.¹⁴⁹

Concerns about environmental degradation have been mounting for decades, and this heightened ecological consciousness has mobilized unprecedented levels of individual activist efforts. Yet, this heightened sense of urgency has quite clearly and obviously not availed adequate or effective forms of environmental change. The logic of individualizing responsibility dictates that there is a notable lack of environmental change because individuals have not made the necessary decisions. If the environment is not improving, it is because individuals do not know or care enough to change it. In this way, the individualization of responsibility is another iteration of neoliberal blame displacement; another way of directing attention to address symptoms, rather than root causes. To counter the logic of individualizing responsibility, I maintain that the problem is not individual apathy or ignorance, but a system that relies upon this false belief.

In the pursuit of necessary socio-environmental changes, we need to theoretically re-politicize the individual by acknowledging that individuals are distinct. Put simply, we need to be upfront about the realities and patriarchal inequalities of capitalist systems. If we do not build acknowledgement of inequity into our theoretical frameworks, we cannot address it: we cannot change what we cannot see. Silence, often a tacit acceptance of the status quo, is a way of naturalizing patriarchal relations such that gender inequity is believed to be part of the natural order. It is illogical to suppose that an environmental solution premised on a neutral conception of the individual — one that does not exist in society — could serve in dismantling the structural asymmetries that give rise to disparity and inequalities in socio-environmental experience.

Part of confronting systemic inequality and patriarchy is recognizing that the current order is one that benefits some at the expense of others. What gets obscured, overlooked, or naturalized is not random; it is no accident that the status quo is one that benefits corporate interest at the expense of women’s unpaid, depoliticized, labour. Andy Lockhart writes:

by using mean averages of people’s contribution to environmental degradation, they fail to discern how social, economic and cultural inequalities both precipitate such problems and obscure the divergent impacts on people of different race, class and gender. Structural issues of poverty, patriarchy and militarism remain unchallenged. The effect of this hole is to perpetuate the idea that the ecological crisis is a result of human excess, rather than anything more systemic in the organization of society.\textsuperscript{150}

As Lockhart makes clear, for the beneficiaries of the status quo, there is a clear incentive to misdiagnose environmental degradation as “a scientific problem that affects ‘us’ equally.”\textsuperscript{151} A homogenizing environmental theory that at once sanitizes and universalizes individual-environmental relationships is by design. It is a way of stifling contestation, naturalizing inequality, and obscuring structural critique. Maniates argues that — despite what the logic of individualization suggests — the problem of environmental degradation is not consumption or private consumer behaviour; rather, the problem is that focusing on the individual skews a critique of the larger structural forces and interests that actually lead to environmental degradation.\textsuperscript{152}

Similarly, the problem is not \textit{actually} the inequity of feminized eco-responsibility (though this is certainly a problem): the problem is that this inequity is foundational to the same larger structural

\textsuperscript{151} Macgregor, “Only Resist,” 628.
\textsuperscript{152} Maniates, “Individualization: Plant a Tree, Buy a Bike, Save the World?” 31-52.
forces and interests. The political, economic, and corporate actors that benefit from globalization and consumerism are the same political, economic, and corporate actors that benefit from patriarchy. These connections are important ones to make—we cannot build a new environmental future, or truly emancipate environmental movements from corporate interests, if we do not first problematize inequity in all its forms. Environmental solutions cannot be built on patriarchal foundations. The problems we face are complex and linked, and the solutions we come up with must be too. Compartmentalizing the problem by treating environmentalism and patriarchy as separate issues is no doubt appealing in its simplicity, but pragmatic solutions are no substitute for equality and justice.

Pinpointing blame in structural problems somewhat ironically runs the risk of letting the individual slip between the cracks of this analysis. Certainly my contention in highlighting structural inequities is not to absolve the individual of blame. To relegate the blame for environmental degradation on capitalism or the neoliberal order is a form of third order shift of responsibility unless there is recognition that these structures are not vague and amorphous, but are made up by people who buy into and perpetuate the system. As Peter Dauvergne suggests, “[i]gnoring [the importance of people] runs the risk of thinking about responsibility in rather intangible and vague ways — with concepts like capitalism, rather than the people who make up and run the institutions of capitalism, somehow accountable for unequal and unsustainable outcomes.” The reality is that the problems associated with environmental degradation do not reside in the exclusive domain of either the broken system or the individual that is served by this broken system. Understanding this begins, as Maniates does, by critically examining how environmental solutions are framed in a language of responsibility. There are undoubtedly

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important responsibilities associated with addressing environmental degradation that are made hugely complex by considerations of culpability and capability. Not everyone is equally responsible for environmental degradation, and not everyone has the same capability to attend to its solution. The point is that these responsibilities cannot be delegated by uncritical blanket statements or as an unconscious consequence of any environmental policy. We need to be mindful about where we place responsibility, and it needs be done explicitly and purposefully.
Section 8: Conclusion

I begin this conclusion with a quote from environmental scholar Jessica Dempsey:

Liberal environmentalism is an approach premised on a smooth space of politics, one where all the different players can find common ground through dialogue, or even better, the neutral words of numbers and even money . . . It aims, as much as possible, to avoid dirty, asymmetrical, bloody politics. It seeks an orderly, technical solution. 155

I maintain that this reliance on technical solutions, this aversion to “dirty, asymmetrical, bloody politics” is in fact the crux of the issue with liberal environmentalism.156 The purpose of this ecofeminist analysis is to shed light on the invisible assumptions that underpin environmental discourse, and to critically, rigorously question any narrative that is supposedly ‘neutral.’ Who or what are the beneficiaries of the status quo, neoliberal environmental structures, and at what cost does maintaining this status quo come to certain people and places? By expanding the scope of this ecofeminist analysis to consider multiple gender subjectivities, I have sought to push beyond what Sandilands calls “[a] singular and problematic narrative of oppression based on white, heterosexual, western-centric assumptions about women and nature.”157 Patriarchal relations cannot be broken down by focusing on one singular experience of oppression. With this in mind, I have sought to direct attention toward “a more thoroughgoing and context-sensitive position that holds critical conversation as a central political and intellectual tenet.” 158 These critical

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156 Ibid.
158 MacGregor and Sandilands, “WEspeak: Ecofeminism; Conversations for a New Millennium,” 4.
conversations are the basis of true, emancipatory political action, and these critical conversations are what is stifled in environmental discourses that homogenize the individual.

Calls for the individualization of responsibility take place within a societal framework of gender norms and expectations. To presume that any framework of environmentalism that systematically ignores these gender constructions could operate in the absence of equity and justice is severely and critically short-sighted. There is no neutral environmental citizen, so it is fundamentally illogical that the solution to the ecological crisis hinges on a framework that revolves around one. It matters which individuals we speak of when we buy into the narrative that individuals have caused the environment crisis. Certainly, the individualization of responsibility is not the only gendered environmental approach. However, by shifting responsibility for environmental degradation to the individual without problematizing which individuals, the individualization of responsibility compounds this gendered division by simultaneously exploiting and naturalizing asymmetrical, oppressive power relations. As a method of addressing environmental degradation, liberal environmentalism operates to promote incremental changes that sustain a status quo that benefits some at the expense of others.

Kings argues that “[t]he liberation of women cannot be achieved without the simultaneous liberation of nature from the clutches of exploitation.”159 Accordingly, so too it is impossible to solve the environmental crisis without first addressing women’s exploitation. Identifying the parallels in how women and nature are systematically subordinated in this status quo is an important first step in what are critical efforts to disrupt the structure of the ‘mainstream’.

159 Kings, “Intersectionality and the Changing Face of Ecofeminism,” 70.
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