Green Speculations

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CHAPTER THREE

ECOFEMINIST THEORIES OF LIBERATION

In this chapter I move from deep ecology to ecofeminism, a transformative environmentalist philosophy that likewise emerged within the post-Carson atmosphere of the 1970s, matured in the 1980s, and continues to thrive today. As philosopher Karen J. Warren argues, male-centered thinking follows a “logic of domination” that promotes the oppositional pair male/female, places a higher value on males in this pair, and as a result justifies inequalities between men and women (47). The superiority granted to males under this logic excuses the use of social, political, and economic power to subordinate women, and it sanctions a privileged socioeconomic and political stance for men. For Warren and other ecofeminists, the projects of feminism and environmentalism must notice the similarities between this androcentric logic and the cultural logic that constructs a culture/nature opposition, places a higher value on culture, and as a result authorizes human domination over nonhuman nature. Because both feminism and environmentalism are fundamentally critical of domination, each one can find in the other one resources for expanding its attentions and energizing its methods, ultimately to join hands in a coproductive ecofeminism that denounces oppressions of women and nonhuman nature as well as addresses these oppressions with theory and practice. In the words of Greta Gaard, “no attempt to liberate women (or
any other oppressed group) will be successful without an equal attempt to liberate nature” (“Living” 1).

Ecofeminism is a diverse body of critical thought, though, in some modes aligning with deep ecology’s ecospirituality and critique of anthropocentrism and in other modes proposing an emancipatory politics that rejects deep ecology’s normative principles. Ecofeminist theorists propose and contest contrary positions. As such, ecofeminism cannot be said to have linked feminism to environmentalism in any consistent or universal way. But this characteristic of ecofeminism does not harm its productiveness as a critical method. In feminist literary scholarship, efforts to negotiate particularly the tension between “affinity” and “constructionist” ecofeminisms have produced some rich results. For example, Karla Armbruster argues that whether our ecological politics is informed by a perception of an affinity—a deep ecological kinship or continuity—between women and nature, or by a broader attention to the way differences in race, economic class, ethnicity, gender, and species construct our ideas about human–nonhuman relationships, we will still end up validating the conceptual dualisms and hierarchies that we are critiquing. In the former case the continuity perspective creates “yet another dualism: an uncomplicated opposition between women’s perceived unity with nature and male-associated culture’s alienation from it” (98). In the latter case the constructionist “emphasis on differences in gender, race, species, or other aspects of identity can deny the complexity of human and natural identities and lead to the hierarchical ranking of oppressions on the basis of importance or causality” (98).

I want to follow Armbruster’s lead in discovering and fleshing out possibilities for thinking about this longstanding ecofeminist discussion. Methodologically, however, I want to travel down a different path, not because Armbruster’s is not clear and fruitful enough. To be sure, her call for ecofeminism to embrace poststructuralist theory in order to resist “recontainment” by dominant dualisms and hierarchies is an invaluable theoretical boundary crossing (99).¹ And her reading of Ursula K. Le Guin’s “Buffalo Gals, Won’t You Come Out Tonight” (1987) is equally an invaluable and successful application of her poststructuralist ecofeminism to a work of literature. My effort in this chapter is to show how certain works of science fiction read alone or in combination have engaged with central ecofeminist issues at the same time as, and even before, such issues provoked theoretical deliberations in more academic settings.

As ecofeminist works, Sally Miller Gearhart’s *The Wanderground* (1979), Le Guin’s *Always Coming Home* (1985), and Joan Slonczewski’s *A Door Into Ocean* (1986) envision healthy ecological spaces as the out-
growths of the cultural valuing of the “feminine” and the containment and/or absence of the “masculine”—a move characteristic of affinity ecofeminism. These books narrate affinity, or as I will continue to call it, cultural ecofeminist possibility, all portraying women—and societies—who define themselves in ways encouraged by that branch of ecofeminism: against the dominant logic of patriarchy and through their own personal and local experiences, through collective histories, and/or through Earth-based spiritual traditions. But these texts do not represent exclusive, uncontested cultural ecofeminist positions. They balance and at times struggle with their cultural ecofeminist ideas and other ecofeminist positions. For this reason, Gearhart’s, Le Guin’s, and Slonczewski’s works perform within and among their narratives the critical dialogue important for ecofeminist theory then, in the formative years of ecofeminism, and even now, when such discussions remain pedagogically and politically important. They stage within their fictions the very debate that ecofeminism grapples with as a transformative environmentalist movement searching for ways to challenge the oppressions of women and nonhuman nature effectively, and to perform this challenge while maintaining the best theoretical and practical work of ecofeminism’s many iterations.

Sherry B. Ortner’s 1974 essay “Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?” helps set up contexts for discussing the differences between cultural ecofeminism and more constructionist, rationalist ecofeminisms. An anthropologist, Ortner finds men’s subordination of women to be universal and asks what it is in every culture that leads to this subordination. She reasons that the pancultural oppression of women follows from the likewise pancultural tendency to identify women with nonhuman nature. Ortner borrows from Simone de Beauvoir to show that breasts, the uterus, menstruation, and pregnancy highlight humanity’s fundamental animality, our inescapable belonging to the class Mammalia. Since culture, by definition, values human engagement “in the process of generating and sustaining systems of meaningful forms (symbols, artifacts, etc.) by means of which humanity transcends the givens of natural existence,” patriarchy emerges as culture’s defense against whatever would remind civilization of humanity’s inability to fully realize this transcendence, including the menstruating and lactating female (40). Women are thus forced to remain in the home, where they can exercise their “natural” roles as mothers to animal-like infants that are “utterly unsocialized,” “unable to walk upright,”
and unfamiliar with social language (45–46). “[W]oman’s body,” Ortner concludes, “seems to doom her to mere reproduction of life” (43). On the other hand, “the male . . . lacking natural creative functions, must (or has the opportunity to) assert his creativity externally, ‘artificially,’ through the medium of technology and symbols. In so doing, he creates relatively lasting, eternal, transcendent objects, while the woman creates only perishables—human beings” (43). Under the logic of patriarchy, men are the agents of privileged, nonanimal culture; women are of a lower order.

Anthropologist Melissa Leach is among those who have since critiqued Ortner’s argument, mainly because of its claims about the universality of patriarchally constructed woman–nature connections. And without a doubt Leach’s analysis of the Mende-speaking people of Western Africa, whose relationships with nonhuman nature disturb any simplified conception of culture as dependent upon oppressing women and nature, does much to dismantle such claims. But as a context for discussing the cultural and rationalist threads of ecofeminist thought, Ortner’s research is still useful; for, by highlighting a perceived connection between women and nature, Ortner raises important questions about whether that connection should be welcomed as valuable for social and ecological transformation or challenged as falsely construed and in the end hazardous for feminist and environmentalist projects. Ortner favors the latter, characterizing what Stacy Alaimo deems “feminist theory’s flight from nature” (4).

