

MYSTICAL SCIENCE IN A MATRIARCHAL WORLD: OREGON'S LESBIAN
SEPARATIST COMMUNITIES AND FEMALE NATURE, 1970-1990

by

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Abstract

In the mid-1970s, lesbian women across the United States sought solace from patriarchy and ecological destruction by abandoning cities and moving to secluded rural areas. These spaces became lesbian separatist communities, or communities in which no men were allowed. Sometimes called lesbian landers, the women who made up these communities formed part of the larger women's land movement of the same period. Southern Oregon housed several women's lands. Although the women's land movement perpetuated racist, colonialist, and essentialist ideas, it was particularly significant in shaping how one segment of countercultural women understood the intersections between gender and nature. This thesis examines the ways in which southern Oregon's lesbian separatists rejected what they saw as mechanized, masculine science and blamed it for the world's social and environmental problems. Lesbian landers understood nature as female; they saw "her" as a caring, nurturing mother and same-sex lover. They connected to "her" both spiritually and sexually. As women, landers sought to heal from patriarchal destruction alongside "her" by living on and loving the land. I argue that in doing so, lesbian landers forged new ways of knowing that combined the biological with the magical, the physical with the metaphysical. I call this way of knowing mystical science, and I argue that this ontological perspective enabled landers to radically reimagine solutions to social and environmental problems. Lesbian separatist communities provide a useful space for historians of science to explore how tensions between scientific and social values affect the intellectual and spiritual creation of alternative cosmologies.

Lay Summary

The 1970s brought about great social and environmental changes in the United States. Three main movements that effected that change were the women's liberation movement, the gay rights movement, and the environmental movement. A relatively unknown group of people who combined the goals of all three movements were lesbian landers. Lesbian landers were feminists who left cities and took to the woods. Once there, they established lesbian separatist communities, or communities in which no men were allowed. Lesbian landers moved to rural areas because they wanted to connect with nature and with other women. Connecting with nature and other women was important to landers because they believed that patriarchy—or the social system under which men and masculinity are dominant—was the root cause of violence against women and the environment. They also saw masculine science as the mechanism by which patriarchy had exploited women and nature. Landers imagined nature as female; they called “her” Mother Earth, and they also felt an intimate relationship with “her” as their lover. In this thesis, I argue that lesbian landers created new ways of knowing nature, ways that integrated both ecological and spiritual perspectives. I call this new way of knowing mystical science, and I argue that landers' mystical science enabled them to reimagine what nature could and should be.

Preface

This thesis is the original, unpublished, independent work of the author, Kylie Young.

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my Grandpa Y., who passed away in July and who, ornery as ever, made finishing my final drafts difficult. If he could read this now, he a) probably wouldn't actually read it, and b) would undoubtedly shake his head in confusion while smiling with pride.

May this thesis always bring me fond, sweet memories of sitting by your bedside.

Introduction

In the summer of 1988, over 100 women assembled in the woods of southern Oregon to attend the OWL Spirit Gathering on Oregon Women’s Land Farm—or OWL Farm, as it was more commonly known. The theme of this gathering was “Soothing Ourselves, Soothing Our Earth.”¹ On a yellow flyer advertising the event, one side features hand-drawn images of big-bodied women climbing a tree with another naked woman holding up the tree from its roots. The other side depicts a hand holding plants and a rabbit, and this hand seems to be coming from another topless woman whose hair resembles tree branches. Distributed by the “Lesbian Community of Southern Oregon,” the flyer states the purpose of the gathering:

Our purpose is to celebrate our rich and varied lesbian culture in the beauty and safety of Oregon Womyn’s Land. Wimmin being safe together—nurturing ourselves and our earth. Through ways we create at the gathering, we will soothe our physical, emotional, and spiritual beings.²

To create a safe and nurturing environment, the gathering had several rules: meals would be “vegetarian and dairyless”; no men were allowed; no male children were allowed unless they were breastfeeding; childcare, both day and night, would be provided for free; and those who registered late were required to bring a box of organic food. Prices to attend the gathering varied depending on a woman’s socioeconomic position. The OWL Spirit Gathering was one of many gatherings at the heart of the American women’s land movement.³

¹ “OWL Spirit Gathering” Flyer located in Box 4, Folder 6, SO CLAP! Collection, 1974-1999, University of Oregon Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene, Oregon (hereafter cited as SO CLAP! Collection).

² Ibid. The misspellings of “women” in this quote were intentional; many feminists of this period preferred to use alternative spellings of “woman” that did not place women as derivatives of men. For simplicity, I will use the standard spellings of woman/women except for direct quotations.

³ Ibid.

In the early 1970s, lesbian women created lesbian lands across the United States, where they sought solace from heteropatriarchy by “returning” to nature. The women who lived in these communities and participated in the women’s land movement are sometimes called lesbian landers. Landers structured their communities as separatist, meaning that no men were allowed on the land. They saw separatism as the solution to the world’s patriarchal and ecological problems.⁴ Separatism was necessary, lesbian landers argued, because patriarchal dominance and the men who enacted it were the root cause of violence against women and the environment. While some women saw separatist solutions as temporary, others thought that permanent separatism was the only way to heal both the social and natural world. And who better to heal the world, they argued, than women?

Southern Oregon became a hub of these communities.⁵ In fact, by 1976, the year women purchased the land that would become OWL Farm, several lesbian separatist communities had already surfaced in the area, with woman- and earth-based names like Fly Away Home, Rainbow’s End, Riverland, We’moon Healing Ground, Rootworks, and WomanShare Collective.⁶ Because the women’s land community in southern Oregon was so active, Oregon’s lesbian landers became leaders of the movement.

⁴ Katherine Schweighofer, “Legacies of Lesbian Land: Rural Feminist Spaces and the Politics of Identity and Community” (PhD diss., Indiana University, 2015), 10.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁶ Grosjean, ““Making Ourselves Real,”” Jean and Ruth Mountaingrove in the Southern Oregon Lesbian-Feminist Community, 1970-1984” (MA thesis, University of Oregon, 2014), 5. See also Joyce Cheney, ed., *Lesbian Lands*, (Minneapolis: Word Weavers, 1985), 125-128; Catherine Kleiner, “Doin’ It For Themselves: Lesbian Land Communities in Southern Oregon, 1970-1995” (PhD diss., University of New Mexico, 2003), 71. As of 2011, many of these lesbian lands in southern Oregon still existed, sometimes with and sometimes without residents, but the lands’ post-1990 history is beyond the scope of this paper. For more information, see Heather Jo Burmeister, “Rural Revolution: Documenting the Lesbian Land Communities of Southern Oregon” (MA thesis., Portland State University, 2013), 1-2. Also see

Lesbian separatist communities arose out of an entanglement of social, political, and spiritual anxieties. A convergence of the women's and gay liberation, environmental, and back-to-the-land movements, the women's land movement of the 1970s-1990s saw the social problems associated with each movement as inherently intertwined. Underlying lesbian landers' critique of North American society was a critique of what they understood to be Western scientific ways of knowing. Specifically, landers rejected the masculine, mechanized metaphors for nature that they saw around them and instead promoted a type of human-nature relationship built on care, mutual respect, and consent. These ideas occurred alongside changes in ecological thought during the same period that reframed the earth as a holistic, interconnected organism. Here, I demonstrate how the story of southern Oregon's lesbian separatist communities is as much about women rejecting what they understood to be mechanized science as it is about women rejecting patriarchy.⁷ Lesbian landers rejected patriarchy and ecological destruction through their rejection of what they perceived to be masculine modern Western science, and this rejection occurred primarily via the ways in which they conceptualized and interacted with a female earth who was both their mother and their lover.

Shewolf, *Shewolf's Directory of Wimmin's Lands and Lesbian Communities* (New Orleans: Royal T. Pub, 1995), 4, located in Box 6, Folder 18, SO CLAP! Collection.

⁷ I use the term "mechanized, masculine science" to refer to how historians of the time characterized the scientific practices that derived from the mechanical philosophy. In 1977, historian Richard Westfall described the mechanical philosophy as "the rigorous separation of the corporeal from the spiritual, and the consequent necessity of mechanical causation." Westfall wrote that the mechanical philosophy "defined the framework in which nearly all scientific work was conducted." Further, Westfall argued that "Whatever the crudities of the 17th century's conception of nature, the rigid exclusion of the psychic from the physical nature has remained as its permanent legacy." Richard Westfall, *The Construction of Modern Science: Mechanism and Mechanics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977): 40-41. Landers similarly understood science as having been created by men and for men. Landers also argued that modern Western science tended to view the earth as mechanical rather than organically interconnected, and they associated this mechanization with masculinity. As such, I refer specifically to this view of a mechanized and masculine science when referring to the science against which landers fought.

This story, therefore, must be understood not only as part of a feminist history but also as a countercultural rejection of mechanistic worldviews. Landers attributed organic and holistic beliefs about nature to the feminine, and they valued these beliefs as good. They saw mechanized views of nature as patriarchal, bad, and as having formed the social and scientific foundations of the ecological crisis they feared. To justify their environmentalist and feminist critiques of American society, lesbian landers created a worldview that allowed for belief in the ecological sciences of the time while simultaneously incorporating their essentialist and spiritual beliefs and practices. Lesbian landers, I argue, created not only an alternative world in their separatist communities but also an alternative science, one that merged the biological with the mystical and the physical with the metaphysical. I contend that this mystical science enabled lesbian landers to radically reimagine solutions to social and environmental problems beyond the confines of mainstream American ways of knowing. By understanding how landers reconciled their conflicting scientific and spiritual beliefs, historians of science may gain greater insight into how alternative cosmologies come into being and how those cosmologies become mobilised for activist purposes. While different ways of knowing have, of course, existed across time and place, landers' mystical science in particular is important because it enabled Oregon's lesbian separatists to cope with a growing ecological crisis and to imagine how they might create a more socially and environmentally just world.

