

# Land and Women: The Exploitation of *our* Natural Resources

By

Tara DePorte

Prepared for Transforming Everyday Life in America

University of Virginia

2000

**“The universality of female subordination, the fact that it exists within every type of social and economic arrangement and in societies of every degree of complexity, indicates to me that we are up against something very profound, very stubborn, something we cannot rout out simply by rearranging a few tasks and roles in the social system, or even by reordering the whole economic structure (Ortner, 68).”**



In this painting by Edgar Degas, he portrays a seaside landscape with the body of a nude woman. Through this painting, I think Degas, perhaps accidentally, touches on a crucial link between women, the land and the exploitation of both of these ‘landscapes’, as it were. In America, we see the earth as a woman, often as the ‘mother’, the ultimate sign of protection and productivity. Likewise, woman, her body and its ‘products’ are often viewed as more ‘natural forms’ or ‘organic’ forms. “We may thus broadly equate culture with the notion of human consciousness, or with the products of human consciousness (i.e. systems of through and technology), by means of which humanity attempts to asset control over nature (Ortner, 72).” Although there are many examples of nature/women correlations within our society, one of the most prominent is the

objectification of the physical shape expected of a woman's body. The curves associated with the breasts, hips, and rears of women are considered both symbols of production ( a woman is supposed to have healthy, 'birthing hips') and fertility as well as objects of sexual desires. These 'curves' are, therefore, key to a woman's concept of self worth as they are crucial to her superficial status in society. At the same time, especially through today's media, there is a tight social limit on the weight or size associated with the attractive woman (the perfect Barbie doll). It is these culturally announced norms associated with the woman's body that lead to the evident objectification and subordination of the woman. I believe, although small, each issue that potentially adds to the decrease in a woman's view of her own self-worth are catalysts to psychological and physical subordination of women within our society. I will try to present how ties made within our culture between the woman and the natural, wild state of the earth may serve as both indicators and educators into the global phenomenon of both natural and feminine subordination under the auspices of organized culture. I do not want to say that women are **equated** with nature or considered necessarily part of nature, however I would argue that women are viewed as active participants in processes (such as childbirth and menstruation) that are more rooted in, or have a more direct affinity with, nature. (Concept: It may be that I am arguing that, through the women's rights movement in American society, women have been able to rise above the restraint of male domination, however, now the subordination of women in our society, instead of being erased, has merely transformed. Today, as it is more socially unacceptable for a man to have power over a woman, it is increasingly more acceptable for **society** to have increased power over the woman.) Therefore, we are living in a society where domination has shifted from an individual level to a cultural level. Furthermore, I believe that it is through America's redefined concepts of success and freedom, we have created a society ridden with socioeconomic inequality. This society is also one that is focused on the 'short-term' thinking of a changing, dynamic market system, where 'natural resources' are to be extracted and maximized to their fullest productive potential. Within this system, I believe the feminization of the earth is key to understanding both American land-use ethics and gender equality issues.

The contrast of culture and nature and the control over nature indicative of American culture is paralleled to the devaluation and subordination of women (the 'natural' sex). Additionally, I would argue that American concepts of appropriate land-use and resource extraction may be parallel to the intrinsic reasons behind the objectivity of women in our society. This is portrayed in both actions and in much of American slang used to denote both women and earth; Both women and the land are seen as producers for all of man's needs; They are to be explored, conquered, and owned. Then, as their productivity wanes, both women and the land are to be discarded and new plots are sought out.

In my paper, I will discuss how capitalist ideals of unrestricted consumption and ownership are direct catalysts of the degradation of the environment. From there, I will argue that the strong associations made between land and woman through both American ideology and language is both reflective of land-use trends and indicative of the underlying objectification of women in our society. Additionally, I will touch on roles and power relationships between men and women within American society and attempt to relate them to the transformation of today's woman. In conclusion, I would like to propose that the increasing decline of the family in American society is more likely to be caused by the increase in consumer consumption and subsequent changes in capitalist ideology, rather than the offspring of both sexes in the workplace.

As an introduction, I would like to present what I see as the ideals behind the American Dream of prosperity and success. I will do this by showing both examples and scenarios of ideas correlated with ownership, 'economic success' and freedom.