Drawing from many of the same sources as deep ecology, cultural ecofeminism posits an innate woman–nonhuman nature link and argues that this link should be embraced as a way of dealing with the social and environmental problems inherent and evident in patriarchal culture.2 Developing in the late 1970s and early 1980s out of radical feminism’s repudiation of oppressive social systems and accentuation of ways of knowing and being that contest harsh masculinity, cultural ecofeminism dismantles patriarchy by prioritizing “feminine” values. Cultural ecofeminists “elevate what they consider to be women’s virtues—caring, nurturing, interdependence—and reject the individualist, rationalist, and destructive values typically associated with men” (Gruen 77). Lori Gruen, a critic of cultural ecofeminism, argues that the belief that women and nonhuman nature are connected works to devalue men as unconnected from nature and thus does nothing to restructure the hierarchal relation of privilege that feminism and other social movements have challenged for years. As Val Plumwood notes, ecofeminists of this “Cavern of Reversal” define their identities “by reversing the valuations of the dominant culture” (Feminism 3). For cultural ecofeminists, though, the hierarchal relation of privilege is
not what is troubling. The direction of the privilege is. Judith Plant writes as a cultural ecofeminist: “Women’s values, centered around life-giving, must be revalued, elevated from their once subordinate role. What women know from experience needs recognition and respect. We have had generations of experience in conciliation, dealing with interpersonal conflicts in daily domestic life. We know how to feel for others because we have practiced it” (“Searching” 160).

Plant does not challenge the validity of the presumption that strong interpersonal communication and empathy are innate in women, which other types of feminism and ecofeminism do challenge by labeling such characteristics as imposed upon women in patriarchal social systems. Her essay in Irene Diamond and Gloria Feman Orenstein’s *Reweaving the World* is about what women, specifically, can bring to the bioregionalist project, a project advocating a more life-centered, interpersonal, and connected view of local place. The thought that women are inherently closer to nature and are thus invaluable for the realization of bioregional ways of life is not a problem for cultural ecofeminists. What is a problem is when culture devalues its feminine categories and thus devalues the virtues necessary for a more viable human relationship with nature. While still manifesting hierarchical thinking, cultural ecofeminism argues that privileging care and empathy for all human and nonhuman life, instead of privileging self-interest and the production of marketable goods, are reversals necessary for an ecocentric, life-affirming culture to emerge.

Asserting so-called feminine values is central to Andrée Collard’s ecofeminism, too. Much like Plant, Collard centers her theorizing on the importance for environmentalism of accenting an essential woman–nature connection. She writes, “Ecology is woman-based almost by definition. *Eco* means house, *logos* means word, speech, thought. Thus ecology is the language of the house. Defined more formally, ecology is the study of the interconnectedness between all organisms and their surroundings—the house. As such, it requires a thorough knowledge and an intimate experience of the house” (137). As speakers of the language of the house, Collard argues, women endure the domestic burdens relegated to them under patriarchal convention. Women can therefore empathize with the similarly abused nonhuman nature, making them better positioned to address and correct this latter abuse. Relatedly, cultural ecofeminism stresses the need for a collective history of women’s oppressions in patriarchy. One project of feminism as a whole is to draw attention to women’s history, but the goals of this attention vary. Cultural ecofeminism breaks from the liberal feminist endeavor to achieve equal rights and representation for women
using the methods of already existing sociopolitical institutions and instead seeks change by contrasting the modern history of women’s oppression with an ancient history allegedly permeated with prepatriarchal ideals such as kinship, egalitarianism, and nurturance. The goal of this juxtaposition is epistemological; lacking knowledge of “what [women] were and therefore what [women] can be . . . encourages women to want incorporation into man’s world on an ‘equality’ basis, meaning that woman absorbs his ideologies, myths, history, etc. and loses all grounding in her own traditions” (Collard 8).

Much of the work done in cultural ecofeminism involves revaluing matriarchal principles historically documented in archeological studies. In its spiritual forms cultural ecofeminism promotes the reemergence of ancient matriarchal belief systems that coincided in Minoan Crete and Old Europe, for example, with peace and respect for all life. Along with Marija Gimbutas, Riane Eisler, Starhawk (the author of the deep ecological and cultural ecofeminist science fiction book *The Fifth Sacred Thing* [1993]), Charlene Spretnak, Joanna Macy, and Carol P. Christ, Collard is a thinker in this tradition. She and others call on modern culture to embrace or at least adopt some values of Earth-based spiritualities historically seen in goddess-worshipping cultures. “In cultures where the cycle of life is the underlying metaphor,” Starhawk writes, “religious objects reflect its imagery, showing us women—Goddesses—ripe in pregnancy or giving birth. The vulva and its abstracted form, the triangle, along with breasts, circles, eyes, and spirals, are signs of the sacred” (175). According to Spretnak, many feminists came to ecofeminism after their exposure, through historical and archeological research, to such an ancient religion “that honored the female and seemed to have as its ‘good book’ nature itself” (5). What was intriguing for early ecofeminists “was the sacred link between the Goddess in her many guises and totemic animals and plants, sacred groves, and womblike caves, in the moon-rhythm blood of menses, the ecstatic dance—the experience of knowing Gaia, her voluptuous contours and fertile plains, her flowing waters that give life, her animal teachers” (Spretnak 5).

That cultural ecofeminism is caught up in idealism is one of the main criticisms leveled against it. Critics of cultural ecofeminism believe that valuing a woman–nature connection is an ineffective liberatory strategy that fails to consider and dismantle rationally the logics of the social, political, and economic systems responsible for dominations of all types. Susan Prentice identifies cultural ecofeminism’s idealism as its worst characteristic. Advocating an understanding of systems of power and domina-
tion more sophisticated than what cultural ecofeminism offers, she writes, “By locating the origin of the domination of women and nature in male consciousness, eco-feminism makes political and economic systems simply derivative of male thinking” (9). For Prentice the assumption that men “‘think wrong’” and that “‘biology is destiny’” “trivializes several centuries of history, economics and politics by simply glancing over the formidable obstacles of social structures” (9). Janet Biehl also voices this critique. She chides cultural ecofeminism for narrowly and crudely focusing on patriarchy as the cause of oppression, and for assuming that prioritizing women’s supposed biologically determined predispositions is a way to eradicate oppression. What about the state, Biehl asks, which historically as an institution has oppressed women, nature, and men alike? Racism is rooted in ethnic chauvinisms and economic motivations unrelated to gender conflict. And capitalism’s profit motive and growth imperative have instigated an entire range of oppressions directed at whoever and whatever gets in the way of their realization. Drawing on Prentice’s analysis Biehl concludes, “Systems of domination like capitalism, statism, and ethnic oppressions—and sexism itself—have a ‘history, logic, and struggle’ of their own”; in no way does elevating women’s values above men’s values engage the procedures necessary to foster real change (50).

A strong advocate of rationalist feminism, Biehl also questions the validity of cultural ecofeminism’s historical references. Goddess worship does not guarantee a benign culture, she argues, yet cultural ecofeminists seem to honor such worship as “the magic carpet by which we can reclaim the ‘women’s values’ of the Neolithic” (33). Nor does the presence of “full-figured female figurines” in ancient archeological sites confirm that the relative peacefulness of early Neolithic cultures resulted from an embrace and worship of “a generative female principle” (34). The societies of the early Neolithic were complex, and to suggest that their sociopolitical dynamics grew simply out of goddess worship is to ignore the range of social, political, and cultural intricacies that constructed the Neolithic temper. Biehl also references archeological evidence of human sacrifice in Minoan Crete, which suggests a cruelty in that society overlooked in cultural ecofeminism’s idealizations.