Oregon Women's Land

In June of 1975, a group of lesbian women met at WomanShare Collective, one of the lesbian separatist communities in southern Oregon. At this meeting, the women discussed the possibility of establishing a trust for southern Oregon's women's land community. The trust came to be called the Oregon Women's Land (OWL) Trust. In May of 1976, OWL Trust held another meeting, attended by over one hundred women who collectively agreed to purchase a 147-acre plot of land in Wolf Creek, Oregon, about three and a half hours south of Portland and one hour north of the California border. At this second meeting, members of OWL Trust donated \$10,000 and pledged enough to cover \$250 per month for the following six months.⁸ The land was purchased successfully by July of 1976, and OWL Farm came into being. In its first year, OWL Farm permanently housed twenty to thirty-five women and children, with hundreds of additional women passing through.⁹

OWL Farm was one of several communities owned and run solely by lesbian women in southern Oregon. Like their back-to-the-land counterparts, lesbian landers believed that the industrial capitalism, increased consumption, and environmental degradation of the post-WWII United States had led humans to overstep their relationship with the natural world. Historian Ryan Edgington argues that the back-to-the-land movement also emerged from “[d]eep-seated American yeoman ideology, indigenous cultural imagery, and the North American rural utopian legacy...as countercultural communards modeled their communities on idyllic pastoral life and

⁸ Liz Crain, “OWL Herstory,” in *Changing Images*, eds., Wendolf, Deb Sarratore, Maclena, Elizabeth, Ohoa, zana, Hannah Blue Heron, Pegasus Touch, and Eileen Hartwings (Bayside: Amazonia Press, 1983), 5-6. Box 5, Folder, 2 SO CLAP! Collection. The Trust purchased the land for \$65,000 with an \$18,000 down payment and \$365 monthly payments.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 5-6.

‘primitive’ rural labor.”¹⁰ Lesbian landers combined their feminist ideologies with back-to-the-land beliefs about correcting the ills of modernity—in this case, patriarchy and ecological destruction—by returning humans to their “natural” place in nature.

Lesbian landers’ mission was similar to that of the back-to-the-landers, but lesbian separatists added an additional layer of blame: patriarchy. They saw patriarchy as an underlying cause of both violence against women and violence against the natural world. Lesbian landers thus fled cities not only to live in nature but also to live away from men. Because of their spiritual beliefs in the power of the feminine—including a feminine nature—lesbian landers believed that women were uniquely capable of fixing the modern world’s problems through love and nurturing. They argued that society should be matriarchal, or controlled by women.¹¹

Two major matriarchs of the movement in Oregon were partners Jean and Ruth Mountaingrove.¹² As mothers who had previously been married to men, Jean and Ruth Mountaingrove met at a Quaker retreat for single parents in 1970.¹³ They went on to explore their emerging desire for lesbian separatism together in southern Oregon. There, they lived as partners and practiced their feminist and environmentalist politics and inspired women from across the country to do the same. The Mountaingroves valued lesbian separatism because they believed it was the best way to heal from heteropatriarchy. In an interview with historian Shelley Grosjean, for instance, Jean Mountaingrove compared lesbian separatist communities to

¹⁰ Ryan Edgington, “‘Be Receptive to the Good Earth’: Health, Nature, and Labor in Countercultural Back-to-the-Land Settlements,” *Agricultural History* 82, no. 3 (2008): 281-282.

¹¹ Katherine Schweighofer, “Legacies of Lesbian Land,” 10.

¹² For more information on Jean and Ruth Mountaingrove, see Grosjean, “‘Making Ourselves Real,’” 1-10 and Heather Burmeister, “Women’s lands in Southern Oregon: Jean Mountaingrove and Bethroot Gwynn Tell Their Stories,” *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 115, no. 1 (2014): 80-86.

¹³ Grosjean, “‘Making Ourselves Real,’” 3.

hospitals, where women who had been hurt by the patriarchy came to heal and, sometimes, to be cared for forever.¹⁴ Healing came, they believed, from the creation of a separate women's culture, apart from men in not only physical but also sexual and emotional ways, which would ultimately, they argued, lead to an alternative world.¹⁵ They needed to act in concert with nature to create a separate women's culture that would bring healing to all women and the earth. Landers' feminist and environmental concerns were inextricably linked.¹⁶ For lesbian landers, healing from and rejecting the patriarchy came not only from uniting women with each other but also "re"-uniting women with nature. These values formed the foundation of Oregon's lesbian separatist movement.



Figure 2.1: Women gathered at OWL Farm, circa 1980¹⁷

¹⁴ Ibid., 4.

¹⁵ Kleiner, "Doin' It For Themselves," 2.

¹⁶ Ibid., 12.

¹⁷ Ruth Mountaingrove, photo, undated, taken at OWL Farm, accompanying Deb Serratore, "Our Herland" in *Changing Images*, eds., Wendolf, Deb Sarratore, Maclena, Elizabeth, Ohoa, zana, Hannah

In her 1983 reflection on the mission of OWL Farm, OWL resident Marcia Lamphere wrote,

The Oregon Women's Land Trust is attempting to provide access to land in as many ways as women want it, whether for long-term homesteading and farming or short-term access for recreation and retreat. We envision women as stewards of the land, treating her not as a commodity but as a full partner and guide in this exploration of who we are. We are struggling to learn and to teach each other. The Land Trust is a vehicle for our ecological education. Women want to relate to the land in a new way. We want to share in her powers of birth, healing and nourishment, and to cultivate and to preserve our living heritage. To this end many women and children have lived at and visited OWL in the past 7 years, sharing skills, rural life, spirituality, and developing a nurturing space.¹⁸

In this reflection, Lamphere emphasizes the foundations upon which lesbian landers built OWL Farm. She calls landers "stewards" yet "full partners" of the land; she refers to the land using she/her pronouns; she foregrounds landers' "ecological education" and ability to relate to the land; she demonstrates how women and female nature are partnered in their mutual "powers" of birth and nourishment; and, finally, she highlights how each tenet of OWL's mission aims to provide healing for women and the land on which they live. The women on OWL Farm thus believed that their land should be open and accessible to any woman or child who needed healing. OWL members saw the environment as a partner, not a resource. They sought to spread their message through word-of-mouth, newsletters, and periodicals. Landers envisioned this mission developing in a loving and nurturing place, both physically and spiritually.

Because the lesbian land movement originated in the American West, and because of Oregon's relatively mild climate, cheap land, and proximity to the already-established gay

Blue Heron, Pegasus Touch, and Eileen Hartwings (Bayside: Amazonia Press, 1983), 18-19. Box 5, Folder 2, SO CLAP! Collection.

¹⁸ Marcia Lamphere, "Our Dream" in *Changing Images*, eds., Wendolf, Deb Sarratore, Maclena, Elizabeth, Ohoa, zana, Hannah Blue Heron, Pegasus Touch, and Eileen Hartwings (Bayside: Amazonia Press, 1983), 10-11. Box 5, Folder 2, SO CLAP! Collection.

communities in San Francisco, southern Oregon housed a fairly large and tight-knit network of lesbian landers.¹⁹ More importantly, the lesbian separatist communities in southern Oregon were one of the largest clusters of countercultural back-to-the-land communities, and they rather successfully met the goal that most women's lands across the United States had: to create a separate women's culture, a network of women living with and loving each other and the land.²⁰ OWL Farm specifically is an extreme example of these goals in its commitment to being an open women's land. For these reasons, I use journals, newsletters, notes, and ephemera primarily from OWL Farm. I also draw from two periodicals that were popular among lesbian landers across the country, *Country Women*, a magazine for back-to-the-land women, and *WomanSpirit*, which was created and maintained by movement leaders Jean and Ruth Mountaingrove.²¹

Because of the connections between the lesbian separatist movement and the histories of ecofeminism, the women's liberation movement, and the popularization of rural living, the history of lesbian lands in the United States warrants more attention. Scholars have recently studied these separatist communities through the lenses of counterculture, feminist, queer, and

¹⁹ Kleiner, "Doin' It For Themselves," 6. In addition to the density of lesbian lands in this region, archival materials from communities across southern Oregon were well-preserved through the Southern Oregon Country Lesbian Archival Project (SO CLAP!) in 1989, which are now housed at the University of Oregon. "SO CLAP! (Southern Oregon Country Archival Project) Collection, 1974-1999," Archives West, last modified 2004, <http://archiveswest.orbiscascade.org/ark:/80444/xv68074>.

²⁰ I make the claim that they "rather successfully" achieved these goals only within the 1970-1990 time period. In the early 1990s, the communities, including OWL Farm, experienced conflict and a decrease in residents for a number of reasons. Because those reasons extend beyond the confines of this paper, I only address Oregon's lesbian lands from the time they were created in the early- to mid-1970s to 1990. Heather Burmeister, "Women's lands in Southern Oregon," 70.

²¹ *Country Women* was a periodical popular among women in the back-to-the-land movement that ran 1972-1978. Its circulation numbered 11,000 at its highest, and one survey revealed that one third of readers identified as lesbian, while another twenty percent were exploring bisexuality and lesbianism. Schweighofer, "Legacies of Lesbian Land," 19. *WomanSpirit* magazine was created by Ruth and Jean Mountaingrove; it ran for ten years and was produced with an electric typewriter and marine battery. Two thousand copies of each edition were printed, and by the end of 1984 the magazine had over 800 annual subscriptions. Grosjean, "Making Ourselves Real," 44-45.

environmental histories, but have paid little analytical attention to the functions of landers' conceptions of nature.²² Placing this story within the history of science provides a framework for understanding how and why landers' spiritual and ecological ways of relating to nature enabled them to imagine how they might create a more equitable and ecologically-stable world.