### **Capitalism and Ownership: The American Dream**

The American Dream is one of success and utopia; a Dream realized by few, followed by many. As the country of the great frontier, historically America has had the luxury of expansion, exploration, and conquest. Subsequently, I would argue that the 'frontier mentality' of unlimited expansion is directly reflected in modern American society:

**“The disappearance of utopia brings about a static state of affairs in which man himself becomes no more than a thing. We would be faced then with the greatest paradox imaginable, namely that man, who has achieved the highest degree of rational mastery of existence, left without any ideals, becomes a mere creature of impulses. Thus, after a long tortuous, but heroic development, just at the highest stage of awareness, when history is ceasing to be blind fate, and is becoming more and more man’s own creation, with the relinquishment of utopias, man would lose his will to shape history and therewith his ability to understand it (Mannheim, 1929/1936:262-3).”**

In the ‘land of opportunity’, success is defined by financial security, ownership, and freedom and these are considered the cornerstone of American ideology. Within this ideology lies a form of democratic capitalism (based on what we call a free-market economy) that has defined both Americans’ ideas of success and power. As I have argued in previous papers, I believe it is humans desire to create utopia or Eden both in life and in death are key to both the power of religion in American society and perfunctory to ‘total-use’ concepts of resource use and extraction. Likewise, resource extraction, such as the damming of the Columbia River to produce irrigation water and cheap electricity (which subsequently destroyed the natural ecosystem), is often rationalized as ‘God’s will’ in that the earth was made for man to use so he may prosper and reproduce: “Its fundamental precept is that the only godly work a man can do is grow food. From that precept comes the corollary notion that the American taxpayer has an obligation-economic, patriotic, and religious-to deliver cheap water to farmers so they can continue to do God’s work (Harden, 123).” Coupled with the sense of resource entitlement, in America today, the accumulation of either capital or debt is crucial to ownership, personal freedom, and the American Dream :

**“Not having your own place, being someone else’s foreman, running someone else’s settle-that’s second best, isn’t it?...I guess that’s what it’s all about for a cowboy. Cows and calves and your own place and being free. Being up on a horse-being good at it, doing what you know best (Kramer, 162).”**

As the above quote demonstrates, ownership of both land and enterprise are indicative of the fulfillment of the American Dream. In the case of The Last Cowboy's Henry, a rancher from the Midwest, he believes that both freedom and success for the individual are impossible without a strong sense of ownership and economic success. I believe that this philosophy, which is crucial to my definition of 'the American Dream', is detrimental to an individual's self worth and creates increasing socioeconomic hierarchy within a society (Thusly, inequality). Additionally, it is the correlation between ownership and success of the individual within American culture and the dichotomy that exists between culture and nature that makes the ties between nature and women so influential to a woman's perception in American society. I believe these ideologies, stemming in the concept of the 'American Dream', are what allow for the perceived 'ownership' of women and the 'exploitation' of both women and the land. Before delving further into this issue, however, I must first define some of the boundaries and values placed on ownership in our country. To do this, I will take the example of homeownership and social status as is analysed by Perin:

**“Nevertheless: despite their chafing at “interferences” with their “rights” to “private property” (interferences not so different from those renters experience, that is\_ for Americans "to own" anything less that the single-family-detached house (the townhouse of condominium) is, these texts say, a “compromise” with the American Dream (Perin, 64).”**

Perin's analysis of homeownership is indicative of the American belief in a person's right to both ownership and social status. As he argues, an American's path to freedom is through economic success, which he believes is best exemplified by the single-family home. Interestingly enough, many Western feminists believe that global equality for women is only attainable through economic empowerment. I would like to argue that although economic empowerment may act aid gender equality between individuals, within the American Dream philosophy the close ties between success and economy devalue the social and physical roles that are associated with the natural biology of a woman (ie childbirth and motherhood). It is this transformation from individual inequality (or the gender gap between men and women) and the social inequality

associated with socioeconomic division that I find to be key to issues of equality within American society. As is evident in the above quote, within the American Dream lie underlying hierarchies of power, ownership and conquer leading to the exhaustion of people and landscapes. However, I believe that, at the base of these issues, lies the overwhelming American ‘right’ to mass consumption. This focus on mass consumption that has been spurred by a transformation in capitalistic ideology may be looked at as a driving force behind inequality and exploitation of resources (both human and ‘natural’) in our country.