Biehl concludes, “With an ecological ethics grounded in the potentiality of human beings to consciously and rationally create a free ecological society, we can begin to develop an ecological political movement that challenges the existing order on the grounds that it denies both humans and nonhumans their full actualization” (130). Biehl’s loyalty to reasoned democratic process is crucial, as she values the modes of critical
engagement necessary for transformation while at the same time denying legitimacy to gender valuations that would lock women’s identities onto eternal, nonnegotiable, and politically feeble concepts of femininity. But as Elizabeth Carlassare points out, such loyalty comes at the expense of discounting “the work of cultural ecofeminists with their emphasis on transforming consciousness, reclaiming women’s history, and fostering a woman-based culture and spirituality” (229). Perhaps there is something valuable not in locating a simple continuity between women and nonhuman nature, but at least in esteeming as a vital part of the ecofeminist dialogue those ideas that have come about as a result of thinkers whose intellectual tendencies move them toward more personal and spiritual transformative modes. As Carlassare notes,

Criticism of ecofeminism’s essentializing tendencies is important to insure critical self-reflexivity and for examining the ways in which essentializing may sometimes work against the goals of women’s liberation by homogenizing the diversity of women’s experiences. Dismissing cultural ecofeminism on this basis, however, precludes the possibility of learning from this position and obscures the legitimacy of the variety of positions and discursive forms under ecofeminism’s umbrella. (231)

Published five years after Ortner’s anthropological study of patriarchy, and a decade before ecofeminism rose to prominence as a critical perspective in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Gearhart’s *The Wanderground* is the story of the Hill Women, an all-female society living nomadically in a wilderness far away from the “City” and its oppressions. Driving the plot is the encroachment of men from the City into the wilderness where, years before, various expressions of male potency—aggressive sexuality, militarism, and destructive technologies—were made impotent by what the Hill Women call both the “Revolt of the Earth” and the “Revolt of the Mother,” a juxtaposition of “Earth” and “Mother” characteristic of cultural ecofeminism (158). Explaining the Revolt one of the Hill Women says, “Once upon a time . . . there was one rape too many. . . . The earth finally said ‘no.’ There was no storm, no earthquake, no tidal wave, no specific moment to mark its happening. It only became apparent that it had happened, and that it had happened everywhere” (158). Guns no longer worked in the wilderness, machines broke down, animals refused to serve men, and the male libido waned. As imagined by Gearhart, this
Revolt represents disdain for mythologies of Earth and its processes as tools of a violently retributive god, demonstrating instead Earth as a Gaian female subject peaceably protecting herself against men, who have brought violence upon women, animals, and land. The effects of the Revolt are disappearing, however. Rumors of male virility’s return outside the City are leading men to test their sexual strength through acts of rape and group “Cunt Hunts” in the country, generating a fear in the Hill Women that “woman energy might again be drained as it had been for millennia before the Revolt of the Earth” (130).

*The Wanderground* supports an inverted masculine/feminine value hierarchy. The novel is self-reflexively aware of its good women/bad men dichotomy, presenting one character, Jacqua, who says to herself early in the book, “It is too simple . . . to condemn them all or to praise all of us” (2). But right away Jacqua declares, “‘for the sake of earth and all she holds, that simplicity must be our creed’” (2). This condemnation of men and praise of women is a necessary defensive and offensive mantra for the Hill Women, for their historical experiences do not reveal anything decent in the male sex. In addition, this mantra is key for the novel as a cultural ecofeminist thought experiment and radical feminist speculative text motivated by its historical moment to narrate female subjectivity against patriarchal society’s male gaze, as well as to narrate female possibility when released from this gaze’s physical and psychological oppressions.

As a result of the Revolt and the subsequent escape of the Hill Women’s predecessors to the wilderness, women have been left free to evolve independently of the patriarchal logic of domination. This narrative move facilitates Gearhart’s speculation on the qualities inherent in women as free subjects living on what Alaimo discusses as “undomesticated ground,” nature as “a space of feminist possibility” (23). Although to be expected in a science fiction novel bordering on fantasy, these qualities, these estranging *nova*, stand out as being more ecological, more embedded and inter-relational, than the qualities that the text argues men possess as members of a fundamentally disconnected sex. The Hill Women fly, or “windride.” They have a built-in instinctual mechanism called a “lonth” that acts as a flight response allowing involuntary kinesthetic control, demonstrating their return to an animal nature that modernity has sedated. The Hill Women can also communicate telepathically with other Hill Women and with flora and fauna, a phenomenon called “mindstretch” that requires traits associated in cultural ecofeminist thought with the feminine: “‘Meaningful communication,’” a Hill Women lesson goes, “‘is the meeting of two vessels, equally vulnerable, equally receptive, and equally desir-
ous of hearing)” (115). Finally, the Hill Women engage in a ritual called “earthtouch” that uses mindstretching to send energy drawn from Earth by one Hill Woman to another in need of this energy. Combined, mindstretch and earthtouch represent a dynamic, deep ecological spiritual and communicative web of interdependencies between one woman and other women, and women and nonhuman nature. This web is an ecological phenomenon permitted to develop as a result of the absence of anti-ecological and enforced patriarchal power.

Just as cultural ecofeminism does more theoretically to elevate what it conceives as women’s values than simply to connect women and nature in an essential bond, so too does *The Wanderground* go beyond just conceptualizing women as windriders with more ecologically sound instinctual and communicative awarenesses. The novel also offers up programs for reviewing and challenging modern cultural tendencies that oppress women and nonhuman nature. The apparent essentialism of Gearhart’s book thus borders on being “a positive tool of liberation,” as Noël Sturgeon notes of selected essentialist rhetorics (9). This political possibility ultimately wanes, as I will show below, but the first of these programs motivates ecofeminist practice by uniting the oppressed through their individual histories. Against a destructive patriarchal memory that recalls the potency men used to have outside the City, and thus reinstates the violent misogyny of the past after the effects of the Revolt have worn off, the women of *The Wanderground* stress the importance of a collective and constructive memory that allows members of their liberated society to understand their social history and what motivates their emancipatory project. Thus, while the men of the City continually seek to impose and perpetuate a master narrative of patriarchal history—requiring every woman to be married, allowing men to have several wives, and instituting curfews on women—the women of the country seek local stories that will illustrate what they are escaping from and to, as well as inform their future. Nowhere in this collective history do the women subscribe to a master narrative of their culture’s experience. Instead,

From countless seemingly disconnected episodes the women had pieced together a larger picture so that now they had some sense of what had happened during those last days in the City. Over the years as women had joined them the memory vessels had been added to: more and more stories, more and more horrors, and sometimes a narrative that brought with it some hope or humor. As a woman shared, she became part of all their history. (23)
As a cultural ecofeminist text, then, *The Wanderground* posits competing historical paradigms—one masculine, one feminine—that use historical references either to recreate the social conditions of a predetermined, univocal social system or to create freeing conditions based on an ecology of private experiences.