The majority of historians who have discussed the history of lesbian separatist communities have done so within the history of so-called second wave feminism; Shelley Grosjean argues that lesbian separatists, through outreach like the publication of the periodical *WomanSpirit*, transformed spirituality into a political practice.²³ Heather Jo Burmeister claims that Oregon's lesbian lands had tangible, far-reaching impacts on lesbian-feminism in the 1970s and 1980s.²⁴ Catherine Kleiner asserts that the separatists' inward focus on their communities was part of their radical action.²⁵ Although these histories are important additions to the history of American feminism, the relationship between landers' feminism and their environmentalism has been less explored.

One way other scholars have begun to fill this gap are explorations of landers' claims to land and space. Sociologist Catriona Sandilands, for example, has used southern Oregon's lesbian separatist communities as a case study to understand the historical relationship between sexuality and nature. Sandilands argues that "[r]ural separatism was, at least in part, about

²² See primarily Catriona Sandilands, "Lesbian Separatist Communities and the Experience of Nature," *Organization & Environment* 15, no. 2 (2002): 158. See also Catherine Kleiner, "Nature's Lovers: The Erotics of Lesbian Land Communities in Southern Oregon, 1974-1984," in *Seeing Nature Through Gender*, ed. Virginia Scharff (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2003), 246; Kleiner, "Doin' It For Themselves," 14; Katherine Schweighofer, "Legacies of Lesbian Land," 3-6; Shelley A. Grosjean, "Making Ourselves Real," 63.

²³ Grosjean, "Making Ourselves Real," 22-23;

²⁴ Burmeister, "Rural Revolution," 15-16.

²⁵ Kleiner, "Doin' it For Themselves," 10.

developing a distinct lesbian culture of nature.”²⁶ While Sandilands also argues that “environmental issues are inextricably tied to social organization” and, she adds, “sexuality,” Sandilands does not historicize the lesbian landers’ visions of nature as specifically female. Sandilands further argues that lesbian “separatists have, since 1974, developed a distinct political-ecological culture to challenge the heterosexual, patriarchal, and capitalist organization of rural North America.”²⁷ Although Sandilands describes the ways in which Landers’ ecological beliefs shaped their identities as lesbians, she offers little discussion about the role that ideas about science played in landers’ critiques of and solutions to North America’s ecological and social problems.

Historian Katherine Schweighofer goes further to show how lesbian landers’ “distinct lesbian culture of nature,” much like the mainstream American culture of nature they fought against, was rooted in settler colonialism. Schweighofer deconstructs the colonialist implications of white landers’ claims to space. Schweighofer, using ethnic scholar Shari Hundorf’s terminology, describes white landers as “going native,” as adopting “what they believed to be Indigenous practices and ethics” in an effort to position themselves as protectors of the land from white male violence.²⁸ Using the experiences of two Indigenous-identified women on lesbian lands, Schweighofer demonstrates how white lesbian landers appropriated a vague and generalized notion of Indigeneity while simultaneously excluding Indigenous women and other women of colour from participating in claims to land or land stewardship. In doing so,

²⁶ Sandilands, “Lesbian Separatist Communities,” 132.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 131.

²⁸ Katherine Schweighofer, “A Land of One’s Own: Whiteness and Indigeneity on Lesbian Land,” *Settler Colonial Studies* 8, no. 4 (2017): 494.

Schweighofer argues, white lesbian landers sought to create not just a new world, but a new world made specifically for white settler women.²⁹

Although Sandilands relates landers' sexualities to their ecological perspectives and Schweighofer underscores the landers' maintenance of colonial land claims, no scholar has yet analysed landers' feminized understandings of human-nature relationships within the context of environmental and ecological activism. I demonstrate how this story fits within the history of science by exploring how Oregon's lesbian separatists understood claims about nature and humans' place in it. I relate lesbian landers' visions of nature to other perspectives in the history of science about ways of knowing nature. By further contextualizing this movement within its feminist and scientific histories, I also show how Oregon's lesbian landers' story is as historiographically relevant for the history of science as it is for the history of feminism and sexuality.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 497. As with most primarily white spaces in the post-Jim Crow era, women of colour were technically allowed on the land but often felt excluded or exoticized. Schweighofer provides a few examples of women of colour feeling these ways. For examples of exclusion and exoticization from OWL, see Anonymous, Journal, 1974, Box 4, Folder 1, SO CLAP! Collection. See also Sereta Freeman, letter "To Women of Color," Box 2, Folder 28, SO CLAP! Collection.

Landers and Counterculture in the Age of Ecology

Lesbian separatism cannot be understood without consideration of the women's liberation movement from which it arose. Lesbians' role in the late twentieth century women's liberation movement was unstable and uncertain. By 1969, anti-lesbian sentiments in the mainstream women's movement emerged. Betty Friedan, author of *The Feminine Mystique* and then-president of the National Organization for Women (NOW), for example, called lesbianism a "lavender menace." This remark led to a subsequent exodus of lesbians from NOW in 1971.³⁰ In response to these sentiments, several lesbian-feminists formed a group called the Lavender Menace and confronted the mainstream feminist movement at the 1970 Second Congress to Unite Women. In preparation for this confrontation, the Lavender Menace wrote a short manifesto entitled "Woman Identified Woman" and advocated for lesbianism to be seen less as a sexuality and more as a "constructed political identity" based in social critique.³¹ Lesbian-feminists had, as Dana Shugar writes, "rewritten [lesbians] as the pioneers of the feminist community" by foregrounding women's relationships with other women rather than with men.³²

But, forming a relatively small portion of the lesbian-feminist movement, lesbian separatists have historically excluded transwomen in particular. In general, lesbian separatists saw gender essentialism as a large and necessary part of separatism. They defined women by the ability to care, nurture, and reproduce, celebrating the essential biological differences between bodies traditionally labeled as male and female. As a result, lesbian separatists often excluded

³⁰ Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America* (New York: Viking, 2000), 83; Dana Shugar, *Separatism and Women's Community* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 16-17.

³¹ Shugar, *Separatism*, 26.

³² *Ibid.*, 26. See also Rosen, *The World Split Open*, 230.

transgender women from their women's movement, arguing that individuals not born with uteruses, ovaries, and vaginas could not be women at all.³³ For example, in a 2011 interview with historian Heather Burmeister, lander Dana MacDonald described sentiments about transwomen at Steppingwoods, the Oregon women's land on which she had been a longtime resident:

Some lands are more open to men or transgenders [sic] and some aren't. Our land is always. We have women's events that are women-only events, and we come up against some questioning about that, and rightly so. But we feel like we want to maintain that for certain women who do not feel safe in the presence of transgendered [sic] and/or male energies.³⁴

Although transwomen are technically allowed at Steppingwoods, the ways in which MacDonald speaks about them reflect broader tendencies in the lesbian separatist movement to classify transgender women as outside the category of "woman." MacDonald groups "men" and "transgenders" together, and she associates "transgendered energies" with "male energies." Lesbian separatists' essentialism thus at times led landers to exclude transwomen from separatist spaces by equating transgender women with men and masculinity.

Women of colour experienced similar exclusions. For instance, in *This Bridge Called My Back: Radical Writings by Women of Color*, first published in 1981, Black feminists Barbara Smith and Beverly Smith argued that separatism "seems to be only viably practiced by women who have certain kinds of privilege: white-skinned privilege, class privilege," that women "who don't have those kinds of privilege....can't go to a harbor of many acres of land, and farm, and

³³ Perhaps the most studied case of the exclusion of transwomen from woman-only spaces is the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival. See Emi Koyami, "Whose Feminism Is It Anyway? The Unspoken Racism of the Trans Inclusion Debate," in *The Transgender Study Reader*, ed. Susan Stryker and Steven Whittle (New York: Routledge, 2006), 698-699.

³⁴ Steppingwoods was established in Oregon in 1975. Burmeister, "Rural Revolution," 18 and 111.

invite the goddess.”³⁵ Smith and Smith also contended that one major tension between white lesbian separatists and Black ones is that white separatists “accuse us [Black women] of being ‘male-identified’ because we are concerned with issues that affect our whole race.”³⁶ Black women refused to separate from men completely because Black men and women both experienced racial oppression. Because white lesbian separatists understood sexism as the most important type of oppression, Black women’s allegiance to Black men led white separatists to see Black women as betraying the feminist cause. Racial issues did not matter to white separatists because, as Smith and Smith described, they believed that “when [they got] rid of men, sexism and racism [would] end too.”³⁷ Since landers’ spirituality drew largely from what they believed to be Indigenous ways of knowing, Indigenous women in particular were also simultaneously appropriated from and exoticized, as with one white lander who wrote that she had become an “Indian” by “loving one and loving the earth.”³⁸ Although women of colour were technically always allowed on separatist lands, white separatists’ dismissal of racial oppressions created a hostile environment for women of colour who engaged in both feminist and racial politics.

³⁵ Barbara Smith and Beverly Smith, “Across the Kitchen Table: A Sister-to-Sister Dialogue,” in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings By Radical Women of Color*, Second Edition, ed. Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1983), 121. I follow the lead of Smith and Smith here by capitalizing “Black” and not “white.”

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 121.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 123.

³⁸ Anonymous, Journal, 1974, Box 4, Folder 1, SO CLAP! Collection. For context, the full passage states, “When I was a child I dreamed of two things—of being rich famous important (in a city of course) and of being an Indian. I loathed being white. I longed for the freedom of the plains and mountains....Little did I know that I would become rich by hanging around lesbian separatists and an Indian by loving one and loving the earth”

At the foundation of white lesbian separatist philosophy, then, was the argument that men specifically, not humanity, were the source of the world's problems. Separatists' main concerns were with men and the environmental problems they caused. White separatists saw their environmentalist roles as equally important for their feminist activism, as this report from OWL declares:

In the same way that rural America has been the backbone of this country, country women are playing a similar role in the feminist movement. Country women and their qualities of strength, self-reliance, independence and sense of community as well as a love for the land represent the ultimate of feminist idealism.³⁹

They believed that country women were essential to the feminist movement, and that women were better positioned than men to address the world's ecological problems. They argued that thinking about men and women as equal parts of humanity enabled men to shirk responsibility for the problems that men—not women—had caused.⁴⁰ This essentialism reflects a broader shift in feminist thought toward cultural feminism.