In the past thirty years, capitalist society has undergone a shift from production to consumption (Ritzer, 118). Historically, the amount a society could produce was indicative of their overall success. However, as we shift to a global economy, Americans’ concept of success is portrayed in the ability to harbor unlimited consumption, thereby indicating unlimited wealth and prosperity. However, this increased consumption has led to increased production of waste and to the exhaustion of both societies’ and the earth’s resources. I believe that the consequences have extended even further into our society and that unlimited consumption constrains the freedom of the individual:

**“While new means of consumption enable people to do things they could not do before [empowerment], they also constrain them to buy more than they need; to spend more than they should ...In fact, important status symbols in modern society are the number of credit cards one has in one’s wallet as well as the collective limit of credit available on those cards. Rather than the amount of savings one has, the modern status symbol is often how much debt one has and, better yet, how much more debt one can incur (Ritzer 101).**

In other words, the more an American consumes, the more money is necessary to sustain that level of ‘success’. Therefore, the individual must spend more time working to gain the money needed for the sustained level of ‘social status’. In this sense, the individual has limited his or her **freedom** because he or she is forced to spend more time in the office rather than with family, friends, or recreation. As money in American society is the key to consumptive power and success, professions that earn more money

are more highly respected than those lesser paying jobs. Through this transformation, therefore, we have seen a not surprising devaluation of the woman's role as mother and housekeeper. I am suggesting that both the roles of mother and father have lost respect in our society because they are roles or 'jobs' in society that **do not** result in financial reimbursement. I would like to return to this idea later when I present some of my thoughts on the reasons behind the downfall of the family in American society.

Returning to the issue of social hierarchy within the workplace, I would argue that the pervasive belief that it is necessary to "climb the ladder of success" has created a socially expected chronology of life transitions. In my opinion, the very nature of these transitions negate the previously mentioned concepts of social equality associated with the American Dream. With each stage, there is a correlated societal status (Perin, 33). In a capitalistic society, the only way to ascend the social ladder is through economic success exemplified by ownership. Therefore, economic success is synonymous to social power and this power creates socioeconomic inequality throughout the United States.

From here, I would like to explore the objectification of women within the structure of American 'culture'. To do this, I will revert back to the ties between nature and women heretofore mentioned, as well as touch on concepts of 'use' associated with women and the land, alike.

### **Women as the commodity**

Nature and women have been linked through femininity throughout time. Historically, we have personified the earth as female and have objectified the woman as a sink for natural resources. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century Industrial Revolution in America, we saw the coal extraction and exploitation of the hills of New England by coal miners, industrialists and economists. The supporters of the coalmining industry in St. Clair, PA, were certain that the 'otherness' of wilderness would inevitably give way to cultivation and industrial development. To planning engineers and most of corporate America, the future of St. Clair was described as a "vista of unlimited splendor and wealth" and was foreseen as a model of American growth and prosperity. Following the above arguments, I would like to argue that this wilderness (nature to be cultivated) is approached synonymously to the woman and her physical being in American society and this stems

from the natural procreative functions specific to women alone (Ortner, 73). Likewise, I believe that the cultivation of barren soil and resource extraction are directly reflected in the language and the American approach to woman. Much like the wildness of nature, woman has been identified with, or has been seen as a symbol of, something that is inherently devalued by culture. I believe it is the physical nature of a woman's flows, procreative functions, and sensuality are often viewed as 'dangerous' or 'foreign' to man and ordered society. Much like the forest, the rushing river, or the looming mountain, these 'resources' of a woman are powerful and threatening. It is man's (societies as well) inability to either recreate or control nature as well as the reproductive powers of the woman that are base to the use or consumption of these precious resources.

The American woman is both objectified as a sexual object and viewed as a resource for procreation. Here, I would like to present both examples of vocabulary associated with resource extraction and the American woman, as well as the treatment of these two living entities. Furthermore, it may be that the underlying rationalizations necessary for exploitation, whether it is environmental or humanistic, are one in the same, It is necessary to objectify before consumption. Before I begin, I would like to reemphasize that, although the male sex has been instrumental in gender inequality and the objectification of women, it is society as a whole that is responsible for this injustice. Additionally, it is important to realize that women themselves are often the worst enemies of their own equality as a sex.