Second, as the earthtouch ritual shows, the Hill Women are rooted in a deep ecological, Earth-based spirituality that is vital to their selfhood, their kinship, and their sense of place. Indeed, advocating such a spirituality is imperative for cultural ecofeminism. Earthtouch emphasizes what Riane Eisler, a cultural historian, calls a “partnership model of society” (33). Developing out of the Gaia tradition, which regards Earth as “a living system designed to maintain and to nurture life,” the partnership model opposes the “dominator society,” favoring instead a worldview founded upon ancient spiritualities in which “the world was viewed as the great Mother, a living entity who in both her temporal and spiritual manifestations creates and nurtures all forms of life” (Eisler 30). Partnership requires empathetic nurturance, and thus from a cultural ecofeminist perspective can only emerge given a revaluing of the feminine. In *The Wanderground*, partnership in earthtouch is exclusive to those whose feminine capacities have been permitted to develop in the absence of masculine power. As a political statement Gearhart’s is radically essentialist. To posit a separatist, feminist space where a spiritual ecological conscience can thrive is a key theoretical move for ecofeminist science fiction. As unsophisticated as this move may be, it initiates speculation on what it is in modern culture that undermines the human potential for realizing such an ecological conscience: masculine aggression, perhaps, but ideologies of dominance more accurately. So while Gearhart’s story “reinforces the exclusivity of the categories of male and female”—something that science fiction scholar Jenny Wolmark sees as problematical for its adherence to the same-old gender assumptions and the resulting failure to question these assumptions—such reinforcement is a viable starting point for an ecofeminist project that endorses a worldview contrary to prevailing dogma (85).

Rounding out Gearhart’s programs for instituting change is *The Wanderground’s* look at the dominant ideology against which the Hill Women elevate their collection of personal histories and their feminine partnership, an ideology embodied by men and their collective space, the technological City. The dystopian City is the institutional space for both men, the oppressors, and technology, the tool of their oppressions. Answering why the Hill Women, with their extraordinary powers, refuse to seek violent revenge on the City with technological weaponry, one of the Hill Women
insists, “That’s the mistake the men made, sisterlove, and made over and
over again. Just because it was possible they thought it had to be done.
They came near to destroying the earth—and may yet—with that notion”
(145). Thus, the essential quality of men in the novel is being “Driven in
their own madness to destroy themselves and us and any living thing”
with whatever technology is available (3). Even using the tool of language,
men in the novel impose oppressive aesthetic standards upon women
(“streamlined,” “limited,” “dependent,” “constantly available”) (63).

*The Wanderground* succeeds as a radical statement of cultural eco-
feminism. It establishes and contrasts what it means to be a woman
both in the oppressive context of patriarchy and in a liberated context.
As women unchained, the Hill Women restore and develop further their
innate feminine potentials. Vulnerable, receptive, pacifist, interconnected,
wild—these terms describe both the natural world that Gearhart imagines
and the women she envisions evolving free from masculine oppressions,
women empowered by a Revolt of the Earth-Mother to create themselves
as subjects who value the qualities of the feminine traditionally dispar-
aged in patriarchy. To make this empowerment clearer, Gearhart sketches
a woman living in the dystopian City as an unmistakably powerless object
of the male gaze: “a thickly painted face, lacquerstiffened hair, her body
encased in a low-cut tight-fitting dress that terminated at mid-thigh” (63).
This image of stiffness, encasement, and termination reveals the misogyny
against which the Hill Women are fighting, a misogyny that permits men
to exercise reckless power over women and sustain a civilization of domi-
nance over women and other-than-human nature.

Prefiguring the anti-essentialist insights of Prentice and Biehl, feminist
literary critic June Howard notes of Gearhart’s book,

> The evaluation of “feminine” and “masculine” qualities asserted by
> radical feminism and by *The Wanderground* . . . lends support to the
> idea that differences between men and women are “natural,” and thus
> endangers the basis of our critique of existing social relations and our
> belief that they can be changed. The disagreement is between those who
> accept and build upon the common-sense observation that the sexes dif-
> fer, and those . . . who argue that gender identity is constructed by com-
> plex, socially and historically specific structures. (72)

From Howard’s point of view *The Wanderground* promises nothing trans-
formative and is actually dangerous in its maintenance of ahistorical gen-
der divisions. To achieve successfully a more fully developed ecofeminism,
Gearhart could have further contemplated the simplicity of her novel’s universal condemnation of men—the simplicity that her character Jacqua admits. But she passes up this opportunity in favor of cultural ecofeminist polemic. In the novel there exists briefly a potential dissipation of essentialist definitions of men: the book’s Gentles are “Men who knew that the [Hill Women] were the only hope for the earth’s survival” (2). However, this potential is quickly weakened by a subsequent description of the Gentles as “Men who, knowing that maleness touched women only with the accumulated hatred of centuries, touched no women at all” (2). The Gentles understand their instinctive male aggressiveness and thus choose to abstain from physical contact with women altogether. They know themselves as innately hostile male bodies that require self-policing to ensure the protection of women and nonhuman nature.

Of course, this understanding of the Gentles is Jacqua’s, revealed in the passage in which she reflects on and endorses the simplicity of the Hill Women’s denunciation of all men. Gearhart’s ecofeminist project still shows promise of theoretical complexity, though, when it introduces other Hill Women who question inscribing a predetermined, inborn aggressiveness on the Gentles. Reacting to the developed communicative powers of one of the Gentles, the Hill Woman Betha admits that “her absolutes began to get fuzzy around the edges when she tried to make them apply to a man like Aaron” (115). But again Gearhart does not explore gender difference as more complex than cultural ecofeminism declares. Only women can share power peacefully, her novel insists: “men—even Gentles—found it difficult or impossible really to share power” (115). What Betha sees in this Gentle does not instigate a revision of the Hill Women’s established beliefs. Rather, his “understanding of the essential fundamental knowledge [that] women and men cannot yet, may not ever, love one another without violence” instead impresses on her a slightly different perception of the Gentles than her perception of men in general (115). The Gentles are different from the men of the City merely because they realize and contain their natural brutality as well as share the Hill Women’s view of human sexual relations.

Gearhart’s final opportunity to render a more complex ecofeminism comes when the Hill Women engage with the Gentles in political process. The Gentles have noticed that the increased violence against women outside the City correlates with the number of Hill Women on rotation in the City, and they want to meet with the Hill Women to discuss this trend. As fewer women from the Wanderground make their way in disguise into the City to keep an eye on the conditions there, more abuses against the Hill
Women happen in the country. Before the meeting in which the Gentles share this crucial observation, the Hill Women debate whether they should grant the Gentles this meeting at all. Though the meeting does happen, it does not take place without opposition: “to some of the women it did not matter that the gentles were men sworn to isolate themselves from women; if they were men then there was no reason for concourse with them” (126). But the eventual decision to let several women meet with the men—while greeted unenthusiastically and permitted only under the assurance that the individual women speak only for themselves and not for the group as a whole—signals a step toward a more socially conscious ecofeminism.