By 1975, the year before OWL Trust purchased the land in Wolf Creek, cultural feminism had risen to dominance within the women's liberation movement.⁴¹ As cultural feminists called for a separate women's culture, one that valued women's nature as essential and fundamentally different from and superior to men's nature, radical feminists discouraged cultural feminists from abandoning men altogether.⁴² Feminist scholar Alice Echols argues that cultural feminism "modified lesbian-feminism so that male values rather than men were vilified and female bonding rather than lesbianism was valorized, thus making it acceptable to heterosexual

³⁹ "OWL Trust Report," July/August 1976, Box 5, Folder, 3 SO CLAP! Collection.

⁴⁰ Shugar, *Separatism*, 43.

⁴¹ Alice Echols, *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America 1967-1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 243.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 243-244.

feminists.”⁴³ Yet efforts to separate from the patriarchy persisted through Radicalesbians’ calls for a female-only community and desire to establish a matriarchy.⁴⁴

In the 1973 article “mother right,” for example, radical leftist Jane Alpert wrote,

Could it not be that just at the moment that masculinity has brought us to the brink of nuclear destruction or ecological suicide, women are beginning to rise in response to the revolution mean anything else than the reversion of social and economic control to Her representatives among Womankind, and the resumption of Her worship on the face of the Earth?⁴⁵

Alpert blamed the nation’s nuclear and ecological dangers on masculinity and proposed that the only response was for women to regain social and economic power. Efforts to understand the related root causes of gender and environmental issues led to a new branch of feminism, ecofeminism, which in part derived from feminists searching for alternative religions. Feminists’ quest for alternative religion coincided with broader religious explorations of the period.

As such, a new spiritual movement emerged alongside the women’s liberation movement. In the last few decades of the twentieth century, counterculturalists, who were primarily white, sought spiritual revival and abandoned mainstream American religions for what came to be called the New Age movement. New Age spirituality of the 1970s combined ancient and medieval neo-pagan beliefs in witchcraft and nature worship with a variety of “alternative” religious practices, ranging from Gnosticism, mysticism, and “Eastern” concepts of karma and auras to American mysticism, occultism, and transcendentalism.⁴⁶ From these teachings, the New Age movement was founded upon four basic beliefs: the belief in the proximity of the

⁴³ Ibid., 244.

⁴⁴ Shugar, *Separatism*, 32.

⁴⁵ Jane Alpert, “mother right: a new feminist theory,” *Off Our Backs* 3, no. 8 (1973): 28.

⁴⁶ Karlyn Crowley, *Feminism’s New Age: Gender, Appropriation, and the Afterlife of Essentialism* (Albany: State University of New York, 2011), 6 and 28.

material world to the metaphysical world; the belief that the world is holistic, not dualistic or reductionist, so everyone and everything is interconnected; the belief that humans can progressively seek higher consciousness; and the belief that the mind is holy and creates an individual's environment.⁴⁷

While men also participated in the New Age movement, it held particular significance to women, who saw the New Age practice of goddess worship as a means to “return” to or recreate an ancient matriarchal past.⁴⁸ In general, these goddess worshipers believed that approximately ten thousand years ago goddess worship was universal. As one goddess worshiper described, this ancient history had “no war, people lived in harmony with nature, women and men lived in harmony with one another, children were loved and nurtured, there was food and shelter for all, and everyone was playful, spontaneous, creative, and sexually free under the loving gaze of the goddess.”⁴⁹ Because of its ancient and earth-based nature, goddess worshipers likely saw goddess worship as the most natural and, given the values of the countercultural movement of the period, the best way to live. Goddess worshipers believed in the primacy of the female, noting that the original goddess worshippers lived under matriarchies and valued sex-based biological functions like menstruation and childbirth.⁵⁰ This biological essentialism would have been especially appealing to lesbian separatists who valued women for the ability to bear

⁴⁷ Ibid., 28.

⁴⁸ Cynthia Eller, *Living in the Lap of the Goddess: the Feminist Spirituality Movement in America* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 6. Eller draws distinctions between the New Age movement and what she calls “feminist spirituality,” but for these purposes, that distinction is not as important. As such, women might identify with different versions of the movement, calling themselves New Age spiritualists or neopagans, for example, but the practices that underlie each of these religious groupings are what I focus on here.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 157. Quote from Eller, *Living in the Lap of the Goddess*, 161.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 158-159.

children and for what separatist argued to be biologically-engrained tendencies to nurture and care.

Indeed, the Oregon women's land communities appeared to have adhered to this type of goddess worship. Several journal entries use a dating system described by Merlin Stone, a leader of the goddess movement of the time and author of *When God Was a Woman*. Merlin Stone's timeline of the history of goddess worship "counts 8000 BCE as the year 0," so landers would sometimes refer to the year 1990 as 9990, for example.⁵¹ In letters to one another and to OWL Farm as a whole, women also signed off with phrases like "in sisterhood" or "blessed be."⁵² The periodical *WomanSpirit* as a whole is rife with goddess references. A communal journal entry addressed to OWL members thanking them for their environmental and feminist work ended with, "The circle must be completed. Hold tight sisters she will provide", wherein "she" refers to the goddess.⁵³ In a personal journal, one lander even wrote, "And I love that goddess, pagan fanatic pantheistic freak that I am!"⁵⁴ Thus lesbian landers embraced goddess worship as their spiritual worldview and saw themselves as a part of nature, not separate from or superior to it.

⁵¹ For example, see Eileen J. Carr, letter, Box 1, Folder 9, SO CLAP! Collection.

⁵² Ibid. See also Thyme, letter, Box 1, Folder 2, SO CLAP! Collection.

⁵³ Kain, journal entry in communal journal, 1980, July 29, Box 4, Folder 3, SO CLAP! Collection.

⁵⁴ Anonymous, journal, 1974, Box 4, Folder 1, SO CLAP! Collection.

The Nature of Nature

Underlying the American environmental movement were questions about what humans' place in nature ought to be. These questions became a significant part of American environmental activism and ecological thinking in the mid- to late-twentieth century. In 1967, Lynn White Jr. published "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis" in the journal *Science*. White traces Christian thought from Medieval peasants to Isaac Newton, ultimately claiming that Christian beliefs about the supremacy of humans over nature had enabled humans to ethically exploit the earth's natural resources. Only five years later, feminist cultural anthropologist Sherry Ortner took up similar questions about the relationship between men, women, nature, and culture. Ortner published "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?" in *Feminist Studies* in 1972. Ortner claims that "the devaluation of women relative to men is a cultural universal" because of biological processes like menstruation and birth.⁵⁵ Defining culture as "the notion of human consciousness...by means of which humanity attempts to rise above and assert control, however minimally, over nature," Ortner concludes that arguments about women's supposed inferiority derive from beliefs that women are closer to nature and therefore unable to dominate it.⁵⁶ Many have critiqued White's and Ortner's claims, namely making arguments against White's "monocausal" explanation for ecological problems and Ortner's emphasis on universality rather than differences among women. But their existence and academic legacies

⁵⁵ Sherry Ortner, "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?" *Feminist Studies* 1, no. 2 (1972): 9-10.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

show how important questions about human-nature relationships have been to the development of American beliefs about humans' place in nature.⁵⁷

While the philosophical foundations of Western science have varied over time, some North American and European scientists in the second half of the twentieth century began talking about nature as an interconnected organism. These scientists, particularly ecologists, adopted this metaphor for nature because they were more concerned with understanding how systems functioned holistically rather than how individual units in nature operated. Metaphorical shifts toward holism arose in part from a post-World War II financial and intellectual emphasis on understanding the effects of radiation on environments. Environmental historian Donald Worster argues that the “age of ecology” began in July of 1945, when the first atom bomb test was conducted on US soil.⁵⁸ Ecology as a discipline had existed for decades previously, but only after Americans became concerned about the environmental effects of nuclear power did ecology capture the world's attention. Brothers Eugene and Howard Odum pioneered the field of ecosystems ecology, which held the ecosystem as the primary unit of study.⁵⁹ The first major implementation of ecosystem ecology was a survey studying the effects of nuclear weapons in the ocean surrounding the Bikini Atoll, where the United States had repeatedly conducted

⁵⁷ For example, see Ben A. Minteer and Robert E. Manning, “An Appraisal of the Critique of Anthropocentrism and Three Lesser Known Themes in Lynn White’s ‘The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,’” *Organization & Environment* 18, no. 2 (2005): 165-166. See also Henrietta L. Moore, “‘Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?’: Thoughts on ‘Making Gender,’” *Social Analysis: The International Journal of Anthropology* 42, No. 3 (1998): 159.

⁵⁸ Donald Worster, *Nature's Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas*, second edition (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 340.

⁵⁹ Joel Hagen, *An Entangled Bank: The Origins of Ecosystem Ecology* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 100-105.

nuclear tests.⁶⁰ Thanks to this study and similar research undertaken in the American West, the ecological dangers of atomic testing became part of public consciousness by 1958.⁶¹

By the 1960s, scientists and laypeople alike were questioning what the “natural” state of nature was supposed to be. As a result of public-facing science like Rachel Carson’s 1962 *Silent Spring*, which argued for more attention on the deleterious effects of pesticides and other chemicals, the American public became increasingly concerned about the state of the environment. The term “age of ecology,” which appeared during the first Earth Day in 1970, described what Worster has called “a grim hopefulness that ecological science would offer nothing less than a blueprint for planetary survival.”⁶² But confidence in the ecological sciences to solve environmental problems was not monolithic. While subscribers to the *Whole Earth Catalog*, for example, might have been more optimistic about technological environmental solutions, other back-to-the-land groups, including Oregon’s lesbian landers, were more skeptical of scientific solutions.