Historically, as there were distinctive separations between the inside and outside worlds of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, women's only link to the outside sphere was through her faith (women had no access to economic empowerment). It was up to the woman to stay in the inner 'home' sphere, while the man used her physical resources for pleasure and the production of children. All other actions were considered 'impure' and would weaken that one bond of faith by tarnishing her redeemed soul. In the Southern camp meeting of They All Sang Hallelujah, as it is often in American religious institutions, there is an inversion of women's acceptable roles within the spiritual community:

**“Moreover, it was during the conversion period that women and children were allowed to serve as functionaries in the camp-meeting, either as convert-exhorters or as good singers and praying persons. Given the usual position of women and**

**children in the religious organizations and in plain-folk society, their behavior here constituted a significant reversal of stature, for those who were normally expected to take a subordinate role in life were here enabled to take control of a situation. Not only were the structures of the meeting—which replicated the social structure—purposefully negated, but for a time they were turned upside down (Bruce, 87).”**

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was the woman’s involvement in the church (and the saving of her soul/creation of new soul) that allowed her to cross the liminal boundary (through Jesus Christ) from the private home to the public sphere. However, her only role in this sphere is through this spirituality and she would then become impure if she were to work as do men in this public sphere (i.e. a “working girl” is what we call a prostitute today....Women renting out houses, rooms, unless widowed. This would mean that they had already been used up as resources, or their bodies were old and no longer productive or useful to the man). Additionally, within the church, women were not allowed to hold any formal position within the church that would indicate social power of any kind.

The inversion scenario presented through the church of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was the only leeway available for the woman to enter the external world. Today, although there remain restrictions in the ‘proper place’ for women, gender roles have become very integrated. However, the objectification of the female body has neither changed throughout history, nor amongst different cultures. In American society alone, the female body is still highly regarded as both a sex object and the primary source for reproduction. In this sense, the female body has, and continues to be, expected to be both “beautiful and fruitful” and readily available for the reproduction and objectivity of men:

**“It is absolutely clear that by his activity, man changes the forms of the materials of nature in such a way as to make them useful to him. The form of wood, for instance, is altered if a table is made out of it. Nevertheless the table continues to be wood, an ordinary, sensuous thing. But as soon as it emerges as a commodity, it changes into a thing, which transcends sensuousness (Marx, 163).”**

Let’s look at this quote while dually attempting to equate the objectivity of nature and of women. Women are often considered the epitome of all things sensual. As is nature, the woman in her natural form (purest form) is untouched and is the virgin. The

arrival of puberty for a woman, marked by the beginning of her period, marks both a rite of passage symbolic of the biological empowerment of the woman as well as an event crucial to the social formation of the commodity of woman. The transformation of the girl to woman means that she is now socially categorized as both a sensual being and has the ultimate potential as a commodity or producer for the community. The prepubescent girl is not considered of much use-value in American society. She is simply awaiting 'arrival'. However, once she has reached maturity, the woman is objectified by society as both a sex object and a commodity for reproduction:

**“In other words, woman’s body seems to doom her to mere reproduction of life; the male, in contrast, 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 created relatively lasting, eternal, transcendent objects, while the woman creates only perishables-human beings (Ortner, 75).”**

I would argue that the American approach to 'virgin' land is both symbolic and representative of the biological transition and objectification of the woman. The virgin forest is viewed as a barren wilderness of no use to society. However, once this land is owned, tilled and seeded, the land is bountiful and productive for all of society. It is up to society to 'tame' the virgin forest and mold it for its' own uses. In this way, society is able to optimize the use value of the land and of the forest. I would argue that the same philosophy is behind the view of women in American society. The 'ripe' virgin epitomizes the untouchable and the pure; yet she remains the most gratifying of man's conquests. The virgin is transformed into the useful through the breaking through of the male from the 'outside' through the liminal separation and into the internal world of the woman (the physical occurrence of breaking through the virginal lining). Through this break, the man is then able to release into the woman his own self, thereby overtaking the woman's very being with man. The ejaculation of sperm and the fertilization of the egg inside the woman result in the 'commodity' of the woman. She has been transformed, by the man, from the natural state of 'purity' and her body has become a commodity, or warehouse for reproduction. The woman, as she increases as a reproductive commodity

(has more children), decreases as a sexual object. In other words, one will ‘use-up’ a woman and then discard her once she has produced enough a) satisfaction b) babies so that her physical being has been worn out and is no longer both “fruitful and beautiful”. At this point, (often after menopause) society will both discard the woman as a useful commodity and as a sensual things:

**“Here we have the key to the whole mystery. On the biological level a species is maintained only by creating itself anew; but this creation results only in repeating the same Life in more individuals. But man assures the repetition of Life while transcending Life through Existence [i.e. goal-oriented, meaningful action]; by this transcendence he creates values that deprive pure repetition of all value. In the animal, the freedom and variety of male activities are vain because no project is involved. Except for his services to the species, the human male also remodels the face of the earth, he creates new instruments, he invents, he shapes the future...for she [woman] too is an existence, she feels the urge to surpass;, and her project is not mere repetition but transcendence towards a different future-in her heart of hearts she finds cinfimation of the masculine pretensions. She joins the men in the festivals that celebrate the cuccesses and victories of the males. Her misfortune is to have been biologically destined for the repetition of Life, when even in her own view Life does not carry within itself its reasons for being, reasons that are more important than life itself (de Beauvoir, from Ortner, 75).”**

Here, de Beauvoir shows how women themselves are continually questioning their own devaluation and role in life. As they are treated solely as ‘reproducers’ they or objects of desire, there only visible option for escape seems to be through the “confirmation of masculine pretensions”. These things are instrumental to the ‘usevalue’ associated with women in our society.