In the end, however, the women maintain their essentialism. Their fear of universal masculine aggression prevents them from opening up productive conversation with the Gentles about how both groups can work together to dodge the intruders from the City. Moments after their pledge to communicate the Gentles’ observations to other Hill Women, the women return to their separatism after learning that the Gentles have discovered in themselves telepathic powers similar to the Hill Women’s. Responding to the Gentles’ claim that these powers are nonviolent, Evona says, “‘Nonviolent? Never. You know what will happen. You’ll use your new power all right. You’ll use it, perfect it, manufacture it, package it, sell it, and tell the world that it’s clean and new because it comes from a different breed of men. But it’s just another fancy prick to invade the world with’” (179). Evona’s response is laden with the types of ideological barriers that other modes of feminism and ecofeminism avoid in their drives to add more complexity to ecofeminist conversations. The Hill Women’s attitude toward the Gentles does not encourage the breakdown of their essentialism into a mode of thought more open to recognizing the potential for anyone, man or woman, to exercise social and ecological consciousness, and thus for progressive social and ecological change to grow out of democratic conversation.

*The Wanderground*'s brand of ecofeminism defines men as inherently oppressive and liberated women as ecologically conscious. *Always Coming Home*’s ecofeminism is more critical than that, even though Le Guin does reflect several facets of cultural ecofeminist thinking. The Kesh society of her future history interweaves human culture and nonhuman nature in a way that breaks down the culture/nature dualism to favor instead a
spirituality of individual, social, and cultural embeddedness in nonhuman nature. This deep ecological, cultural ecofeminist ecospirituality informs the Kesh’s social organization and treatment of Earth, as it also combats a patriarchal quest for dominance over nature that would undermine the lived union with nonhuman nature that the Kesh have achieved. Further, the Kesh’s gender identifications are analogous to those of cultural ecofeminism: the Kesh connect “woman and animal . . . throughout [their] sexual and intellectual teaching,” a connection that the narrator of this passage declares is not used to devalue woman (420).

A complex symbol, the “heyiya-if,” illustrates Kesh spirituality and gender identifications. Signifying ecological connection with its dual spirals growing inward, as well as openness to change with its center empty and refusing to finalize that connection, the heyiya-if permeates and defines the Kesh’s cultural activities, their dance choreography, stage productions, town planning, art, musical instruments, and meditative practices. The heyiya-if informs the practices of the Kesh. They make “no provision for a relation of ownership between living beings,” arranging their society around not just a respect for life—a cultural ecofeminist care ethic—but also a deep ecological sense of their place within the ecosystem (43). The “Earth People” of the Kesh’s “Five Houses of Earth” include “the earth itself, rocks and dirt and geological formations, the moon, all springs, streams and lakes of fresh water, all human beings currently alive, game animals, domestic animals, individual animals, domestic and ground-dwelling birds, and all plants that are gathered, planted, or used by human beings” (43–44). The “Sky People” of their “Four Houses of the Sky” include “the sun and stars, the oceans, wild animals not hunted as game, all animals, plants, and persons considered as the species rather than as an individual, human beings considered as a tribe, people, or species, all people and beings in dreams, visions, and stories, most kinds of birds, the dead, and the unborn” (44). Here, Patrick D. Murphy’s thoughts on matrilineal societies are useful: “In matrilineal societies among the first nations, . . . kinship is observed in terms of extended families, lodges, clans, and entire tribes, not nuclear family structures. As a result, it is more accurate to say that there are not others in such cultures, only anothers, that is, beings who are neither self nor other in any absolute dichotomy but are familiar, related, and connected with us” (Farther 88).

A specter haunts the ennatured Kesh in the form of a masculinity once prevalent in the aptly named “City of Man”—our own Industrial Age, our now—and now reemerging in the future world of the Kesh in a patriarchally organized warrior group called the Condor, or the Dayao.
Representing a time “‘when [people] lived outside the world,’” “a sort of peninsula sticking out from the mainland, very thickly built upon, very heavily populated, very obscure, and very far away,” the City of Man still exists in the world of *Always Coming Home* in the form of the dangerous industrial toxins modernity left behind (Le Guin, *Always* 153). With the Condor this City of Man takes its present form in militaristic aspiration. They want to resurrect the “Great Weapons” of the past, a project identified in Le Guin’s book with the essence of masculinity. One weapon, a tanklike vehicle named the “Destroyer,” “push[es] through a wall of bricks, thundering and shaking through the ruins it made, huge and blind, with a thick penis-snout” (349–50). A figurative rape this is, one also extended to the other-than-human world: “the Destroyer push[es] against the oak trees . . . , push[es] them over” (350). In the masculine culture of the Condor, a “man-dominant” culture, the “identification [of woman and animal] is used to devalue” (420, emphasis added).

Le Guin’s book traces one Kesh woman’s navigation through this masculine “outside the world” as well as her experiences of living life under the cultural paradigms dominant during the City of Man and now resurfacing as a force against which the Kesh’s ecologically conscious Valley culture must struggle. North Owl is the daughter of a woman of a Valley House, Willow, and a man of the oppressive Condor people, Terter Abhao. As one of the Kesh she is among the world as a child enough to recognize “the dirt [as] the mother of [her] mothers” and to make her coming-of-age ritual one of absolute in(ter)dependence in the wilderness (19). However, because North Owl’s father left the Valley so early in her life to command an army, she has grown up with the title “half-person” (19). At eight years old she feels incomplete. Terter’s return to the Valley with his army prompts North Owl to reflect, “He was home, he was here, our family was whole; now everything was as it should be, balanced, complete; and so it would not change” (30). But she soon finds out that her fantasies of familial completion, informed by a patriarchal concept of the family, contradict the greater ecological union valued in Kesh culture.

When North Owl leaves the Valley to join her father and experience Condor culture we get a deeper view of this culture’s supporting structures, the linguistic, religious, and social configurations that underlie Condor tyranny. In this way, Le Guin’s ecofeminism moves away from strict cultural ecofeminist reasoning and into a more critical mode of ecofeminist understanding, one motivated to explore the historically contingent, rather than fixed, features of patriarchy. First, unlike the Kesh’s language, the Condor’s recognizes hierarchy; Terter renames North Owl “‘Ayatyu,’”
“woman born above others,’” while he also refers to the people of other towns as “people of no account” (186, 189). Condor is a hierarchal designation symbolizing people who “go in silence, above all the others” (189). Second, this linguistic encoding of hierarchy goes hand in hand with the patriarchal religion of the Condor people, a monotheism with only one person—a man, “The Condor”—able to interpret the word of “One” (193). Of religious practice North Owl observes, “Women were not allowed into the sacred parts of their heyimas, which they called daharda; we could come no nearer than the vestibule in front of the daharda to listen to the singing inside on certain great festivals. Women have no part in the intellectual life of the Dayao; they are kept in, but left out” (200). Furthermore, “True Condor warriors were to be one thing only, reflections of One, setting themselves apart from all the rest of existence, washing it from their minds and souls, killing the world, so that they could remain perfectly pure” (201). And finally, with such language and religion comes an attendant social and familial structure. North Owl narrates,

Certain men belonging to certain families are called True Condors, and others like them are called . . . One-Warriors. No other people are called Condors. Men who are not of those families are all called tyon, farmers, and must serve the True Condors. Women of those families are called Condor Women, and must serve Condor men, but may give orders to tyon and hontik. The hontik are all other women, foreigners, and animals. (193)

In contrast to the “anotherness” of which Murphy speaks, the Condor’s social reasoning embraces an otherness steeped in a strict division between male warriors—and their approved servants—and “women, foreigners, and animals.”