While there is no evidence of landers having read ecologists of the period, they did read feminist scholars who took up similar ecological questions. Scholars like Mary Daly, Susan Griffin, Sherry Ortner, Carolyn Merchant, and Charlene Spretnak all wrote about the history and philosophy of human-nature interactions, and book reviews of and references to their work appeared in *WomanSpirit* and other lesbian separatist writings.⁶³ These scholars focused

⁶⁰ Worster, *Nature’s Economy*, 344-346.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 346.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 340

⁶³ The works landers were most likely to have read were Griffin’s (1978) *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Insider Her*, Ortner’s (1972) “Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?”, Merchant’s (1980) *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution*, and Daly’s (1978) *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*. For example, see Ruth Mountaingrove, “review of Susan Griffin *Woman and Nature*,” *WomanSpirit* 5, no. 19 (1979): 35, located in Oregon Collection, HQ1101.W58.,

particularly on how Western scientific ways of knowing were created by men and for men, claiming that scientists generally took as a given “man’s” dominance over nature. Instead, these scholars advocated for so-called feminine and sometimes spiritual ways of knowing and relating to the earth.

Similarly, landers understood nature to be an interconnected whole. They worshiped nature and condemned the extraction of knowledge and resources from nature by man. They used the language of mechanization to talk about world problems, while they used organismal language to discuss their matriarchal past and to envision future solutions.⁶⁴ Their spiritual connection to nature came from a desire to put humans back into the interconnected and holistic earthly system. Specifically, landers expressed their knowledge of and connections to a holistic nature through their feminization of “her”—the earth—as both their mother and their lover. Imagining nature as both their mother and their lover enabled landers to create the alternative women’s culture of healing that lesbian separatists sought, a culture that valued both women and nature as creators and healers and that rejected and fought the existing scientific patriarchy.

University of Oregon Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene, Oregon, USA (hereafter cited as Oregon Collection). See also Charlene Spretnak, “The Lost Goddesses of Early Greece,” *WomanSpirit* 4, no. 16 (1978): 27-28 or Charlene Spretnak, “Myth: Triad of the Moon,” *WomanSpirit* 4, no. 16 (1978): 29 in Oregon Collection. See also Victoria White, “Excerpt from and Book Review of Mary Daly’s *Gyn/Ecology*,” *WomanSpirit* 5, no. 18 (1978): 16 in Oregon Collection.

⁶⁴ For example, Jean Mountaingrove writes, “Having grown and tried to mature within a life-denying, mechanically regulated civilization, I have lost touch, feel and sense for these natural and human cycles” in Mountaingrove, “Fall Equinox,” *WomanSpirit* 25, no. 1 (1974): 25 in Oregon Collection. See also “OWL Farm, being a little piece of the Earth, is a living organism that wants to grow—she does not die easily” in “Oregon Women’s Land Trust Maize #3, ’84-’85,” *OWL Oregon Women’s Land Trust: A Resource Book*, 1991, page 19, Box 5, Folder 7, SO CLAP! Collection.

Knowing Nature as Mother and Lover

To understand how landers combined their spiritual beliefs about nature with ecological ones, we must first analyse the intimate ways in which landers understood their relationship with nature. Landers most frequently called the earth Mother Earth, using she/her pronouns to characterize “her” as caring and nurturing. The first issue of *WomanSpirit*, for example, is filled with images of Mother Earth as nourishing and loving. Jean Mountaingrove writes of embracing a tree: “I feel like the small beloved child at the knee of her serene mother. Peace and confidence flood through me as I accept the protection and help which are given as I am open to nature just-as-she-is.”⁶⁵ Another poem in a later issue expresses similar sentiments: “O mother,/rock me in your long green arms/cradle me in your sweet wind.”⁶⁶ For landers, earth was a kind, caring, and comforting mother.

The entire creation story lesbian landers told was also bound up in ideas about femininity and fertility, overturning Judeo-Christian narratives about woman as having come from man and man as ordained steward of nature. Thus nature as mother included not only earthly nature but also the cosmos:

As far back as anyone can remember, there had always been night. She was everywhere....First a single spark split out of her, then more until they settled into place. Aries the first constellation danced in its pride of being. Beaming her joy of motherhood Night knew she had more to bear...⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Jean Mountaingrove, “Explorations in the Grove,” *WomanSpirit* 1, no. 1 (1974): 7 in Oregon Collection.

⁶⁶ Christina V. Pacosz, “Vernal Equinox,” *WomanSpirit*, 5, no. 19 (1979): 3 in Oregon Collection.

⁶⁷ Thea, “A Feminist Creation Myth: There Was a Beginning,” *WomanSpirit* 2, no. 7 (1976): 3 in Oregon Collection.

By integrating woman into the cosmos, lesbian landers' spirituality held feminine reproduction as foundational not only to the earth but also to the universe as a whole. Landers' emphasis on gender essentialism stems from a similar reverence of the ability to bear new life. Not only was the world organically interdependent, then, but the cosmos was, too.

Landers' depictions of earth as mother worked to overturn traditional narratives of nature being dominated by man. In a poem titled "Origins," for instance, another contributor to *WomanSpirit* references the sexual and derogatory descriptions of nature that have historically contrasted those of nature as loving and providing: "In the heat of the day/ the sons of the Earth went mad./ They denied their mother,/ called her harlot and devil."⁶⁸ Although this author's references are more Biblical, she still communicates her belief in an ancient past in which humans and nature harmoniously coexisted: humans used to respect what they envisioned as Mother Earth, but once humans saw "her" as chaotic or impure, sexual or devilish, humans permitted themselves to exploit and enact violence against "her." Lesbian landers' choice to return wholeheartedly to images of Mother Earth, then, makes sense in a historical tradition that has used condemning language about nature as a justification for its exploitation. But what differentiated lesbian landers from traditional back-to-the-landers or other Mother Earth-worshiping people was their simultaneous depictions of earth as both mother and same-sex lover.

⁶⁸ Jody Ahèsan, "Origins," *WomanSpirit* 1, no. 1 (1974): 3 in Oregon Collection.

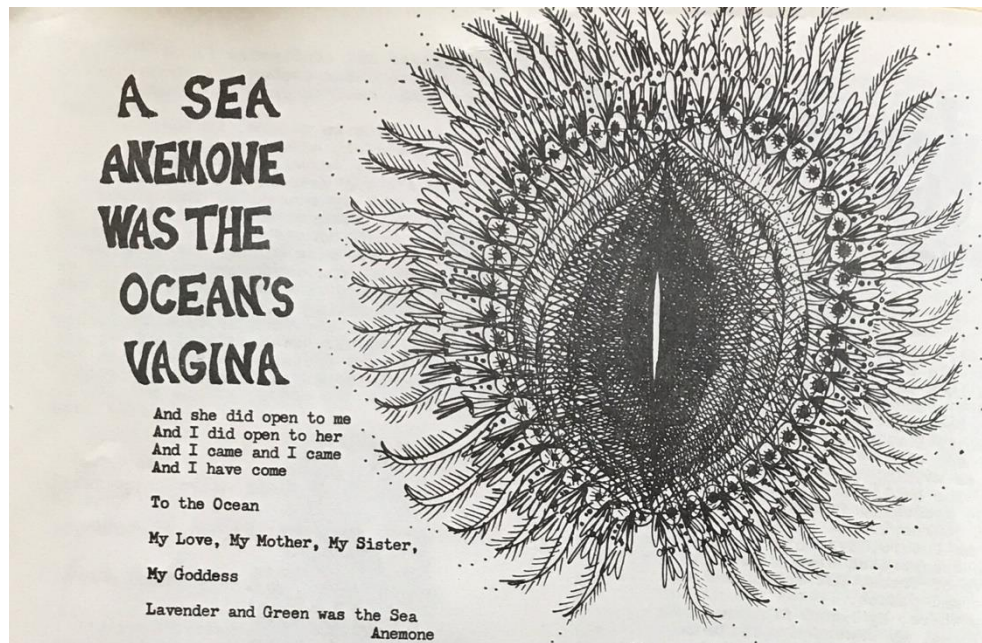


Figure 5.1: Image of a vulva-like sea anemone, published 1974⁶⁹

Lesbian landers not only described themselves as children of Mother Earth but also lovers of her. What is significant about the sexual ways in which the Landers describe their relationship to nature is how their language reverses the traditional sexual narrative of man dominating nature and replaces it with a model of women and nature as loving partners. For example, another article in *WomanSpirit* depicts a hand-drawn sea anemone that closely resembles a vulva. The accompanying story is about the author's trip to a beach and her consensual sexual encounter with nature. The author, Barbara Altar, writes,

I ran along the edges splashing a lot, then made little forays in deeper and deeper.... I began to wonder why I loved her so much....I want to be intimate with her....She was bashing about menacingly. But then I went a little ways back on the rocks. She became utterly calm and quiet....Then I came to a wide open icy green and lavender sea

⁶⁹ Image from Barbara Altar, "A Sea Anemone Was the Ocean's Vagina," *WomanSpirit* 1 (1974): 8 in Oregon Collection.

anemone. I saw at once that she was the vagina of the sea! And I saw to my amazement that she was utterly open to me, and that she was accepting me as her lover. I sat on a rock very near to her, watching her, and making love to myself.... One side of the lips [of the anemone] formed the face of the goddess, and I chanted to her that yes I could see her, and yes she was my mother and my lover and my sister and my goddess.⁷⁰

In this story, Altar explicitly describes her sexual relationship with nature and draws on concerns relevant to the women's liberation movement of the time, such as references to the colour lavender, the word "menace", and otherwise taboo topics like masturbation and orgasm. Altar generously uses double entendres: she forays "deeper and deeper," referring to walking farther into the ocean but also implying some kind of penetration; she "came" to the sea anemone, suggesting both a physical and orgasmic arrival; and she references "lips", which I have contextually clarified here as belonging to the sea anemone but which also are a play on the colloquial term "lips" for the labia majora and labia minora. Accompanying the short story is also a photograph of a naked woman standing next to the ocean, arms raised and hair flowing in the wind.