Likewise, the land once cultivated, having produced and extracted all natural resources available, is discarded and removed from the structure of society. Woman too is disregarded once she is no longer able to symbolize what is ‘useful’ to American society. In other words, she is no longer useful if she is neither beautiful (sexually attractive) nor ‘fruitful’ (able to have children). In this sense, postmenopausal woman are subject to rejection from mainstream American society. She is no longer able to produce children through her body, arising in the uselessness of the productive commodity. Additionally, because her body has been so subject to use, her sensual attractiveness is

often considered destroyed (the used commodity has a very limited sense of worth.). I would like to argue that it is this underlying objectification and categorization of the woman as a mere commodity that breeds both insecurity in the woman and limits a woman's sense of both self worth and equality in American society.

While reading the following quote from Henry, in The Last Cowboy, substitute the 'cow' for 'woman' (also note that 'cow' or 'heifer' are both derogatory names used for large, often obese women that have in societies eyes 'lost their sensuality', or sexual appeal),

**"It's a hard thing for me, being that fellow in the middle, it's like you're responsible but at the same time you got no authority...To my mind, if that old cow over there don't produce, she shouldn't be eating up that grass another season. They wouldn't keep me around for long, or one of the horses, if we didn't produce. That's what I keep on telling Lester-we should always be calving more heifers than we need, and always be culling (Kramer, 110)."**

This quote serves to emphasize the importance of productive capabilities in American society. Self worth is often equated with what we are able to produce. Throughout history, for one reason or another, man's productivity has been equated with physical labour and woman's productivity has been grouped with reproductiveness and, therefore, sexual objectivity. Not surprisingly, this cycle of sexual objectivity and use is not usually reflected upon men in American society. I would argue that this is because the male body is not biologically capable of reproduction. Man is able to release his source of potential productivity and separate it from his actual being. The productive source of the male body is sperm and this is expelled from the physical body through ejaculation. Therefore, the use value of the male body is completely separable from his physical being. The woman, however, must internalize not only her own productivity, but house the man's as well. This distinction between internalizing and expelling, allows the male to remain in his 'pure', unchanged state.

The woman's body, however, is forced to go through transitions that lead to the physical and chemical alterations in the woman's body. At the same time, this transformation (although it is undoubtedly 'magical') is socially considered a detractor

from the purity of the woman. As a man ages, the more 'productivity' he is able to expel from his body, the more reflective it is of his own strength and success.

The older man in American society is viewed as a status symbol of strength and stability; the older woman is degraded to the status of a worn-out commodity. For this very reason, it is understandable that impotence (more so than sterility) is terrifying to men. A man who cannot produce active sperm may not be able to add to the value of the commodity of the woman, but the impotent man is forced to keep all of his 'commodity' or sperm inside of his own body because he is not able to ejaculate. Thereby, the impotent man, much like the woman who must internalize all productivity, is not able to 'rid' his body of his productivity; thereby losing power and purity as time elapses. His own internalization of sperm through not being able to ejaculate causes the impotent man to become a commodity in himself. However, unlike the woman commodity, the man commodity has no inherent use value and is, therefore, useless to society.

### **Consumption: Extraction from land and animal**

Here, I would like to discuss further the concepts of consumption and power in relation to women and land use. The 'consumption' of women as a commodity to be used for the good of society for the production of human babies is, in my opinion, derived from the objectification of the woman. Linguistically, bars where there are many men looking for women, we call it a "meat market" For Americans, meat has been at the center of the plate for hundreds of years and the 'consumption; of women has been and continues to be an accepted ideology of American life.

We make a distinction between culture and nature. Why won't we eat dogs in American society? Because a dog is a man's best friend. They are intrinsic parts of society, however, we will "eat" women in both a figurative and a literal way through sexual interactions. Perhaps it is acceptable to consume a woman in that we tend to view her as a commodity, something to be owned. Additionally, it is the consumption of the "resources" (here we may think of the vaginal secretions of a woman as representative of the resources of reproduction). In this sense, the man, when 'eating' a woman is

consuming her as a commodity and consuming that very thing (reproductivity) that gives 'use-value' to the woman in society.