Tied to such linguistic, religious, and social structures, the Condor’s masculine oppressiveness loses the ahistoricity and immovability of the masculinity that is represented in The Wanderground. The Condor’s living “outside the world” is indeed a product of a certain masculinity, but grounded in historically contingent structures, this masculinity is not rigid. That the Condor “believed that animals and women were contemptible and unimportant” and that “Condors’ wives were expected to have babies continuously, since that is what One made women for” demonstrates that beliefs and expectations motivate such patriarchal notions (345). If patriarchy is a sociopolitical construct driven by belief and expectation, then it proves to be far more malleable than if it were biologically defined and, as
Gearhart’s book largely suggests, inevitable. In the same way, the apparent feminine qualities of Kesh culture are more the product of the pervasive heiyiyia-if—a linguistic, religious, and social device—than they are of an inevitable feminine principle.

In addition to its content, the form of Le Guin’s book draws attention to the artifactual nature of gendered categories. *Always Coming Home* contains excerpts of literature, artwork, maps, and other objects of Kesh and Condor existence. The effect of this cutting and pasting is an emphasis on the constructedness of the Kesh’s ecological conscience and the Condor’s tyranny, both of which are products of a set of historical relics and not fundamental to sex. The heiyiyia-if produces and is produced by the ecological mind-set of the Kesh just as the Condor’s crimes feed and are fed by their hierarchical religious language. Social change, it seems, is possible given transformations in the frameworks that make up any cultural system. While North Owl’s journey from living with the Kesh and inside the nonhuman community to living with the Condor and outside this community, ultimately to return to the Kesh, represents a journey between opposite ends of a gendered spectrum, *Always Coming Home* does not frame this spectrum as natural and something to be dealt with using separatist strategies. As a result, Le Guin’s book contributes much to ecofeminist theorizing, embracing much in cultural ecofeminist thought but positing additional, more complex theoretical questions.

If we evaluate *The Wanderground*, *Always Coming Home*, and Slonczewski’s *A Door Into Ocean* using a strict cultural ecofeminist rubric, then their authors’ creations of separate spaces for the ideological positions they critique and celebrate display quite adequately the gender associations upon which cultural ecofeminism bases its thinking. *The Wanderground*’s potently masculine, aggressively sexual, and technological City invades an ecofeminist wilderness of liberated and highly evolved women. *Always Coming Home*’s reestablished City of Man, which like its ancestral Industrial Age lives “outside the world,” intrudes upon a revived eco-centric culture and this culture’s Earth-based spirituality. *A Door Into Ocean*’s colonialist and patriarchal culture of planet Valedon threatens the sovereign, all-female, all-water world Shora, whose inhabitants have a remarkable knowledge of ecology and a strong sense of place. Slonczewski’s clear gendering of colonialist politics and ecological wisdom as male and female, respectively, operates in much the same way as Gearhart’s and
Le Guin’s gendering of similar ideological stances—as cultural ecofeminist polemic. But like Always Coming Home’s ecofeminism, A Door Into Ocean’s goes beyond this polemic to fashion more complex understandings of gender and thus more effective liberatory strategies for women and nonhuman nature.

A shift toward a more critical position characterizes Slonczewski’s ecofeminism, but as with Always Coming Home this shift does not involve a wholesale dismissal of cultural ecofeminist ideas. Read together, Le Guin’s and Slonczewski’s books provide a full sense of what I believe is the ecofeminist position they both ultimately participate in and argue for, a position that is aligned with the ecofeminist Ynestra King’s resistance to an academic fragmentation of the movement into dichotomous theoretical brands. I will explicate A Door Into Ocean within this context shortly, after taking a moment to note that King’s dialectical ecofeminism—a label I am adopting from Catriona Sandilands—at once rejects essentialist gender associations and revalues nurturance, interdependence, and other subordinate yet more ecologically conscious precepts. What sets this ecofeminism apart from the cultural ecofeminism of Plant, Collard, and Gearhart is its anti-essentialist stance; what sets it apart from the rationalist feminism of Prentice and Biehl is its open-mindedness to alternative forms of critical engagement, such as spirituality, intuition, passivity, and emotion.

King argues that ecofeminism must be revised to embrace the more complex social conscience of rationalist positions while still preserving the ecological conscience of cultural ecofeminism. She admits that in choosing nature over culture and feminine values over masculine values, cultural ecofeminism does not adequately question these illusory dualisms. Demonstrating a more constructionist standpoint she writes, “women’s ecological sensitivity and life orientation is a socialized perspective that could be socialized right out of [them] depending on [their] day-to-day lives” (23). Continuing, she notes, “There is no reason to believe that women placed in positions of patriarchal power will act any differently from men” (23). Women’s ecological sensitivity is context-specific, not universal. Just as women can be healers, nurturers, or defenders of nonhuman nature, given different cultural contexts they might also oppose these traits. Likewise, whereas men can be culturally programmed to be militaristic, other contexts might determine them to be caring.

Such critical positions on gender and gendered value categories help free ecofeminism from some potentially devastating theoretical and practical limitations, the same limitations that hinder The Wanderground from
today providing a more effective and applicable critique. In King’s eco-
feminism the transformative impulse is not tied to the idea that change
can happen only within a supposedly universal feminine social or spiri-
tual framework, and in the absence of an equally universal masculinity.
Instead, ecofeminist reform begins in comprehending gender assumptions
as constructed social phenomena. King’s final image of a more effective
ecofeminism is one that welcomes a multiplicity of views not strictly con-
structionist or rationalist:

Ecofeminism suggests . . . a recognition that although the nature-culture
dualism is a product of culture, we can nonetheless consciously choose
not to sever the woman-nature connection by joining male culture. Rather, we can use it as a vantage point for creating a different kind of
culture and politics that would integrate intuitive, spiritual, and rational
forms of knowledge, embracing both science and magic insofar as they
enable us to transform the nature-culture distinction and to envision
and create a free, ecological society. (23)

King blends cultural ecofeminism and rationalist feminism in a way that
creates a new category for the movement, a category deeply concerned
with removing the extremes of these two positions while embracing what
is most valuable in each. Such an ecofeminism understands woman–nature
connections, man/nature disconnections, and nature/culture dualisms as
malleable cultural products that must be evaluated using a range of criti-
cal voices and tools, from the engaged democratic processes of rational-
ist feminism to the deeply personal, ecospiritual reflections of cultural
ecofeminism.