Descriptions of earth as mother and lover were not isolated incidents but formed the foundation of lesbian separatist philosophies of nature. In a spirituality-focused edition of the periodical *Country Women*, Ruth Mountaingrove wrote an untitled poem about her relationship with the earth mother. The poem's third stanza asks, "What am I to do Mother?/ In your abundant pleasure/ In your bountiful grace, I am./You are my lover and my friend/ I am your dancer."⁷¹ Here, the speaker describes nature as abundant in pleasure and grace, as both lover

⁷⁰ Ibid., 8.

⁷¹ Ruth Mountaingrove, "Untitled," *Country Women* 10 (1974): 3 in Feminist and Lesbian Periodical Collection, Coll 257. University of Oregon Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene, Oregon, USA (hereafter cited as Feminist and Lesbian Periodical Collection).

and friend. Paradoxically, in the seventh stanza, Mountaingrove writes, “I have not grown/ I have not nursed at your breast/ Mother. I have been woman/ Now I am child and woman,/ Now I am open, seeking/ Hold me in your gentleness.”⁷² The speaker refers to herself as a child and once again refers to her lover and friend as mother. This time, however, there is a more dependent relationship between the speaker, partly child, and the mother, whose capabilities for nourishment and gentleness offer maternal comfort and care.

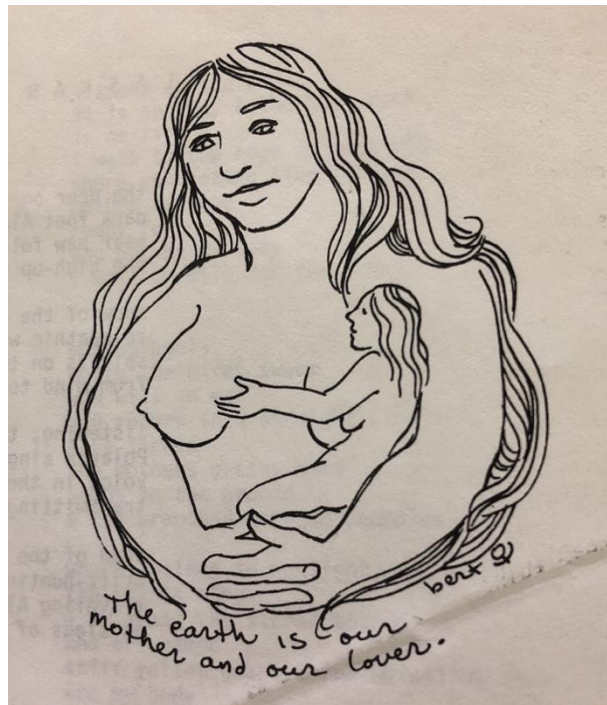


Figure 5.2: Image of a naked woman cradling a smaller naked woman in her arms with the caption “The earth is our mother and our lover,” published 1977⁷³

Catherine Kleiner and Shelly Grosjean note that the relationship between lesbian landers and nature as both mother and lover seems “paradoxical” or perhaps spiritual.⁷⁴ But it also makes

⁷² Ibid., 3.

⁷³ Image in Baba Copper, “Untitled,” *WomanSpirit* 4, no. 14 (1977): 51 in Oregon Collection.

⁷⁴ Grosjean, “Making Ourselves Real,” 54-55; Kleiner, “Nature’s Lovers,” 254.

sense as a lesbian-feminist response to what they understood as a historically masculine mechanization of nature. Altar demonstrates an appreciation and consent (“she was utterly open to me”) that brought pleasure to both the woman and nature. Many of the women in lesbian separatist communities had also experienced sexual abuse and incest, so reclaiming sexual power in a maternal relationship that was safe and loving may have been part of healing. Coming of age during a period in which American gender and sexual norms were heavily enforced, landers frequently had tumultuous relationships with their own mothers.⁷⁵ As a result, literal mother-child relationships with intimate partners or metaphorical relationships with an imagined mother earth may have fulfilled some landers’ familial longings.

In arguing for alternative conceptual categories to think about sexuality throughout time, historian of sexuality Julien Carter has also noted similar intimate relationships that occurred in the early twentieth century in the United States and Europe. Sexual relationships between women modeled on mother-daughter relationships, or what Carter calls “mother-love,” enabled white, upper-middle class women to engage sexually with other women while retaining their feminine

⁷⁵ For example, one OWL member writes in her journal, “Mother is a monster. She give the and then [sic]... she take the away away away. Fangs sprout flames burst from moth nostrils smoking monster. From her the baby monsters learn how to turn into monsters. Turn back again and turn again. Changing faster than chameleons colors teeth slashing tails wagging tails claws the tender hand of caress. The bountiful nurturer the giver of all, the slapping screeching one who forbids who grabs away who throws babies around the room like plastic balls. Thus crash. O sweet one o my precious is there anything mother can give anything? She’ll do anything.” Anonymous, undated journal entry, Box 4, Folder 1, SO CLAP! Collection. Another example comes from a submission to *WomanSpirit*, where the contributor describes her past relationship with her mother, writing, “[My mother is] a wonderfully alive woman who has worked very hard the last several years in overcoming the guilt that she carries and in turn has put on me. We have experienced our traumas, most notably during the period of my life when I dropped out of her “program”—i.e., living in suburbia with a husband, two kids (a boy and a girl), a Volkswagon in the driveway and living happily ever after. The Big Lie.” Jude S., “Rebirth & Reunion,” *WomanSpirit* 5, no. 19 (1979): 15 in Oregon Collection.

status and without being categorized as “lesbian.”⁷⁶ Although Oregon’s landers did identify as lesbian, their emphasis on mother-daughter love may be similar to the mother-love Carter describes. As white middle-class women, landers partook in traditionally masculine activities such as building structures, operating machinery, driving pick-up trucks, and chopping firewood. But they also embraced their identities as women who were essentially feminine, caring, and reproductive. Landers struggled to reconcile their reverence of birth and reproduction with the historical oppression of women through domestic and care work.⁷⁷ This seemingly incestuous relationship between lesbian landers and a nature who was simultaneously mother and lover perhaps reflects anxieties about reproduction that stemmed from the women’s lived experiences as lesbian women in a heteropatriarchy. By revering mother-lover relationships, landers also created a space for themselves to explore how lesbians could reproduce in a world without men. Taken together, the solutions to landers’ social and ecological anxieties relied on radical reimaginings of what nature could and should be.

⁷⁶ Julien Carter, “On Mother-Love: History, Queer Theory, and Nonlesbian Identity,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 14, no. ½ (2005): 108.

⁷⁷ For example, see references to children and motherhood the journal in Box 4, Folder 1, SO CLAP! Collection.

Alternative Science for an Alternative World

Landers' intimate relationship with nature and desire for alternative biologies motivated them to reimagine what is and ought to be possible in the natural world. The alternative world they sought required a reconceptualisation not only of social structures but also scientific ones. In what follows, I demonstrate how landers' intimate relationship with nature resulted in the development of a practical science that aligned with their spiritual beliefs. I call the resulting knowledge system "mystical science" to denote the coalescence of landers' scientific and spiritual ontologies.

Four main problems loomed over lesbian landers' goal of creating an alternative world. First, landers needed to reconcile their disdain for modern Western science while simultaneously using evidence from modern science to support their environmental claims. Second, they needed to blend their ecological worldviews with their spiritual ones. Third, landers' survival on the land required them to find practical ways of obtaining necessities like food, shelter, and clean water. And finally, landers had to address the logistical difficulties of reproducing in a world without men. Poems and articles from *WomanSpirit* and journal entries and ephemera from southern Oregon's lesbian lands show landers struggling with these questions.

Despite landers' desire for "ecological education," as their mission statement claims, landers understood mainstream modern Western science to be patriarchal and inherently exploitative. The detrimental effects of scientific developments surrounded them: nuclear weapons had become an international fear following World War II, new military science and technology had ravaged Vietnam, and the public's attention was increasingly drawn to large-scale farming operations and the release of toxins into the environment. Similarly, science had also played a significant role in the historical subjugation of women: the biological sciences had

for centuries labeled women biologically inferior to men, and the medicalization of childbirth and precarious access to contraceptives in the late twentieth century resulted in scientific control of women's reproduction.

Landers opposed masculine science not only for reasons of social justice but also for spiritual and ontological reasons. In a poem submitted to *WomanSpirit* in 1979, for example, contributor Mary Lee-George-G wrote,

At this point in my life
Scientific explanations
Are not necessary

I believe what works
I use what works
I don't care why

...
Protection circles work
I don't know why
I use them.

...
Scientific explanations are
Male substitutes for faith
I believe in myself.⁷⁸

Lee-George-G compares scientific knowledge to “faith”-based or “alternative” practices like protection circles. She openly associates scientific knowledge with the masculine and faith-based practices with the feminine. To lesbian landers, scientific knowledge was not only masculine; it was inferior: “This is not ‘hardnosed scientific objective fact.’ This is a much deeper knowledge.”⁷⁹ The belief in the inferiority of scientific knowledge and preference for “what

⁷⁸ Mary Lee George-G, “Untitled,” *WomanSpirit* 6, no. 22 (1979): 48 in Oregon Collection.

⁷⁹ Ruth Mountaingrove, “review of Susan Griffin *Woman and Nature*,” *WomanSpirit* 5, no. 19 (1979): 35 in Oregon Collection. Other lesbian lands were also explicit reactions to the big science of nuclear physics that came out of World War II. For example, a community established in the late 1970s just north of Knoxville, Tennessee was called Okra Ridge. The name “Okra Ridge” was a pun on the land’s location, which was about forty miles away from the Oak Ridge National Laboratories, one of the main

works” demonstrates how lesbian landers openly and explicitly rejected “hardnosed” science and its masculine ways.