Therefore, I would like to point out the direct link between the treatment of women and capitalistic consumption. If it is socially acceptable to 'consume' a woman, albeit figuratively, then the unlimited consumption associated with economic success must result in the total consumption of the woman (I look at this on a theoretical level as the psychological destruction, sense of inferiority, of the woman).

However, it may be on a more biological level. The female mammal produces milk, and the nourishment of this milk throughout young infancy sustains the human child, both male and female. So, we may eat female animals (pigs, cows, chickens), however we tend not to eat the male counterparts, unless they are castrated (Americans will not eat bull meat, rooster, etc). Are we culturally afraid of 'swallowing' our masculinity? The fact is, in order to eat something we must objectify it (i.e. we disguise the actual animal names of food we eat, beef, mutton venison, pork...these names are separate from the warm-blooded, living animals such as the cow, rabbit, deer and the pig) (From Leach, 41). At the same time, we have blockages about eating carnivores, like the aversion to eating uncastrated meat, are we afraid to consume all that encompasses power or is it the 'impure' nature of the meat-eating beast that we are afraid to consume. Likewise, in order to consume a woman, we must objectify her as something other than the living, human being. She is referred to as a 'chick', 'dame', 'broad', 'bitch', etc. Note that many of these names are those of other, lesser animals. (Likewise, an ugly woman is considered a 'dog'). Through these names, in American culture, we find it easier to objectify and treat the woman and her body as a mere commodity: 'Ripe', as is a fruit of a tree, and ready to be eaten or consumed.

I would argue, then that the objectification of women and of the environment, allows American society to justify our 'consumption' of them. Additionally, women that are considered 'impure' or 'used' (i.e. hookers or women that have been with many other men) lose their sense of 'attractiveness' or sensuality for many men. Although they might have an exotic appeal (much like eating 'wild-game' is an exotic, rare experience), it is not considered as attractive to consume a woman of this impure nature.

Likewise, the American woman seems to feel this need to be the most 'desirable commodity' and is often one of the biggest perpetrators of the objectification of women. Although when watching American television it is apparent that the act of 'sex' or nudity is scandalous and often less accepted than violence, being 'sexy' is very key to the life of the American woman. Additionally, the acceptance of female objectivity and nudity is apparently much more approved of than male nudity in American films and television. More than naught, I have seen full shots of naked women in television, but I have never (well maybe once) seen a male penis in any American movie other than what we consider pornographic films. This leads me to believe that it is more acceptable to expose a woman as nude, or vulnerable (which is often associated with total nudity) than the 'powerful' male figure. The hooker, the housewife, the woman; we are all considered commodities in this world, desperately trying not to be bought, used or sold (as it were, we don't want to "sell ourselves short"):

**"A hustler is any woman in American society. I was the kind of hustler who received money from favors granted rather than the type of hustler who signs a lifetimes contract fro her trick. Or the kind of hustler who carefully reads women's magazines and learns what it is proper to give for each date, depending on how much money her date or trick spends on her (Terkel, 93)....The overt hustling society is the microcosm of the rest of the society. The power relationships are the same and the games are the same. Only this one I was in control of. The greater one I wasn't. In the outside society, if I tried to be e, I wasn't in control of anything. As a bright, assertive woman, I had no power. As a cold, manipulative hustler, I had a lot. I knew I was playing a role. Most women are taught to become what they act. All I did was act out the reality of American womanhood (Terkel, 103)."**

The sensuality and sexual appeal of the woman can serve as both a tool of empowerment of the woman over men and the source of womans' objectification. Competition for a sense of attractiveness and ultimate beauty has somehow been programmed into the minds of many American women,

**"I viewed all girls as being threats. That's what we were all taught. You can't be friends with another woman; she might take your man. If you tell her anything about how you really feel, she'll use it against you. Your smile at other girls and you spend time with them when there's nothing better to do, but you'd**

**leave any girl sitting anywhere if you had an opportunity to go somewhere with a man. Because the most important thing in life is the way men feel about you (Terkel, 94).”**

American women get a fantastic sense of intra-female competition that is often much more degrading than that of men towards women. Furthermore, the underlying concept in our society that we can ‘use’ women is both degrading and destructive to her as an individual. This concept of use, as was mentioned before is a parallel of both the Americans approach to the earth and to the woman. They are both to be used and extracted from in the most literal and abstract forms.