As with Gearhart’s and Le Guin’s speculative fictions, Slonczewski’s
novel shares with cultural ecofeminism the dual goals of censuring patri-
archy’s social and ecological oppressions as well as highlighting the eco-
logical conscience associated with women. And like Le Guin’s book,
Slonczewski’s develops its ecofeminist position further by adding a level
of complexity characteristic of the dialectical ecofeminism just reviewed.
Shora’s inhabitants, Sharers, are much like the women of The Wander-
ground and the Village dwellers of Always Coming Home in that they
have traits demonstrating their deep connection to place. Physically, the
“breathmicrobes” of the Shoran atmosphere turn Sharers’ skin deep pur-
purple, a preventable phenomenon they accept as part of dwelling on Shora.
Their lungs have evolved to allow long stints of breathlessness under
water. Conceptually, the notion of sharing that gives Shora’s inhabitants
their name erases the hierarchies inherent in dualistic, patriarchal thinking; their expressions “learnsharing, worksharing, [and] lovesharing” nullify any paradigm denying that “Each force has an equal and opposite force” (36). And intellectually Sharers understand their lives as dependent on an intact ecological web. When asked why she does not spray the living rafts, upon which Sharers make their homes, with an insecticide when parasites threaten them, Merwen—a native of Shora—responds, “Then seasilk would choke the raft. And fingershells would go hungry, and tube-worms die of the poison; then fish and octopus would have nothing, and what would Sharers eat?” (60). Their physical, conceptual, and intellectual embeddedness in ecological place sets the Sharers apart from their patriarchal oppressors, whose intrusion into Shora constitutes much of the plot of Slonczewski’s novel.

Valedon’s people, Valans, know the Sharers as “women-like creatures who lived in the endless sea, women whose men were never seen, who subsisted on seaworms and could dive deep beyond light’s reach without going mad” (9). This perspective shrouds the Sharers in a mystery of otherness that for the Valans justifies attempts at their exploitation by a patriarchy cemented to hierarchical value structures. Historically Valedon had a native population, known derogatorily as “Trolls,” that “passed away when the godlike Primes”—who were modern humans, but are now extinct due to nuclear catastrophe—“came to remodel the planet . . . to human standards” (36). As “creatures,” Sharers, too, are threatened by a new manifestation of power; the rulers of the universal political system of which Valedon is a part—the Patriarchy—want to open up Shora for mineral exploration and textile markets. Sharer compliance is necessary for this to happen, but since increased economic exploitation threatens the life forms of Shora, such compliance will not happen. Valan trade there has already brought on much ocean noise, drowning out the communications of animals essential to Shoran ecological integrity. The traders’ applications of poisons to the Shoran sea has also threatened life. Thus the Sharers defend their planet against these, and many more, intrusions.

The Patriarchy was formed to regulate independent governments away from the dangerous uses of military power that ended the reign of the Primes. But the events of A Door Into Ocean suggest little distinction between the violent use of nuclear weaponry by the Primes and the violent use of economic weaponry by those now in the Patriarchy. The Patriarchy claims to follow “the lesson of the dead gods: too many people smashed too many atoms—and planets, in the end,” but its support of Valedon’s social, political, and economic exploitation of Shora demonstrates that it
fails to see this exploitation as another way of smashing planets (21). In the same way that Le Guin extrapolates the Condor from the poisoned society of the Industrial Age, Slonczewski relates the Patriarchy to the extinct Primes to urge a radical move away from the logic of domination and its consequential social, political, and ecological abuses. This concern about patriarchy is not specific to cultural ecofeminism. As a feminist mode, ecofeminism is always critical of patriarchy’s logic of domination. But explicit in *A Door Into Ocean* is the cultural ecofeminist view of “feminine” ways of knowing and being as promising an alternative needed to move toward a more ecologically conscious society and politics. In this way the cultural ecofeminist moments of Slonczewski’s book share much with their equivalent moments in Gearhart’s book.

The stark contrast between Valedon’s social and political norms and the life ways of the Sharers leads to gendered ideological collisions as Valans attempt to take possession of Shora. While the outcomes of these collisions seemingly favor masculine power, in the end the Sharers overthrow their colonial oppressors by using what Slonczewski’s book overtly considers a feminine will. Most tellingly indicating the radical cultural ecofeminism of this novel, the Sharers live in a female separatist ecotopia where the absence of men permits certain values to thrive: respecting social and ecological interconnectedness, affirming and nurturing life, and building communicative networks. Sharer science is a science of life, their intellectual supremacy in biology used not to destroy but to nurture ecological systems. Their politics is one of open communication between all of Shora’s raft communities during events called Gatherings. And Sharers are pacifists. In an instance that reveals the intertwining of their scientific knowledge and valuing of life, their political methodologies, and their pacifism, at one Gathering a Sharer named Yinerva proposes to use biological warfare to rid Shora of “the Valan pestilence” that threatens “Not only Sharer children and survival . . . , but all the other creatures of Shora, the lesser sisters, seaswallowers, fanwings, rafts—from snail to swallower” (309). The group, however, ultimately chooses to preserve their nonviolent ways and instead to conquer the Valans with what the defeated Valan general calls “bloodless ‘invasions’” (395). The Sharers’ nonviolent techniques for resisting Valan aggression include whitetrance—a form of “Gandhian discipline” in which a Sharer grows pale, still, and unresponsive to outside threats—as well as boycotting Valan goods (Slonczewski, “Study Guide” par. 31).

Read as a cultural ecofeminist text *A Door Into Ocean* demonstrates the potential for “feminine” values to triumph over “masculine” imposi-
tions. But because the reason for Shora’s ultimate defeat of Valedon and the Patriarchy is only partially tied to gendered values, it would be an incomplete judgment to deem Slonczewski’s novel a work of hard cultural ecofeminism without considering the range of its critical thinking. For one, Valedon’s racism also instigates its military’s retreat. While Valan patriarchy indeed cannot beat down Shoran ways of life, Valan racism cannot permit Valedon’s army to succeed in its colonialist task. One of the most effective ways the Sharers defeat the Valans is not by conscious tactic but by possessing a racial characteristic that signifies for the Valans various substandard associations: purple skin. From the perspective of the Valan mind-set, Sharers are low creatures. They are natives who “‘don’t think like civilized people,’” who are “‘just naked women,’” and who do not “‘acknowledge the authority of Valedon’” (275, 253, 249). When the skin of the Valan occupiers begins to take on the marker of Sharer nativeness, they fear the “Purple Plague” (299). Troop morale plummets, contributing to the ultimate withdrawal of the army.