Another piece in *WomanSpirit* titled “Healing Power” associates mainstream science with patriarchy and spiritual ways of knowing with matriarchy. The contributor, Max, puts these ways of knowing into opposition, writing, “Scientists have made fun and mocked at the ‘ignorance’ of matriarchal peoples for thinking the moon was a power in its own right when ‘really’ it was just a lifeless hulk.”⁸⁰ Max situates scientists as paternalistic aggressors who call her ways of knowing ignorant while claiming to know the real truth. This paternalism also emphasizes the ontological differences between landers’ understandings of nature and scientists’: while landers animate the moon with power, scientists understand nature to be lifeless and mechanical. Max goes on to write, “For the western European astronomers, this thinking carried an additional male supremacist meaning for the moon in those cultures as the sign of women and the Great Mother.”⁸¹ Max clarifies that the science she references is from the western European tradition. She also shows how these scientists have asserted male superiority through knowledge claims. In thinking about the moon as a lifeless hulk and about themselves as the real knowers of truth, Max argues, scientists understand themselves and their knowledge about the world to be truer and more valuable.

sites of American nuclear production during World War II. While Oak Ridge, Tennessee had come to be known as the “atomic city,” Okra Ridge branded itself as “not nuclear anything, including family.” Catherine Risingflame Moirai, “Okra Ridge: Making the World Safe for Earthworms,” in *Lesbian Lands*, ed. Joyce Cheney (Minneapolis: Word Weavers, 1985), 105. In another piece in *Country Women*, contributor Alice Malloy lays out sixteen goals for a feminist future, which include aims like ending the nuclear, armaments, and fossil fuel industries and monocrop agriculture. Alice Malloy, “Here’s my plan, for openers,” *Country Women* 33 (1979): 38 in Feminist and Lesbian Periodical Collection.

⁸⁰ Max, “Healing Powers,” *WomanSpirit* 1, no. 2 (1974): 42 in Oregon Collection.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 42.

Although a significant portion of Landers' activism derived from their discontent with modern science, they did embrace certain mainstream scientific practices. They could not completely ignore mainstream ecological knowledge and values; some understandings from the environmental movement and ecology had to permeate their ecological practices. Landers composted; they used a manual that not only showed the steps to take to create a compost pile but also depicted the compost at a microscopic level, with an accompanying caption that reads, "Decomposing organisms in an aerobic compost: bacteria, fungi, worms, insects, protozoa, algae, actinomyces, + many others."⁸² OWL members also discussed the development of their land, specifically addressing the lack of water by installing a drill. This development led to a land use study and a note written by an OWL member declaring, "Seems urgent to figure out water sources and their potential for development."⁸³ They also had a United States Department of Agriculture bulletin as well as other informational handouts, such as one that explained cellulose fiber in housing insulation.⁸⁴ Landers relied on this type of knowledge for survival.

As their use of scientific knowledge and the environmental practices that resulted from that knowledge shows, the stakes of completely abandoning modern science were too high: landers were curious about the microlevel workings of their compost, they needed to alter their land to find enough water for their gardens, and they needed the technical knowledge necessary for building structures and living safely in the woods. There were thus tensions between landers' dismissal of modern science and their adoption of certain practices that were necessary for their

⁸² Helga Olkowski, "Backyard Composting," 1975, page 16 in Box 4, Folder 10, SO CLAP! Collection.

⁸³ Anonymous, "OWL Land Use Study" note, undated in Box 4, Folder 11, SO CLAP! Collection.

⁸⁴ United States Department of Agriculture, "Water Supply Sources for the Farmstead and Rural Home," undated in Box 4, Folder 9 SO CLAP! Collection; "Farallones Facts: Insulation," undated in Box 4, Folder 11, SO CLAP! Collection.

safety and comfort. As I will demonstrate below, landers addressed these tensions by modifying their scientific understandings of the natural world to include knowledge about the metaphysical world to create a type of mystical science.

The modification of scientific understandings to align with various metaphysical beliefs is not a new phenomenon. In fact, other lesbian feminists of the same period explored alternative ontologies that combined traditional scientific practices with more mystical ones. Perhaps the most salient example is the lesbian feminist belief in human parthenogenesis. Parthenogenesis is a type of asexual reproduction wherein an embryo can develop without fertilization. In other words, an egg can become a viable embryo without the presence of sperm. Parthenogenesis occurs within female individuals of a species by creating identical copies of the egg, which results in a population of the species that is entirely female. It is the primary method by which a few species reproduce.⁸⁵ As historian Greta Rensenbrink has shown, some lesbian feminists of the 1970s and 1980s believed that parthenogenesis in humans had actually occurred.⁸⁶ Understandably, lesbian feminists—particularly separatists—saw the potential of parthenogenesis to liberate women from men completely.

While I have not found evidence of lesbian landers discussing a true parthenogenic pregnancy, there are several references to creation and reproduction through parthenogenesis. For example, “Origins,” a poem in *WomanSpirit* that speculates about the origins of the universe,

⁸⁵ The New Mexico Whiptail is one of the most well-known species that reproduces parthenogenically. See James M. Walker and James E. Cordes, “Can Parthenogenetic *Cnemidophorus tessellatus* (Sauria: Teiidae) Occasionally Produce Offspring Markedly Different from the Mother?” *The Southwestern Naturalist* 48, no. 1 (2003): 127-128.

⁸⁶ Greta Rensenbrink, “Parthenogenesis and Lesbian Separatism: Regenerating Women’s Community through Virgin Birth in the United States in the 1970s and 1980s,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 19, no. 2 (2010): 288.

proposes that the earth was created not by celestial deity but by Mother Earth herself: “In the blue north of night/Earth Mother self-sowed.”⁸⁷ In this origin story, the earth was not simply created *by* the Earth Mother—it came *from* her. And not only did it come from her, but it was conceived by her and her alone.

Imagining the earth as reproducing “herself” may appear to be more of a spiritual belief, but landers also extended this belief to human reproduction. Another poem, “In this Poem I Realize,” makes this logical jump from universal self-sowing to individual women reproducing alone.⁸⁸ The poem speculates about how to “[transcend] into a whole other order of existence” to escape the modern world and its male-centric ways. The author, contributor Barbara Mor, writes of returning to a place where “biology and the mystical are one—magic.” And she writes of creating a daughter: “The ‘polar body’ is the daughter, of course—parthenogenically created as a new wild animal who will go on to live in the mother’s transformed world.” For Mor, recreating the earth and its means of reproduction is a return to the earth herself—much like landers’ desires to return to ancient matriarchy, and in doing so, “everything [is] transformed, made new for the daughters.” In short, Mor’s “motto is: Respell the world.” By envisioning the parthenogenic possibilities of reproducing in a world without men, Mor makes space for imagining what an alternative world might look like and how it might come into being.

Like other lesbian feminists of the time, then, landers found power in reimagining what nature could do. Rensenbrink demonstrates how lesbian separatists’ belief in human parthenogenesis reflected a tension between feminist politics and science of the time. With the

⁸⁷ Jody Ahèsan, “Origins,” *WomanSpirit* 1, no. 1 (1974): 3 in Oregon Collection.

⁸⁸ Barbara Mor, “In This Poem I Realize,” *WomanSpirit* 2, no. 6 (1975): 5 in Oregon Collection.

rise of the women's liberation movement also came an increase in feminist critiques of science, especially science surrounding issues of reproduction. For some radical feminists, parthenogenesis offered the potential to assert female importance and, in some cases, superiority. But these circumstances, Rensenbrink argues, left lesbian feminists "torn by competing concerns: the desire for daughters and suspicion of the science that could help them produce those daughters."⁸⁹ Rensenbrink contends that though lesbian feminists did not succeed in creating a means of reproducing parthenogenically they nevertheless "created a crucial space for theorizing, imagining, and creating separatist women's community."⁹⁰ What lesbian feminists lacked in literal parthenogenesis they made up for in re-imagining the relationships between gender and science.

Rensenbrink's argument applies similarly to lesbian landers. I argue here that landers embraced additional tensions between existing environmental sciences and their spiritual relationship to nature. These tensions resulted in questions about how to reconcile scientific knowledge about the state of a degrading environment with spiritual knowledge about what nature is and how humans should relate to it. Landers accepted mainstream science that declared nature in danger, but they rejected the hierarchical nature of that science and the men who conducted it. They agreed with scientists that human actions were destroying a living planet, but they imagined that planet as a woman, a mother, and a lover who had created and cared for all life and who was being mistreated by "her" wayward sons.

⁸⁹ Rensenbrink, "Parthenogenesis and Lesbian Separatism," 290.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 316.

As with lesbian feminist ideas about parthenogenesis, landers' mystical science did not result in literal parthenogenically-created babies or literal intercourse with a sea anemone. But understanding nature as composed of the physical and the metaphysical, and connecting to that nature intellectually and spiritually, enabled lesbian landers to think about human-nature relationships in new ways. By imagining a world in which women and nature were not subservient to men, landers created a space for scientific knowledge to exist alongside spiritual knowledge. A sign next to OWL Farm's garden, for example, jokingly used this logic to implore visitors to work: "OWL's beautiful organic garden grows delicious vegetables for us and of course it takes energy to maintain (it's not all done by the fairies)."⁹¹ This mystical science extended to a number of ways in which landers interacted with the natural world. From finding water and predicting earthquakes to successfully planting a garden and advocating for radical environmental politics, landers' blending of traditional science with their spiritual and intimate connections to nature enabled them to retain the practical advantages of scientific knowledge while simultaneously staying faithful to their spiritual beliefs.

A seasonal newsletter distributed to all of OWL Farm's supporters, for example, requested that members contribute their knowledge, scientific and otherwise, about the natural world to help with a project on their land. The newsletter states,

Wimmin who have knowledge or can bring sources of knowledge on water systems, (especially needed now), soil, forests, meadows, grasses, ponds, orchards, gardening, greenhouses, vineyards, psychic powers—whatever, are especially invited. For this in depth study we are trying to do research and perhaps bring in local government water 'experts' or a local water witch.⁹²

⁹¹ Garden Sign, undated, Box 6, Folder 8, SO CLAP! Collection.