From here I would like to delve once more into the “American correlation” between women and the land. As heretofore mentioned, I believe that common concepts of extraction, ownership and control are fundamental to the subordination of women in our society. I will try to explain the perceived importance of assertive control over wilderness to the organization of society and to better understand how the acceptance of unlimited consumption not only leads to extraction from these wilderness, but to overall degradation of our natural resources, women and the earth.

### **The parallel worlds of nature and woman**

**“By their resistless power, the wilderness had been made to smile and the desert to blossom. Before their march the dark and almost impenetrable thicket through which the Tamaqua (Little Schuylkill River) had wound its course for unnumbered years, have disappeared; and the river itself had abandoned its accustomed channel to make room for the construction of a work which will rank among the public improvements of the country (St. Clair, 241).”**

Let’s look at this quote as a parallel to the ‘coming of age’ of the woman. One must remark both on the commonality of language and sentiment associated with woman and with the land. The wilderness, or the pure nature of the female, ‘smiles and blossoms’ due to the penetration of mankind. We suggest that a girl truly ‘blossoms’ once she reaches puberty. Likewise, before puberty, sexual intercourse with a girl is both ‘dark’, not accepted by society, and impenetrable, figuratively, due to social stigma. The channel of the river,

synonymous to the channel of the vaginal cavity, has flowed for many years. It is transformed, as is the riverbed, through man's penetrations. As a result, the river becomes a new 'work', as it were, that is the creation and delivery of a child to the country. It is important to note, that the vocabulary used for menstruation and natural systems of the earth are often the same.

Flows are crucial to both ecological and menstrual systems. And it is only through man's harnessing and the ultimate controlled disruption of these flows that we may produce success for American society. In other words, the flow of menstruation is disrupted by the fertilization of the egg and pregnancy, as the flow of the Columbia River is disrupted by the Coulee Dam and results in the harnessing of natural energy. It is interesting to note that capitalism, based solely on economic principles is ridden with the constant flows of money and goods. Indeed, the increased flow of capital is an indicator of a healthy and growing economy. This is the inverse of American's approach to nature and to women. The interruption of the 'flow' in these systems is a source of power. (However, with birth control, women have gained power and say in controlling her own 'flowing assets' and have, thusly, in my opinion enabled herself to choose the fate of her own body, increasing drastically her social power in American society).

Additionally, the linguistic slang for a woman's pubic hair is her "bush", a term often used by men. In this way, this part of the woman's anatomy is paralleled to the 'wild' forest, bush or 'outback' of the unknown of our society, " Throughout the proceedings, the theme was the courage and perseverance of the pioneers of the coal trade in the rescue of their country from the dominion of the beasts of the forest, to place it under the rules of enlightened life (St. Clair, 238). Again, these words assume a sense of unconquered, yet conquerable land. Following my previous thesis, the "beasts of the forest" would be the pure, natural state of the woman that must undergo domination, or must succumb to the rules of "enlightened life" or society in order to be fully accepted.

As I mentioned in the introduction. I would like to use the ideology I have laid out here in my paper to explain my thoughts on why the American family is a devaluing entity. According to many, the reasons behind the weakening American family structure are divorce and the fact that more women are entering the workplace. However, I would like to argue

that American's drive towards increasing, unlimited consumption is more influential on the health of the American family.

### **Power and the Home: Women in Transition**

Transition is a property of all life often marked by rites of passage. People traverse social time and social space by leaving one social category to enter another. Those considered safe are those who are settled. Those on the move or in the process of transformation are considered transitional and are often considered 'dangerous' to social standards (Perin, 53). Historically, women were confined to the 'inner-world of the home':

**"The women, too, used social events to get their work done. Farm women had to work alongside their husbands in the fields when agricultural demands were pressing, and plain-folk society allowed women few roles beyond those of wife and mother. There were some activities, however-exclusively women's work....Nevertheless, the role of the women was clearly subordinated to that of their husbands, for they had to wait upon the table while the men dined and could themselves eat only when the men were finished (Bruce, 100)."**

There has always been a separation of the 'sacred home' from the sins of the external world. The woman's seclusion in the home, therefore, contained her within this nonthreatening world, away from all access to social power and 'American' freedom through economic independence:

**"After work, master and wage earner retreated further into worlds of their own...Separated from work and workingmen, they and their wives and children turned the middle-class family into a refuge from the amoral economy and disorderly society outside its doors...By 1830 the doorway to a middle-class home [the wife is intrinsically part of this home] separated radically different kinds of space: drunkenness and promiscuous sociability on the outside, privacy and icy sobriety indoors (Johnson, 57)."**

Women's association with the domestic circle are directly tied with her bodies functional abilities. Today women/male roles are in a transitional state. More men are becoming involved with children and homelife, as women are more involved in what was the 'masculine world' of labour and the external job force. This transitional mixing is

often seen in American society as “dangerous” to both family structure and the well-being of society. As a woman enters the workplace, society blames her for being neglecting her children. However, it is assumed that all fathers would be in the workplace and not in the home. To further complicate matters, women who do stay home with their kids are now seen as ‘weak women’ who are afraid to face the modern world. Therefore, the actual job of mother and housewife has lost respect in American society.

However, the mother figure loses her ‘sacredness’ if she is found outside of the home. Outside of the home, the woman becomes ‘dangerous’ to the man in that she becomes a blockade in the “natural orderly processes of progress” for the man. In other words, women in the workforce are breaking into the masculine ‘labour force’ where, ideologically, we believe the woman should remain in the feminine ‘natural world’ of child bearing,

**“Labour is the *father* of material wealth, the earth is its *mother* (William Petty).”**

Upon entering the outside world of the labor force, a woman is increasing her economic power and her ability to ‘climb the social ladder’. Accordingly, she is decreasing objectified as her social status is raised through financial empowerment.

Our necessity to separate the home from the outside world of work, labor and the unknown creates a dilemma for the family structure of American society. There is a very pertinent issues as to what happens to the children of families with both parents working. Many Americans have voiced their concern for women’s involvement in the working world. They have claimed that the working woman, as it were, had lead to the collapse of the family. However, I would like to present a different reason for this occurrence. Indeed, I believe that the correlation between the American definition of success and unlimited consumption is what has lead to the downfall of the family. It is only necessary to look at the basic scenarios to understand the rational behind this hypothesis.

If two family members work, then arguably the income for the family should be doubled from the same family situation where the man was the sole ‘breadwinner’. Therefore, how is it explained that previously, a family could be sustained by the wages of the working man, now it is hard for an American standard of living to be sustained by two fulltime adults? Because we choose to spend more, we likewise choose to spend our time earning more money, therefore, outside of the home, in the workplace and not with

the children. I don't see why two parents could work fewer hours, gain the same income of the individual workingman of the past and, subsequently, mutually spend more time with their children.

**Power, the body and the land: How are we to retain the dignity of our resources?**

Throughout this paper I have focused on the objectification of woman in American society and how this may be correlated either linguistically, ideologically, or realistically with issues of land-use in our society. The most extreme example of this correlation is through what I consider the total and complete violation of justice, rape. In our language, we both 'rape the earth' of her resources and 'rape the woman' of her dignity. These actions, unfortunately too predominate in our society are the most stringent of signals for a need in ideological change.

As I have said before, I believe that the concept of power is an intrinsic desire for the human animal. We feel vulnerable, one way or another, in our natural state (both man and woman). In this sense, we find that the easiest way to gain power is through physical domination of others, whether it be land or woman. At its simplest, consumption is the key to physical domination. I have argued that in order to consume, we find it necessary to objectify. Accordingly, I believe that it is the underlying perceived right to ownership and private property that has led to a rationalized objectification of both women and the environment. We have, therefore, created a cycle of domination leading to ownership, leading to extraction, leading to waste. Abiotic land is not able to escape man's classification and is vulnerable to our own self-awareness, however, women are able to control their own destinies. I believe that it is crucial for all women to deeply analyse their own concepts of self worth and individuality. Strong associations made between land and woman through both American ideology and language is both reflective of land-use trends and indicative of the underlying objectification of women in our society. I believe that a woman may maintain both dignity and a sense of empowerment through her own acceptance of self. It is only through maintaining a strong internal awareness that she may combat social stigma or stereotype that attempts to class her as a commodity.

Additionally, although the strength of the individual is crucial to the American Dream, I believe that it is more crucial to realize our natural dependence on others. In other words, we are not able to physically survive on this earth without the support and help of community. Therefore, I would argue that a major key to limiting the objectification and unrestricted use of both nature and woman in American society is the development of a greater respect for the community and for the family. If our philosophies are as such, that we are able to extend beyond individual satisfaction and success to long-term communal goals, then I believe we will truly create a more 'equal' and dignified nation.

## Bibliography