While this particular criticism of racism is perhaps and at first odd in its suggestion, against history, that colonialist fears of the predefined Other can protect colonized cultures—rather than justify and prompt militaristic and/or economic endeavor against them—it is nonetheless crucial in its recognition that colonial power is a conglomeration of several oppressive forces, including racism and patriarchy. Thus, A Door Into Ocean shares the theoretical positions of Prentice, Biehl, and King, who also do not limit their critiques of oppression to patriarchy alone. Prentice’s and Biehl’s rationalist feminisms, and King’s dialectical ecofeminism, complement Murray Bookchin’s social ecology, which targets hierarchy as the foundation upon which sexism, racism, and other modes of domination are built (hence his attacks on deep ecology, a movement that wants to reorder the anthropocentric/ecocentric hierarchy). According to social ecology, interrogating any one of these forms of oppression alone does not achieve the complete critical assessment and revision that interrogating their underlying motivating force can. As Mellor observes, “Patriarchy only exists as one form of hierarchy, it is neither the original, nor the primary oppression” (158). Gaard also makes this point when defining social ecofeminism: “Features unique to social ecofeminism include . . . its analysis of the hierarchical structure of oppression as even more descriptive than the specific forms of oppression” (Ecological 43). A Door Into Ocean moves into such a critical territory, beyond the limited range of cultural ecofeminism’s exclusive focus on patriarchy—and often its support of alternative valuations that are hierarchical nonetheless—and into a
focus on questioning together patriarchy, racial essentialism, and anthropocentrism. Such a complete critical evaluation is necessary for the total dissolution of hierarchy, in general, that would liberate nonhuman nature from human tyranny as it also liberates oppressed humans from oppressive ones.

Though *A Door Into Ocean*’s focus on race, or hierarchy more generally, is secondary to its primary focus on gender and patriarchy, the novel still moves strongly away from strict cultural ecofeminism. Operating on patriarchy not simply to reverse its assumptions, but more so to include it in a broader critical analysis of gender assumptions in general, Slonczewski’s book tests cultural ecofeminism and patriarchal essentialism alike with two of its characters, the male Spinel and the female Jade. As Susan Stratton notes, “Gender duality [in *A Door Into Ocean*] is challenged both by the successful adaptation of a Valedonian male teenager to Sharer ways and by the fact that the most vicious of Valedonian soldiers is female” (“Intersubjectivity” par. 22). These characterizations complicate essentialist notions and open the door for ecofeminism to look more at the social than the so-called innate origins of male and female behavior and relationships with nonhuman nature.

Slonczewski’s novel is in part a bildungsroman about Spinel, an adolescent boy from Valedon who goes to Shora, experiences life there, and ultimately chooses to stay. Spinel’s acceptance of Sharer ways, however, comes after his interior battle with himself over the patriarchal ideology that defines him. Going through hard times financially, Spinel’s parents arrange for him to seek opportunity on Shora. The Sharers promote the move, for Spinel presents them with the opportunity to study masculinity and to prove that a man can become a Sharer. But Spinel is not so excited. It is outrageous to him that there are not any men on Shora, and he believes that “‘A world without fathers could have no place for him’” (22). Coming from a hierarchical society Spinel sees the equality among Sharers as the product of “bizarre logic”; to him the planet is “ridiculous” (61). And as Spinel’s exposure to the Shoran atmosphere turns him purple, he demands a medicine that will curtail the phenomenon.

With his compulsory defense of the heterosexual family unit, his hierarchical logic, and his unwillingness to experience difference, Spinel embodies essentialist notions of masculinity. But Spinel is not the subject of essentialist contention. Central to Slonczewski’s argument is that masculinity is a socialized characteristic, and this is made obvious as Spinel embeds himself more and more into Shoran life, shedding his socialized masculinity and adopting a social and ecological conscience. Interestingly,
this embedding begins after he witnesses the wonders of Shoran ecology. Afterwards, “Spinel was now more than simply curious about Shora. Something compelled him to come to grips with this place that was inexorably becoming a part of him” (100). That “Something” is likely the very nonhuman nature within which he overtly experiences his embeddedness as his skin deepens to purple and his ocean dives increase in depth and duration. Spinel’s newfound sense of place ultimately leads him to join the Sharers in defending their planet against Valan exploitation, his sea change expressed in the final words of the novel as he swims away from the spacecraft that would have taken him back to Valedon: “a friendly fanwing dipped and soared overhead like a hand beckoning, Come, lovesharer, come home” (403).

That a male can become a “lovesharer” is one part of the constructionist ecofeminist claim of A Door Into Ocean. The other is that given the cultural atmosphere a woman can embody the worst of masculine aggressiveness. As Chief of Staff of the Valan army, Jade is a woman whose militarism challenges essentialist notions of femininity and the idea that violence and hostility are sex-specific. About militaristic conditioning, ecofeminist scholar Janis Birkeland writes, “men are taught to despise and distance themselves from their ‘feminine’ side, or their emotions and feeling” (35). Slonczewski’s narrative shows that such conditioning is inscribable on both men and women. Jade derogatorily nicknames the Sharers “catfish,” placing them at the bottom of an ontological hierarchy that denies species equality and justifies Valan oppressions against Shoran natives. “‘Catfish aren’t human,’” Jade says, “‘they’re Vermin, and that’s how to treat them’” (323). Jade admits that it is her duty to kill, as she also administers a range of tortures in an attempt to crack the Sharer’s nonviolent protests. In Slonczewski’s world masculinity is a socialized trait; militarism and violent aggression do not emerge simply from being male but are characteristics etched on any sex by genderless oppressive institutions.

Stephanie Lahar asks,

Is there a way to know whether there were ever times and places when human beings lived in easy cooperation with each other and the nonhuman environment, without the sexist, oppressive, and exploitive complex of power relations we call patriarchy? Is seeking such times and
places useful in empowering women today, by portraying model societies in which women either shared or held primary power? (97)

As works of science fiction, Gearhart’s, Le Guin’s, and Slonczewski’s novels all imagine such times and places. But their positions, like ecofeminism itself, are diverse. Espousing the multiplicity of perspectives within ecofeminism, Lee Quinby notices that ecofeminism “has combated ecological destruction and patriarchal domination without succumbing to the totalizing impulses of masculinist politics,” embracing as political strategy a plurality of theoretical positions rather than a single, hegemonic stance (123). The ecofeminist texts reviewed in this chapter confirm Quinby’s point, at least regarding science fiction’s ecofeminist theorizations.

Often challenged as essentialist in its judgments, The Wanderground embraces as political strategy the spatial separation of men and women as well as the safeguarding and uninhibited self-realization of both women and nonhuman nature associated with this separation. Ecotopian? Perhaps. But as discussed in chapter 2, ecotopian visions have transformative potential, if not to lay a literal groundwork then certainly to posit an intellectual compass for moving toward a new ground. And in Gearhart’s novel, that compass is one necessitated by the experiences of women and nonhuman nature during the time of the book’s composition—the 1970s—when both feminists and environmentalists were pushing the boundaries of dominant ideology and reaching for new and effective critical methodologies.

Always Coming Home and A Door Into Ocean also embrace cultural ecofeminism, positing as a critical strategy the consideration of gender difference. But these books intrinsically question their own considerations. Le Guin’s work does not locate gender difference in inflexible biological determinations, instead highlighting the malleability of the structures and symbolisms determining female and male relationships with nonhuman nature, and with each other. Slonczewski’s book expands the ecofeminist critique of patriarchy to a broader social critique of hierarchy as it also underscores gendered behavior as specific to the atmospheres constructing such behavior, regardless of sex. By doing so, Always Coming Home and A Door Into Ocean develop on cultural ecofeminism without watering down what is most important in its message: the liberation of women and nonhuman nature from oppression. These liberations demand theoretical and practical diversity. The Wanderground, Always Coming Home, and A Door Into Ocean together offer us literary explorations of this diversity.