⁹² OWL Newsletter, "Letters and Announcements," 1977, Box 10, Folder 8, SO CLAP! Collection.

This request demonstrates the ways in which landers combined scientific knowledge with their spiritual knowledge about the natural world. The author calls for a variety of knowledge, but she does so within a discrete categorization reminiscent of the ways in which Western scientists have traditionally divided the natural world. But she ends this list with “psychic powers,” abruptly dismissing doubts about her allegiance to spiritual ways of knowing. In the final sentence, she references plans to bring in an actual government-sponsored scientist to help them. But again, she shows her skepticism of scientific expertise by putting quotation marks around “experts” and providing a spiritual alternative: a local water witch.

Landers relied on mystical science not only to study the natural world but also to be “in tune” with it. In a separate newsletter, OWL Farm leaders tell members to beware of earthquakes and to use their spiritual connections to nature to protect themselves:

Earthquakes are becoming more frequent and powerful. We know there will be large California quakes soon. Sisters, please be forewarned: Those who have been in earthquakes say that the wind dies down and the birds stop singing. Those in tune with nature will know the time—prepare for economic and physical chaos in the cities....May you be protected and guided safely to your destiny.⁹³

Just as with the aforementioned project, this warning blends scientifically-acquired knowledge with earth-based spiritual knowledge. Landers knew about more frequent and powerful earthquakes because scientists told them so. But that knowledge—and standard knowledge about earthquake safety, such as where to stand during an earthquake—was not enough. The landers were also to use their intimate relationship with nature to know when an earthquake would strike. And the newsletter authors wished landers not only safety and protection but also guidance toward “destiny,” a spiritual effect of natural disaster.

⁹³ OWL Newsletter, “Announcements,” 1976, Box 10, Folder 7, SO CLAP! Collection.

The blending of scientific and spiritual ecological knowledge extended beyond OWL Farm and is also present in *Country Women*. In a 1974 article titled “Companion Planting” in *Country Women*’s issue on spirituality, for example, contributor Sherry Thomas writes about the practice of companion planting.⁹⁴ Thomas writes, “Plants are living beings; they form relationships and have distinct likes and dislikes.” While she acknowledges that “some of the reasons that plants become companions are purely mechanical,” attributable to nutrient needs, she also writes about “double and triple checking to be sure everyone would be *happy*.”⁹⁵ The choice of the word “mechanical” to describe what Thomas calls “scientific” factors emphasizes the distinction Thomas draws between the organic relationships of plants as happy, friendly beings and as mechanical consumers of nutrients. Thomas further emphasizes this mix of science- and faith-based practices by writing that “Medieval gardens were a jumbled mixture of herbs, vegetables and flowers, *an untechnical but equally reliable* practice of companion planting. My gardens are returning to the same happy, healthy combination.”⁹⁶ By comparing medieval gardens to her own gardens, and by explicitly stating that the efficacy of medieval gardens was “untechnical” but “equally reliable,” Thomas highlights the technical and spiritual validity of her organic companion planting practices.

Underlying landers’ mystical science were also practical concerns about living on the land. Landers’ political and scientific beliefs dictated that they eat local, organic, vegetarian “health” food. But, for reasons varying from lack of farming skills and experience to lack of

⁹⁴ Sherry Thomas, “Companion Planting,” *Country Women* 10 (1974): 38 in Feminist and Lesbian Periodical Collection.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 38. Emphasis added.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 38. Emphasis added.

water sources, landers had difficulty growing enough food. In addressing issues of food scarcity at OWL, for instance, one OWL Farm report states,

This is our first year for goats and chickens and garden [sic]. We cannot produce enough food for ourselves. We spend food stamps and money on food. We need women to bring food when they come.... We suggest buying in health food stores in Roseburg or Eugene... We try to eat organic and tend to be vegetarians.⁹⁷

Landers had to rely on government assistance and visitors' contributions to have enough to eat. Although OWL Farm's goal was to be self-sufficient, the realities of sustainably cultivating crops and raising animals for consumption proved too difficult. In this report, the landers justified their inability to reap the rewards of the earth's fertility by emphasizing a spiritual commitment to sharing. The report unapologetically ends, "We share on all levels here. Sharing rituals, healing, music and work make our lives joyous."⁹⁸ Under the logic of landers' mystical science, reliance on governmental or corporate systems for food was not an environmental failure. Rather, it was an opportunity for women on the land to engage spiritually with one another instead of with the land alone.

Perhaps most importantly, landers sought to mobilize their mystical science for political change. Notes taken at an OWL workshop on the politics of land ask, "Awareness of the Earth – Is there a revolutionary force in people using the earth in ecological and harmonious ways?"⁹⁹ The separation of "ecological" and "harmonious" suggests that ecology and harmonious environmental practices were discrete categories. This distinction demonstrates that landers saw ecological practices as not inherently harmonious. The harmony comes not from ecology itself

⁹⁷ Caretaking Collective, "From OWL Farm," 1977, Box 10, Folder 8, SO CLAP! Collection.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Anonymous, "Politics of Land Work/Think Questions," undated, Box 4, Folder 11, SO CLAP! Collection.

but from a spiritual addition to ecology: the notes go on to ask, “Does gaining awareness of the earth and her cycles create political changes? How?”¹⁰⁰ Ecological awareness of the earth alone was not enough for the landers who wrote these notes. Rather, their ecological awareness had to be combined with more intimate, spiritual knowledge of the earth “herself”. These final questions also show how political activism formed the foundation for landers’ spiritual and ecological practices.

Since abandoning science altogether was logistically not an option—landers were not, after all, living thousands of years ago or communing remotely in the Amazon, as they had wanted—they needed to find a way to acceptably participate in scientific practices. Using mainstream scientific knowledge without question threatened to make landers complicit in their own and the earth’s oppression, since they saw that oppression as having derived from modern Western science. Instead, landers harnessed scientific knowledge and incorporated alternative and spiritual ontologies that would make traditional scientists squirm. In doing so, landers cared for and nurtured the earth they loved while also allowing existing technical and ecological knowledge to guide their social, environmental, and political practices.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

Conclusion

The mystical science that Oregon's lesbian separatists practiced was integral to their understandings of gender and nature because the stakes were high. Landers saw the end of the world approaching as a result of the patriarchal and ecological crisis. As one lander wrote in a journal to her friend,

is this the doomsday discussion? talk abt the non-future of the human species
catastrophic change
evolutionary change
it does not freak us out
(there is only how to deal with it
There is no how to stop it)
The result: we want to learn about the plants here—
What to eat, what to use
In other ways.
We are learning to deal with change—
maybe that is the essence of survival on a changing planet.¹⁰¹

For landers, the end of the world did not necessarily mean the end of humans. Rather, they saw it as a potential for new beginnings, as a blank slate upon which to rebuild the world in woman's image rather than man's. Mystical science enabled landers to envision the practical possibilities of creating the world anew without men, of reimagining human-nature relationships in more harmonious, holistic ways.

The women's land movement in southern Oregon waned by the 1990s. Some of the lands still belong to lesbian landers, but the communities living on the land are mostly gone. OWL Trust, for example, still exists and still owns OWL Farm, and the OWL community still meets occasionally and sends out seasonal newsletters, but no one currently resides on the land. The

¹⁰¹ Cabbage Lane Journal, entry about talk with Mary Lois, 1974-1978, Box 11, Folder 4, SO CLAP! Collection.

heart of the movement, however, persists. Having moved into the twenty-first century, OWL Farm now has a Facebook group that boasts more than 300 members.¹⁰² Some members are old enough to have experienced the original movement, but others were likely born during or after the heyday of the women's land movement. The page is quite political, with members posting articles about environmental issues (recently, most articles have been about pipelines). Members nostalgically post old and new photos of the farm. Excited about the future, members also advertise events, such as the upcoming OreGaia: Northwest Womyn's Fest located at We'Moon Land in mid-August. The landers' legacy continues.

Like many countercultural movements, the Oregon women's land movement had issues: the women were sometimes racist and colonialist, and their biological essentialism excluded women whose bodies did not have—or had differently functioning—ovaries, uteruses, or vaginas. These issues are not to be ignored.¹⁰³ But the ways in which lesbian separatist communities captured the imaginations of women—albeit mostly white women—across the United States speaks to their important role in forming American alternative ideas about relating to nature. Determining how landers' images of earth as mother and lover altered human-nature relationships and investigating the ways in which landers' beliefs in mystical science created new environmental ethics opens our historical lenses to include other attempts at resolving widespread ecological crises. Environmental historians and historians of science especially

¹⁰² Oregon Women's Land Farm, 2014, "OWL Farm and Trust Facebook Group," Facebook, July, 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/OWLTrust/>.

¹⁰³ I have chosen to use a history of science perspective to focus primarily on outlining how landers related to and understood nature. Within the limits of a thesis, I have done so at the cost of neglecting to address even more anti-Indigenous and anti-transgender sentiments present in the landers' archives. The story of southern Oregon's lesbian landers will never be complete without more research on the ways in which landers oppressed others while trying to escape oppression. Schweighofer's "A Land of One's Own: Whiteness and Indigeneity on Lesbian Land" is a good start, but much more research must be done.

cannot dismiss the odd women making love to trees in the woods, for they and those who critique them have much to say about alternative environmental practices.¹⁰⁴ And now, more than four decades after the Oregon women's land community created OWL Trust, environmental problems have only worsened. Continuing to critically and radically reimagine what nature could and should be might indeed be the key to survival on a changing planet.

¹⁰⁴ "Making love to trees" refers to this poem: Stephanie Mines, "Oak Lover," *WomanSpirit* 2, no. 5 (1975): 31 in Oregon Collection, which starts, "Today I made love to the oak tree./ I'd wanted it for so long."

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